For Prince and Country(side) – the Marwanid Mansion at Balis on the Euphrates

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For the Byzantine city of Barbalissos on the Euphrates[1], the advent of the Muslim army in the year 636 C.E.[2] meant a turn for the better. An old fortified trading post situated at an important ford across the river into Mesopotamia that had been used by Alexander the Great, Cyrus the Younger, and later by almost every Sasanian army on its way to reap the riches of the coastal cities on the Mediterranean, the fortress and the region had suffered in previous centuries (Fig. 1). The political stability provided by the nascent Islamic state and soon also the special protection of the Umayyad dynasty brought a decisive economic upturn.

The Umayyad caliph ᶜAbd al-Malik or perhaps only his son al-Walid decided to keep Balis – as it is now called consistently in the sources – within the family[3] and grant it as a personal fiefdom to a prominent member of the clan, the general Maslama b. ᶜAbd al-Malik who had begun to emerge as the family's military genius at the beginning of the 8th century C.E. Over the next thirty years Maslama would lead the annual raid against the Byzantines, crush rebellions between Iraq and western Iran, and even push the empire's border beyond the Bab al-Abwab of Derbent[4].

Given the restless life he led and the number of other estates between Aleppo and the Jazira at his disposal (that he collected in typical Umayyad fashion), chances are small that Maslama himself ever spent much time in Balis[5]. Nevertheless, a major branch of the Marwanid family was based here and was led, in Maslama's absence, by his brother Saᶜid b. ᶜAbd al-Malik. Present or not, Maslama, Saᶜid, and the Marwanids of Balis poured money into their *iqṭāᶜa* and built prodigiously: two canals, the Nahr Maslama[6] and the Nahr Saᶜid not only carried drinking water to the city from the Euphrates because the riverbed had moved further to the north away from the city. The canal projects also offered new possibilities for the irrigation of the fertile plains in the river valley; Balis subsequently became a center of agricultural activities[7]. Simultaneously, Marwanid patronage put a new focus on building activities within and outside of Balis: The Justinianic city walls, racked by earthquakes and sieges were repaired, and for themselves, the family built – according to literary sources – *quṣūr* outside the city in the surrounding countryside[8].

One of the four sites currently under investigation as part of the archaeological cooperation at Balis between the Syrian Department of Antiquities[9] and Princeton University has been the excavation of an Umayyad complex dating from the first half of the 8th century[10] that may very well have been one of the buildings erected by either Maslama or the Marwanids of Balis. Set dramatically upon the ridge that divides the Syrian steppe from the Euphrates valley and looking down on the ruins of the Byzantine-Islamic city of Barbalis-

1 Today, the site is located 5 km east of Maskana, a small town on the highway from Aleppo to Raqqa in northern Syria. Basic information concerning the history of Barbalissos-Balis in Pauly – Wissowa 1896, Herzfeld 1913 and Sourdel-Thomine 1979. A concise historical overview has more recently been offered by Raymond – Paillet 1995.

2 Al-Baladhuri 1865, 150–151.

3 For the extensive architectural patronage under al-Walid's sons see Bacharach 1996, 34.

4 For Maslama see Zettersteen 1936 and Rotter 1991 with extensive literature.

5 Starting with the 705 C.E., Maslama led the annual raid from Syria usually towards the north into Byzantine territory while other generals directed their attacks simultaneously towards the northwest. It is at least possible that Maslama used the middle Euphrates and his estates as a staging ground for his campaigns. After he retired from active service in 732 C.E. he spent his last years until his death in 738 or 740 C.E. in Syria.

6 For the remnants of the Nahr Maslama downstream from Balis, see Harper 1975, 324. 337.

7 Ibn al-ᶜAdim 1988, I, 119. 121.

8 Ibn al-ᶜAdim 1988, I, 119. 121.

9 Represented since 1999 by my colleague Jamil Massouh, MA from the Directorate of Antiquities, Homs.

10 A consistent pattern of radiocarbon dates pointing towards the first half of the 8th century C.E. was established in 1999 by Konstantin Pustovoytov, see http://nolli.princeton.edu:syria/1800/PDF/radiocarbonDating.pdf.

sos-Balis and the Bronze age site of Emar, these Umayyad structures share today their location with an early 13th century Ayyubid monument, the old minaret of the Congregational Mosque of Balis[11], relocated to this place up on the hill only in 1973, when the rising waters of Lake Asad threatened to destroy it (Fig. 2)[12].

THE UMAYYAD COMPLEX (Figs. 3. 4)

The structures and building clusters in question consist of a roughly square *qaṣr* with the dimensions 69 m x 77 m with square towers at the corners and a gate on the western and eastern sides. Detached from the southeastern corner of the complex by not more than 20 m stretched an extensive bath complex and, beyond that, built into a natural depression, a large open reservoir.

Finally, a settlement consisting of quickly built hovels stretched along the south-eastern side of the main building, engulfing and partially using the structures of the bath. No mosque has been found in the course of the excavations.

What is preserved of the enclosure of the *qaṣr* consists predominantly of a single course of two parallel rows of local limestone blocks laid out apart at a distance of precisely 1.5 m or 3 early Islamic cubits[13], built directly on the hard clay surface without using foundation trenches[14]. The intermediary space had been filled with rubble, mortar or clay combined with crushed limestone – arguably the chips that were produced in the process of dressing the stones on site. These limestone blocks formed only the first course, the foundation of the rising walls that were built entirely with mud bricks (Fig. 5) – cheaper but well-copied versions of Byzantine fired bricks known from the Justinianic buildings of 'downtown' Balis that were re-used exclusively to build the Umayyad bath[15]. The *qaṣr* walls – including the limestone block foundation – are preserved nowhere higher than 1.2 m and can be found immediately under a thin layer of soil mixed with mud brick debris, suggesting that the complex had originally only one story[16].

