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Al-'Usur al-Wusta

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and is bordered by a chain of flat hills which forms the northern spur of the Lebanese mountains. The permanent water supply of the region is mainly guaranteed by large springs and several rivers which traverse the plain in a southeast-northwest direction. The most important of the perennial water courses is the Nahr el Kebîr, today the border line between Lebanon and Syria. Together with the adjacent Buqaia plain, the Akkar region forms one of the most important routes connecting the Mediterranean coast and inland Syria.

From the 2nd millennium BC onwards, the area is mentioned repeatedly in written sources which show the involvement of the region in international political affairs. At various periods the plain of Akkar became a border region between different spheres of influence or was incorporated into larger political units. It seems that for only a few centuries it was politically autonomous and independent. Concerning the written evidence, periods of special interest are the second half of the 2nd mill. BC when the area was involved in the Egyptian-Hittite struggle for domination in Syria and later became part of the newly established kingdom of Amurru, the period of Assyrian presence since the end of the 8th century BC and the later periods since the formation of the Roman province Syria. The last period of supra-regional importance was the Crusader period, when the plain of Akkar became part of the county of Tripoli.

During the 1997 survey campaign 41 archaeological sites, i.e. settlements, single houses, tombs, necropoleis and worked rocks were investigated. Due to the fact that almost the entire plain is an intensively cultivated area with dense plant cover and many fenced plantations a complete investigation of the region is almost impossible. Very small sites like single houses, farmsteads or one-phase villages can hardly be found. The investigated settlements are mostly larger sites, quite often covered by modern villages. Although this limits the following assertions to a certain degree, specific trends of occupation are nevertheless discernable. One of those is the distinct increase of settlement intensity during the post-Iron age periods when all of the larger sites were inhabited. This

concerns mainly the Hellenistic to Late Roman/Early Byzantine time, the pottery of which, the main surface material, is rather easy to recognize. Much more problematic is the recognition of the different Islamic periods. It is especially the time span between the 11th and the 14th century for which excavated sites offer comparisons. Still extremely difficult, if not impossible, is the identification of the early Islamic period (7th-10th century) through the pottery, because little comparative material is available. One of the most important early Islamic sites in the Levant, 'Anjar, located in the central Beqa'a valley, was excavated intensively by M. Chehab (1963), but unfortunately, no information about the pottery of the site has yet been published. Therefore, the find of an Early Islamic coin at the site of Dahr el-Biara is of special importance as it is the only archaeological surface evidence for occupation during that period until now (see the appendix by S. Heidemann). However, a more detailed analysis of the material might change these initial impressions.

Among the surface sherds it is above all the glazed material which is of diagnostic value. Besides a large quantity of monochrome glazed pottery, which is difficult to date, several kinds of sgraffito wares (fig.2-3) and slip-painted wares (fig.4) were found. These types are well known from stratified contexts of the 13th to the 14th century in the region of Tripoli (groups AI.3, AI.5 and A II.1 of the classification of H. Salamé-Sarkis) (Salamé-Sarkis 1980: pl.LXXII) and Tell 'Arqa (Hakimian, Salamé-Sarkis 1988). Comparable types are found at 'Atlit, al Mina and Apameia. Stratified pottery types of the 11th century are known mainly from the sûq area at Beirut. Almost completely missing are luxury pottery types like lustre wares which are frequent at medieval Hama, for example.

According to the preliminary pottery analysis only four sites show traces of the Fatimid period of the 11th century. An increase of settlements is reported for the 12/13th century (10 sites), and a rather dense occupation is testified for the 14th century as well (11 sites). Due to the lack of comparative material, a differentiation of later periods, i.e. Late Mamluk and Early Ottoman times is not yet possible. Diagnostics of the Late Ottoman period (19th century) are mainly specific kinds of clay