The gates in the center of the western and the eastern sides were situated opposite each other and both were flanked in typical fashion by semicircular towers or buttresses (Fig. 6). Originally, the western gate must have faced the road that branched off from the old Nikephorion-Raqqa overland route to Aleppo and, passing the mansion, ran down the slopes of the Euphrates valley toward the city of Barbalissos-Balis. Large basalt slabs – actually cut pieces of millstones – found a new purpose here, arranged as flagstones for the floor in the corridor behind the gate.

THE RECEPTION BLOCK

A walled quadrangle of 30 x 30 m in the western half of the enclosure, featuring a reception hall, a series of rooms encasing the hall, and a courtyard in front of it (Fig. 7), represents the very first stage of construction at the site and may have existed – at least for some while – as a solitary, princely pavilion up on the airy plateau, before the perimeter walls, towers, and lateral strips with six apartments were added in a second stage of construction. Not unlike the famous and still enigmatic Ghassanid structure outside the walls of Rusafa, it could have served as a meeting point for the city's and the countryside's' administrators and tribal chiefs on one hand and the Marwanids, the patrons of this region, on the other.

In contrast to all these later additions which used the site's ample stock of reddish clay, the builders of the pavilion chose to transport even the mud bricks from Balis and Emar down in the valley with their characteristically grayish soil up on the hill[17]. This is only the first in a series of observations that suggest that the whole complex developed as a series of successive expansions, possibly even reflecting a changing view on the site's purpose and potential rather than having been planned as an ensemble from the very outset. Thus, the entrance to the quadrangle was moved a

11 Golvin – Raymond 1974, 108. Raymond – Paillet 1995, pl. 5–6.

12 A. Bahnassi, La sauvetage des vestiges de la zone de submersion du barrage de Tabqa sur l'Euphrate, Monumentum. International Council on Monuments and Sites, 17, 1978, 63–66.

13 For the pre-Abbasid length of the cubit of 0.498 m see Hinz 1965.

14 That these limestone courses functioned not only as the foundation but also as the lower portion of the rising wall can be seen in both gate areas in which the threshold with its traces of usage is on the same level with the first course of the wall on both of its sides.

15 It is possible that not only bricks but also some of the limestone blocks were taken from Roman or Byzantine buildings in Barbalissos as were other architectural elements such as columns and even millstones. For a similar practice in the neighboring Umayyad site of Qasrin (Dibsi Faraj), see Harper 1975, 325.

16 This assessment is somewhat marred by indications that the site was leveled by bulldozers to prepare the ground before the Ayyubid minaret was rebuilt in the early 1970s. The loss of material in this process may have led to the impression that the structure in Balis had only one story.

17 This curious Syrian case of bringing coals to Newcastle becomes especially obvious from a number of fine late bronze-age terracottas or Nuzi-period cylinder seals that made there way up on the hill baked into building materials for the Umayyad structure.

couple of meters towards the north before anybody had ever walked through this gate – obviously because the dimensions of the pavilion were changed while construction was still going on and because the gate and the main hall's opening behind were supposed to form one axis (Fig. 8).

Only after the pavilion was finally finished and its exterior walls had been given a white plaster coating, the site was dramatically enlarged into the *qaṣr* proper, and the pavilion enclosed by new perimeter walls with apartments along the northern and southern sides, while the bath and the reservoir were added further to the south.

The medieval visitor of the mansion, after passing through the new western gate, would have found himself in an oblong courtyard approximately 30 m wide and 10 m deep, facing a quadruple columned portico that extended over a front of 18 m. Pedestals as supports for the columns; fragments of various kinds of flecked marble with diameters matching the pedestals – no doubt spoils from pre-Umayyad buildings in Barbalissos – were found in this area (Fig. 9).

Behind the five meter deep covered space of the portico towards the east, a rather eclectic double arch with red- and white voussoirs[18] supported in the center by a massive marble column and a Corinthian capital formed the entrance for the main oblong reception hall (10 x 5.5 m) (Fig. 10)[19]. This central hall was flanked by two sets of smaller rooms that were likewise accessible from the portico area but several elements, such as the high double arch and especially green and eggplant colored window glass that points to clerestories suggest that the center hall's ceiling was raised higher than the rest of the rooms, forming what must have come close to an *iwān*.

In the course of excavating the audience tract, it became obvious that the builders had aimed – by using material of different or higher quality (the aforementioned gray colored mud brick, fine plaster for the walls) but also fresco decorations[20] – to distinguish the audience hall and the two smaller, flanking rooms with the portico in front from the remainder of rooms in the quadrangle. This ensemble of three rooms, forming the shape of the letter T has been known under the designation 'Persian *bayt*', a term that not only points to both the pre-Islamic origins of this type of floor plan but also to its general occurrence east of Syria. Indeed, examples from the Sasanian period come from apartments next to the throne hall in Qasr-i Shirin[21]. Another Mesopotamian example in which three rooms combined with a portico appear to form a throne hall was excavated in Tilul al-Shuʿayba near Basra and is said to be of late Umayyad origin[22]. Curiously, T-shaped reception halls in a palatial context or residential buildings seem to become popular only later, in early Abbasid Iraq[23] and rise under the designation *Ḥīrī* as an architectural concept to international prominence even later, in the 9th and 10th centuries C.E., predominantly in Iraq and Egypt but not necessarily in Syria[24]. Thus, the porticoed audience tract in Balis represents not only the earliest documented example of a *Ḥīrī* type but also the only one in Syria.

The interpretation of this building as a pavilion or reception hall is supported by frescoes that once covered not only the main hall but also two of the smaller rooms on both sides behind the portico. The dominant motif in these frescoes are marble plaques cut to form diamond patterns framed by columns and incrustation (Fig. 11), a sort of paneling that imitates the decoration of roughly contemporary buildings such as the Dome of the Rock or the Great Mosque in Damascus, all of them, of course, echoing Roman and Byzantine models. The only exception from this pattern is the central panel on the eastern narrow side of the reception hall. Here, two (painted) black roundels are set in a frame streaked with thick and dramatically meandering veins (Fig. 12).

Painted marble imitations – even though of varying, often lower quality in comparison to the examples now found in Balis – are such a frequent feature in Umayyad *quṣūr*, for example Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, Rusafa, and Khirbat al-Mafjar[25], that they appear to have been a *conditio sine qua non*, a 'Must Have' for the decorative program of princely buildings of this period.

Certainly new in this motif within Umayyad art, however, is not only the vivid and colorful

18 The color scheme was created by combining wedge-shaped blocks made of concrete painted white with stacked Byzantine bricks whose narrow sides were colored bright red.

19 The capital itself was found in 1999 close to the bath where it had been removed by later squatters. In the area where it had been originally situated, however, enough fragments of its acanthus decoration appeared during the excavation to allow for this reconstruction.

20 See below.

21 Creswell 1986, pl. 85.

22 Majhul 1972.

23 Numerous examples dominate the residential apartments at Ukhaidir, roughly dated to the early 2nd half of the 8th century C.E., see Creswell 1940, 71 and fig. 64 (*bayts* B and H).

24 For a recent overview of the *Ḥīrī*-discussion, see Leisten 2005. D. Majhul, in fact, compares the reception rooms in Tilul al-Shuʿayba to the *Ḥīrī*-type in general and the residential apartments in Ukhaidir (Majhul 1972, 244).

25 Schlumberger 1986, pl. 57 a. c. d; Grabar *et al.* 1978, I, 179; Otto-Dorn 1957, 125 Taf. 2; Grabar 1959.

palette[26] but also the contrast between the studiously precise and naturalistic representation of marble in the center fields on one hand and their much more expressive, dynamically patterned and imaginative 'guards' on the other. They seem to underline the painter's intention to show the panel's composition as artifice facilitated through the medium of painting, as a combination of truthful imitation of decorative traditions and an unconventional artistic take on the concept of marbling – an idea that foreshadows the impressionistic responses to marble in Arabic and Persian poetry of the later medieval period.

While this is especially true for the framing motifs of the main panels, similar things can be said about the patterns that separate the fields of painted marble plaques from each other: the inventive and imaginative response to originally three-dimensional forms in which, for instance, double columns are shrunken and reduced to a mere symbol of support and projected on a two-dimensional plane to be combined with the representation of plaques of multicolored stone-incrustation showing geometric patterns (Fig. 13)[27].

It should be added in this context that the technical term fresco is only partially true for the wall paintings in Balis, especially for their lower portions: after the walls in each room had been plastered completely in preparation for the decoration, the painters pressed thin ropes into the wet surface to obtain ruling lines along which they would paint the geometrical design of the diaper patterns. Then work started from the bottom up and continued towards the top of the panel. Painting on plaster while it was still wet created true fresco, but because the whole wall had been ambitiously plastered all at once, the upper part had already dried up by the time the painters finally reached it. Technically, these portions were therefore executed in secco painting; this might explain why the pigments of most of the fragments that had fallen from the panel's top flakes off easily.

Fragments of carved plaster were found throughout the *qaṣr*, but in all cases but one out of context and often found in the rubble of secondary door blockings. Plaster decoration appears to have been applied only for the decoration of doorjambs. While their series of continuous three-leaf patterns with a pearl border (Fig. 14), chevrons, and medallion petals do have parallels in both, late Sasanian carved plaster and examples from Umayyad palaces, the examples from Balis are closer to their Iranian origins than the ones in, for example, Khirbat al-Mafjar. The 'three-leaf' motive, at least, as part of a repetitive pattern and also the series of stylized flower petals of the second fragment played an important role in the carved stucco decoration of the late Sasanian[28] and Umayyad[29] period.

BAYT A

The pavilion remained, even after it had been enclosed by the *qaṣr*, isolated by walls, corridors, and courtyards separating it from the apartment strips in the north and south. But while the pavilion's function is relatively easy to read as a place of representation, this is not the case for the apartments themselves. All six show the typical characteristics of an Umayyad period Syrian *bayt* or apartment module – a central hall with pairs of flanking rooms on both sides and two more rooms extending to the east or west (Fig. 15). Such an asymmetrical arrangement of rooms within a *bayt* is not unusual and has parallels in many other Umayyad structures such as Kharane[30], Jabal Says[31], Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi[32], Qastal[33], and Qasr al-Tuba[34]. At least in the case of Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, such annex rooms, located farthest from the main hall, have been convincingly explained as latrines[35]. In Balis, however, the function of these elongated sections of the *bayts* must have been a different one as they were equipped with a number of features that go well beyond the notoriously primitive construction of Umayyad latrines. Installations in the corners of the court-side rooms for large jars, *tannūrs*, and ovens with adjacent ash boxes already indicate that they were designated as work spaces within the *buyūt*. More importantly, the two rooms opposite, abutting the exterior wall, differ conceptually clearly from the rest of the apartment as they were accessible only through extra doors and steps leading to a level approximately 1m higher then the floors of all the other rooms in the apartment. What is more, the floors of each of those two artificially raised rooms consisted not of the usual plaster-mortar but of solid concrete, and they not only sloped gently towards the southern side but were also slightly

26 A first chemical and physical analysis has concluded that the pigments used in the paintings are predominantly ferric oxides, but also amorphous carbon. I am grateful to Ms. Pilar Becker for this information.

27 Grabar 1959, 316.

28 Kröger 1982, pls. 65, 3; 85, 4; 89, 7; 9, 4.

29 Hamilton 1959, pls. XXXIV, 3; L, 1; LIX, 14 (1); LXVIII, 1, 2. The concentric "V" appears in late Sasanian borders (Kröger 1982, pls. 63,1–2; 64, 1; 65, 2; 85, 3) but might also represent the abstract form of the heart-shaped motif so commonly used as a border decoration in Sasanian and Umayyad stuccos alike; for example Kröger 1982, pls. 36, 6; 46, 5; 51, 2; 65, 5–7 and Hamilton 1959, pls. XXXII–XXXIII. XXXIX, 5. XLVII. XLVIII.

30 Creswell 1986, figs. 60, 61.

31 Creswell 1986, fig. 71.

32 Creswell 1986, fig. 79.

33 Creswell 1986, fig. 98.

34 Creswell 1986, fig. 127.

35 Schlumberger 1986, 19 pl. 23 b.

depressed at the point where a drain hole opened in the center of their southern walls. Additionally, a concrete, baseboard-shaped bulge around the landing and the lower part of the walls can only be interpreted as a measure that prevented the stairs from being flooded or the walls from being soaked (Fig. 16)[36].

The drain had been carved into a stone block that, while being part of the enclosure wall, had also a large opening at the top[37] thus forming a deep niche in the interior side. The opening led to a chute within the *qaṣr*-wall which continued outside the mansion in an underground canal built of large U-shaped limestone blocks with an inner clearing of about 0.8 m and a width of 0.6 m. The builder's trench for the canal was cut deeply into the virgin conglomerate ground and ended after 6 m outside the mansion approximately 2 m below the surface level. From here the built channel extended in the form of an underground canal that had been carved into the conglomerate. Another 2 m further to the south, the canal from the second room merged with the first one and continued as one towards the valley (Figs. 17. 18)[38].

From the outside, the canal-system was not visible as it already reached sub-floor level in the chute. It was, nevertheless, put to use and accessible also from the outside: Abutting the exterior wall, a stone trough had been positioned between the elevated rooms and their canals. Excess water from the trough could be drained into the canals through ceramic pipes that discharged into the canals just at the point were they emerged from underneath the enclosure wall. Finds from the canals yielded quantities of sheep and camel bones, glass (Fig. 19), and pottery, indicating that *one* of their functions was certainly the disposal of refuse[39].

The phenomenon of these pairs of 'wet-rooms' could be observed throughout the mansion. Apparently as a fixture of all six apartments, pairs of elevated concrete-floored rooms were positioned along the southern as well as the artificially terraced northern wall, where sloping ground in both directions facilitated the discharge of water. In other words, a quarter of the rooms within the two apartment strips had been designed and equipped to cope simultaneously with water. There is no other way than to interpret these rooms as places of manufacture and sites, in which the production of goods necessitated the use of plenty of water. Support for this hypothesis comes now in the form of a preliminary analysis of the silt material from inside three canals that yielded traces of animal hair, especially sheep wool. The best explanation at hand is that these rooms were designed and used predominantly for the washing of wool and perhaps the preparation of felt since most of the spaces lying in front of the elevated rooms had been equipped with fireplaces (for the heating of water and boiling of animal hair) and large stands for water jars.

The vast amount of water needed for such procedures was at hand even though the Euphrates was more than 4 km away. Water was stored in an open air reservoir south of the bath, a basin built into a natural depression and made solid through interior buttressing. Measuring 25 m x 30 m with an approximate original depth of 4 m it was able to hold theoretically more than two and a quarter million liters (Fig. 20). No installations for the collection of rainwater and conduits leading towards the basin, however, could be detected, so that one has to assume the water had to be brought up by beasts of burden from the valley[40].

DISCUSSION

Even so, the question must be asked whether the immense effort[41] required to filling the basin and bringing water from the distant Euphrates up the hill only to wash sheep's wool or to water animals justified such expenditure in the first place. The possibility that the site had not *originally* been chosen as a location for an economic enterprise but was developed out of a reception pavilion – admittedly in a sophisticated way with some elements of technological overkill – into one only at a later point in time by the 'fiat' of the city's patron can only partially explain the situation.

36 The same material and 'base board' shaped sealing between floor and wall also exists in the bath complex, making it evident that water was used in the raised rooms within the *qaṣr*.

37 Limestone blocks with similar opening as part of drainage systems were excavated in Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi, see Grabar *et al.* 1978, pl. 201.

38 In 2000, this canal was followed at the length of another 7 m before safety concerns led to abandoning this excavation.

39 Among them were fragments of cooking pot and red wares with white engobe, typical for the early Byzantine and early Islamic periods. A complete bowl of a greyish buff ware with incisions on its flat rim can be compared with examples dated by K. Bartl tentatively as Late Roman/Early Byzantine/Islamic, Bartl – Hauser 1996, fig.2 no. 7.

40 Compare the caliph Hisham's efforts to provide his residence Rusafa with drinking water through sending daily caravans to the Euphrates, Yaqut al-Hamawi n.d., vol. 3, 47.

41 A rough calculation comes to the conclusion that filling the basin would have required approximately 22,000 donkey trips (with an assumed load of 100 liters per trip) to the Euphrates.

A problem of similar nature, also still not fully explained, is why the architect of these 'wet-rooms' within the apartments would cling to a layout that worked very well for residential purposes but offered only limited potential for manufacture. The decision to use traditional *buyūt* not only forced the production into two rather smallish rooms but also necessitated the building of an extra channel for each apartment. A possible answer is that working with wool is done traditionally in teams with up to four people who could, in fact, be accommodated within one room rather easily. In addition, this sort of activity peaked only during specific seasons. During the rest of the year the mansion's inhabitants could have indeed used these accommodations in a different, more traditional function, such as bathrooms.

This 'added-on' economic aspect of the Balis mansion, its industrial rhetoric rather than original character has, in my opinion, little to do with the city of Balis where the performance of similar tasks close to the canals or the river would have been much easier and less costly.

Therefore, one's attention has to turn from the city as the main frame of reference for the existence of the Marwanid mansion to the countryside. The plateau of the Syrian steppe south of Balis and the Umayyad mansion at a circumference of approximately 10 km was dotted with settlements ranging from small villages to midsize towns in which animal husbandry must have been of greater importance than in the Euphrates valley with its irrigation economy and mainly agrarian character (Fig. 21)[42]. These places, fortified during the 6th century's Byzantine-Sasanian wars and back then left to fend for themselves now formed the peaceful, unified hinterland of the Marwanid fiefdom of Balis[43]. Preliminary results from surveys in these areas demonstrate that these settlements made the transition from the Byzantine to the Umayyad period more or less unscathed and even bounced back to new prosperity before completely disappearing under the Abbasids.

At the same time, we know that a substantial part of the Byzantine population chose to go into exile when the Muslims took over[44]. They were replaced by members from the Qays, which also may have increased forms of sustenance in which livestock played an important role.

Thus, it should be possible to see the metamorphosis of a princely pavilion at Balis into a partially economic – even though hardly profitable and therefore possibly heavily subsidized – enterprise as a practical reaction to the existence and demands of the rural and perhaps even semi-nomadic communities around Balis and their very limited palette of product offerings.

THE END OF THE MANSION

It appears that in contrast to other Umayyad sites, the mansion in Balis did not fare well after 750 A.D. In this year Balis was occupied by ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAli, the uncle of the new caliph al-Saffah, and a group of Khurasanian soldiers were garrisoned in the Hisn Maslama, one of the *quṣūr* in the area of Balis. Molested by the occupying forces and apparently without male support, some female members of the Marwanid family sought help from a powerful man with the name of Abu l-Ward who had not only acted as the last Umayyad governor of the *jund* Qinnasrin but also owned the great neighboring estate of al-Naʿura downstream from Balis. Indeed, between the families of Abu l-Ward and the Marwanids of Balis existed strong family ties[45]. Abu l-Ward's move against the Iranian garrison in Balis was the signal for the first anti-Abbasid rebellion in Syria after the downfall of the Umayyads. After its collapse Balis was taken from the Marwanids and annexed by the Abbasid family. The *qaṣr* must have been abandoned soon after these events. On the physical level, the end of the mansion's regular occupation is signaled by the complete and systematic dismantling of all Umayyad structures at the site. It appears that just after 750 C.E., the mansion itself, the solidly built bath and even the walls of the reservoir were cannibalized for materials that could be used for construction projects elsewhere – a common practice in this period that served an economic purpose and – handily – the *damnatio memoriae* of the former owners. In the case of the mansion, these materials would have been masonry blocks, wooden beams, stone columns, and carved plaster panels. In the bath, the targets were 'quality' bricks of Byzantine origin, marble plaques that had covered floors and the interior of basins, and finally glass mosaic cubes and mother-of-pearl inlay pieces that apparently had been – along with frescoes – part of the bath's decoration. The conglomeration of poorly built hovels that extended east of the bath and had partially encroached upon it as well as simple installations within the mansion, may represent a settlement set up by those who were occupied with scavenging the Umayyad buildings for reusable materials, using rooms and courtyards of the abandoned

42 Nomadic and semi-nomadic activities in the area of Balis are attested throughout late antiquity (Elisséef 1991).

43 Mouterde – Poidebard 1945, Madinat al-Far: 233, 237 (Text), pls. LXXXVI–LXXXVII (Atlas), Tall Makhrum, 238 (Text), pls. LXXXI–LXXXIII (Atlas), Khirbat al-Far 160 (Text), pls. LXXXIV–LXXXV (Atlas).

44 Al-Baladhuri 1865, 150.

45 Cobb 2001, 46–48.

palace to sort through materials and temporarily store them. Coins found in these areas belong to both the late Umayyad and the very early Abbasid periods[46] and suggest that the work of these people was done within the first two decades of the Abbasid era.

The downfall of the Marwanids at Balis was certainly the main reason for the abandonment of the estate, a development that was hastened by the fact that the first of many ill-fated pro-Umayyad rebellions after the Abbasid conquest of Syria started here with a massacre of Khurasanian troops. The relatively abrupt nature of the estate's end along with the disappearance of the previously mentioned rural settlements in its neighborhood – quite in contrast to the 'petering out' of settlement activities at so many other Umayyad *quṣūr*, however, – could also be seen as the result of the impossibility to sustain, or, more bluntly, as a sign of the economic failure of the enterprise at Balis which may have been based on labor-intensive and at the same time costly procedures for a low-grade product. Clearly, the members of the Abbasid family who confiscated the Marwanid fiefdom after 750 C.E. could not see any financial advantage in keeping the estate and had no interest in further investments; instead, it appears, they sold or reused the materials of the buildings brick by brick, column by column.

However, if the interpretation of the estate at Balis as a palace *cum* production site is correct, it would provide welcome new evidence for the Umayyad vision of the economic and representative roles played by those country estates, two factors that would have contributed to strengthen the social and political cohesion within the Umayyad heartland. It would also elucidate the efforts undertaken by the Umayyad administration to redevelop the Levantine country site after the devastation of the 6th and7th centuries C.E. Whether this effort, i.e. encouraging agriculture and production in the environment of the *quṣūr* was a real source of income for the caliphs and the Umayyad family at large[47] or whether it was a subsidized business created mainly to cement loyalty within Syria towards the house of the Umayyads at a time when the empire showed already the first signs of breaking up, would be worth a closer look.

46 The latest coins found on the floors date from the early reign of al-Mahdi (775–780).

47 For that view see Gaube 1979.

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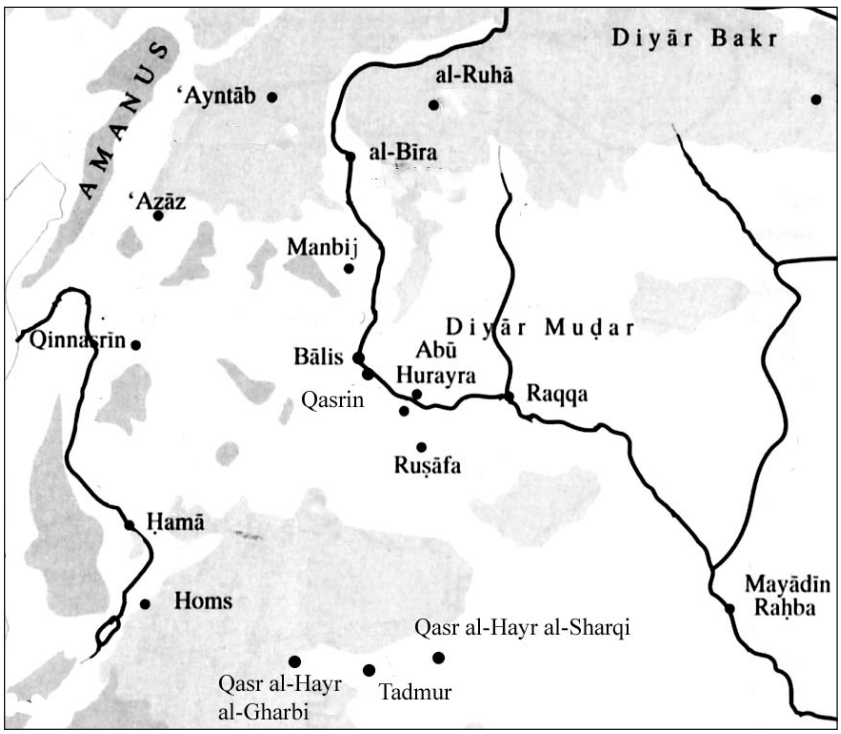

Fig. 1 Northern Syria and the Middle Euphrates Region.

Fig. 2 The northern wall of the mansion with the Ayyubid minaret from the Congregational Mosque at Balis looking southeast.

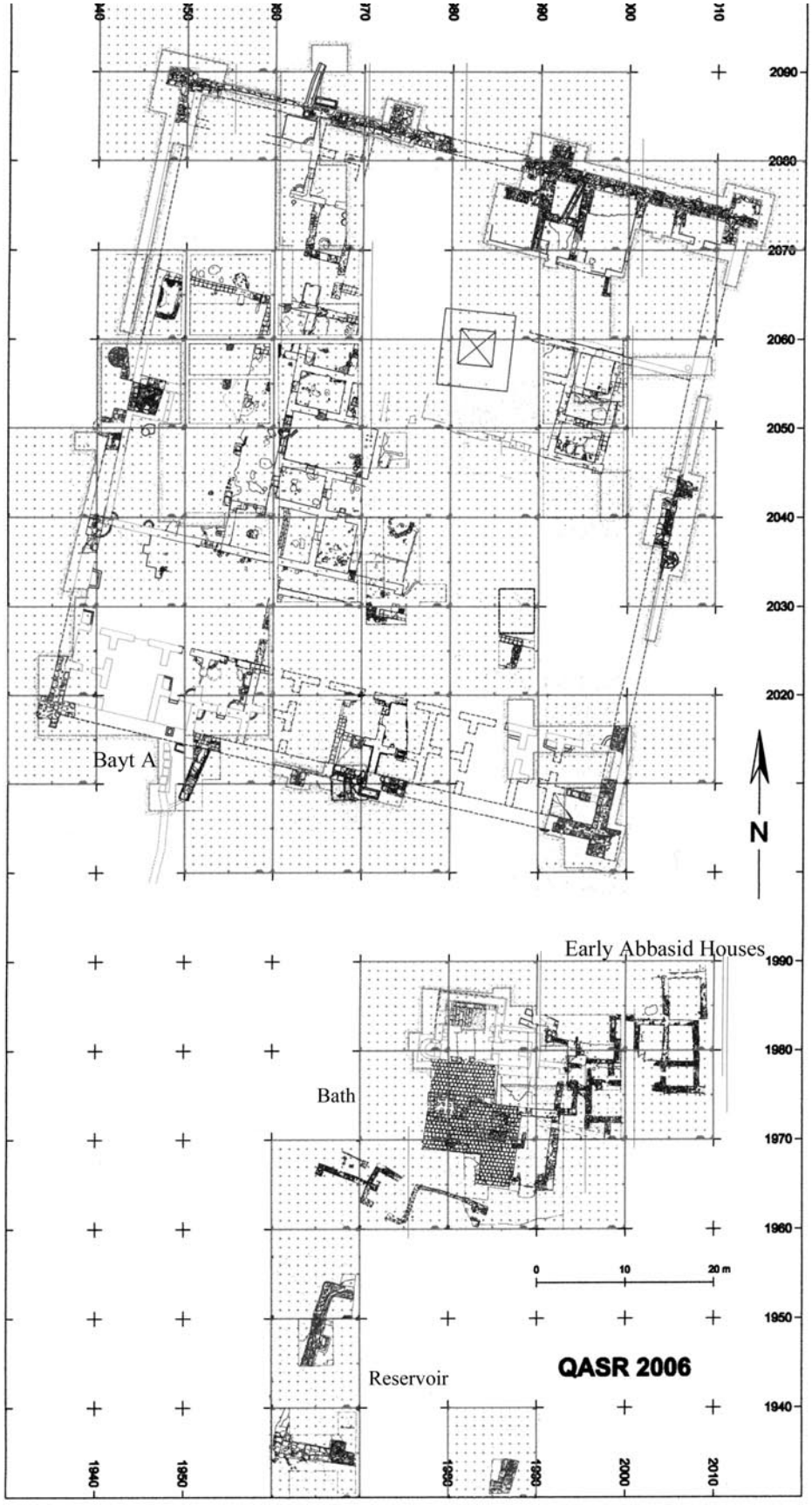

Fig. 3 Plan of the site after the 2006 campaign.

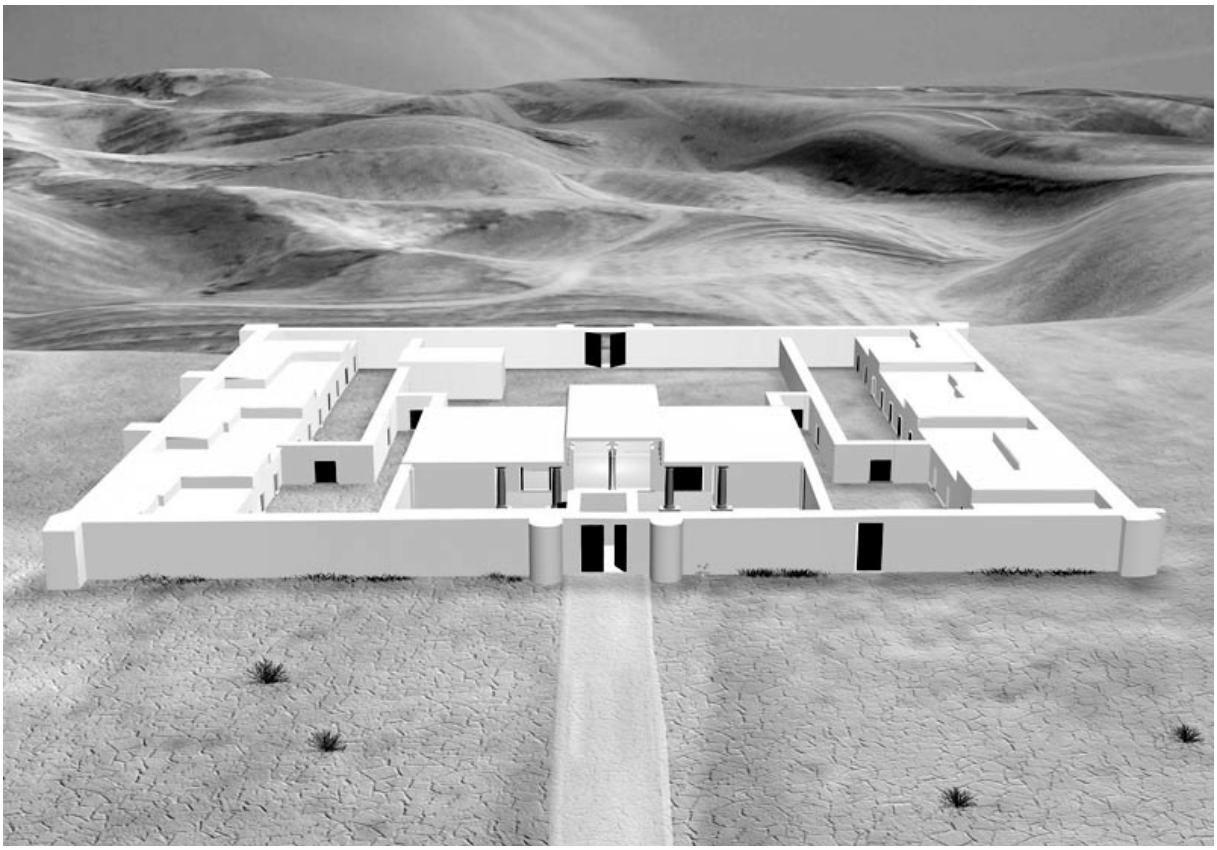

Fig. 4 Reconstructed view of the mansion looking east.

Fig. 5 The southwestern corner of the enclosure with tower, limestone foundation and mud brick walls.

Fig. 6 The new western gate with its bent-axis entrance looking east. The reception block is in the background.

Fig. 7 The pavilion quadrangle with reception block, portico, courtyard, and the old and new western gates looking southwest.

Fig. 8 The old western gate, blocked by the mansion's enclosure wall.

Fig. 9 Fragments of marble columns at the threshold to the main audience hall; to the right a re-used altar barrier.

Fig. 10 Reconstructed view of the entrance to and interior of the audience hall.

Fig. 11 Painted marble plaque from the audience hall.

Fig. 12 Central panel from the audience hall.

Fig. 13 Painted miniature columns and incrustation panel in the room north of the audience hall.

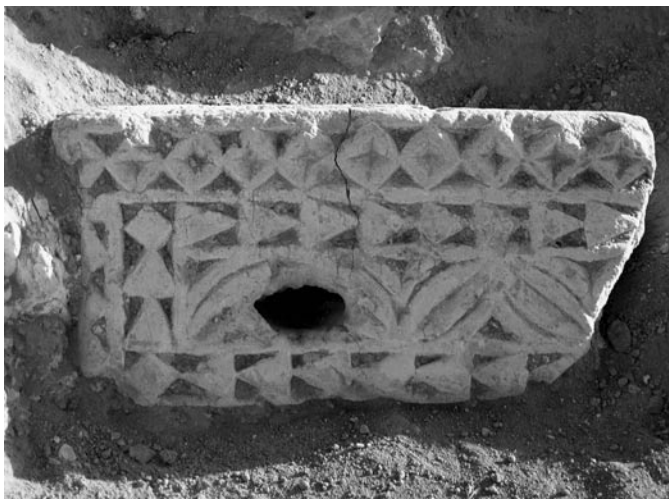

Fig. 14 Fragment of a carved plaster doorjamb.

Fig. 15 The raised rooms of Bayt A.

Fig. 16 The concrete floor and drain in western raised room of Bayt A.

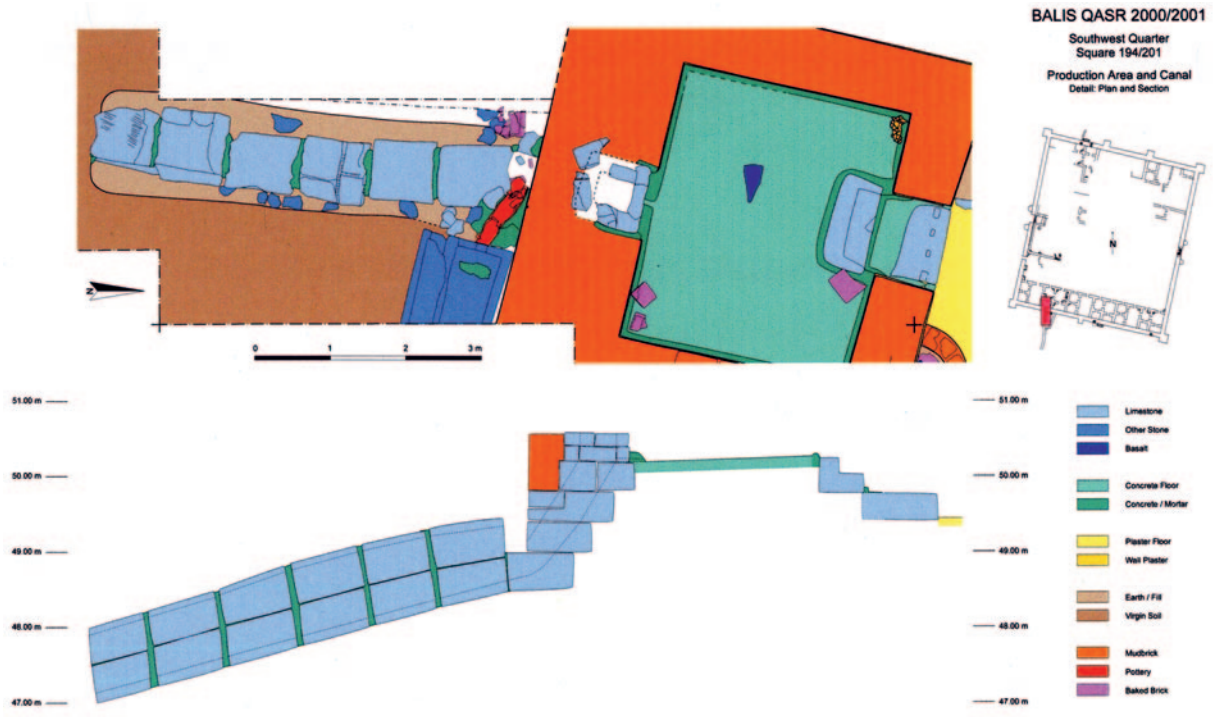

Fig. 17 Plan and section of the western raised room, chute and channel of Bayt A.

Fig. 18 The two channels of Bayt A outside the enclosure wall looking north.

Fig. 19 Fragment of luster glass with *basmala* from the channel.

Fig. 20 The northwestern corner of the reservoir with interior buttress.

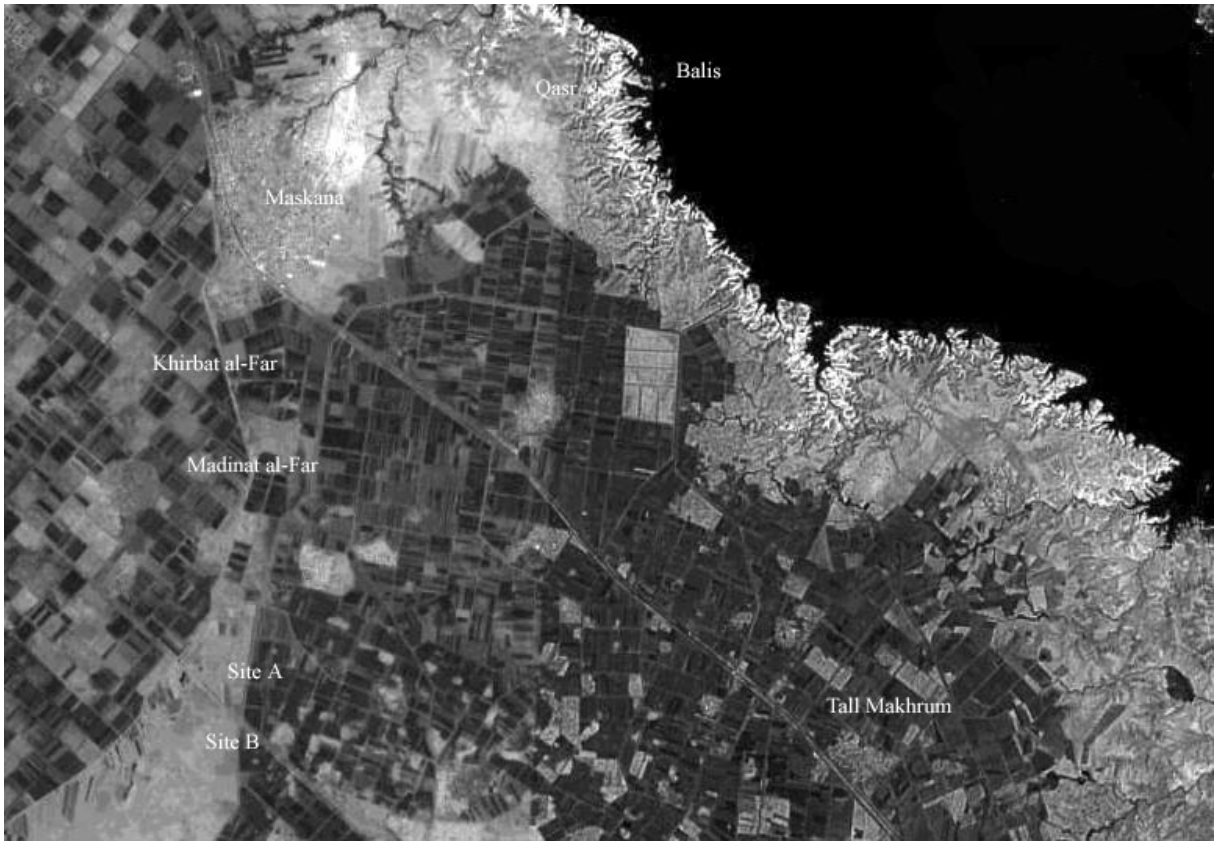

Fig. 21 Satellite view of the area south of Balis with Umayyad period settlements in a circumference of 10 km.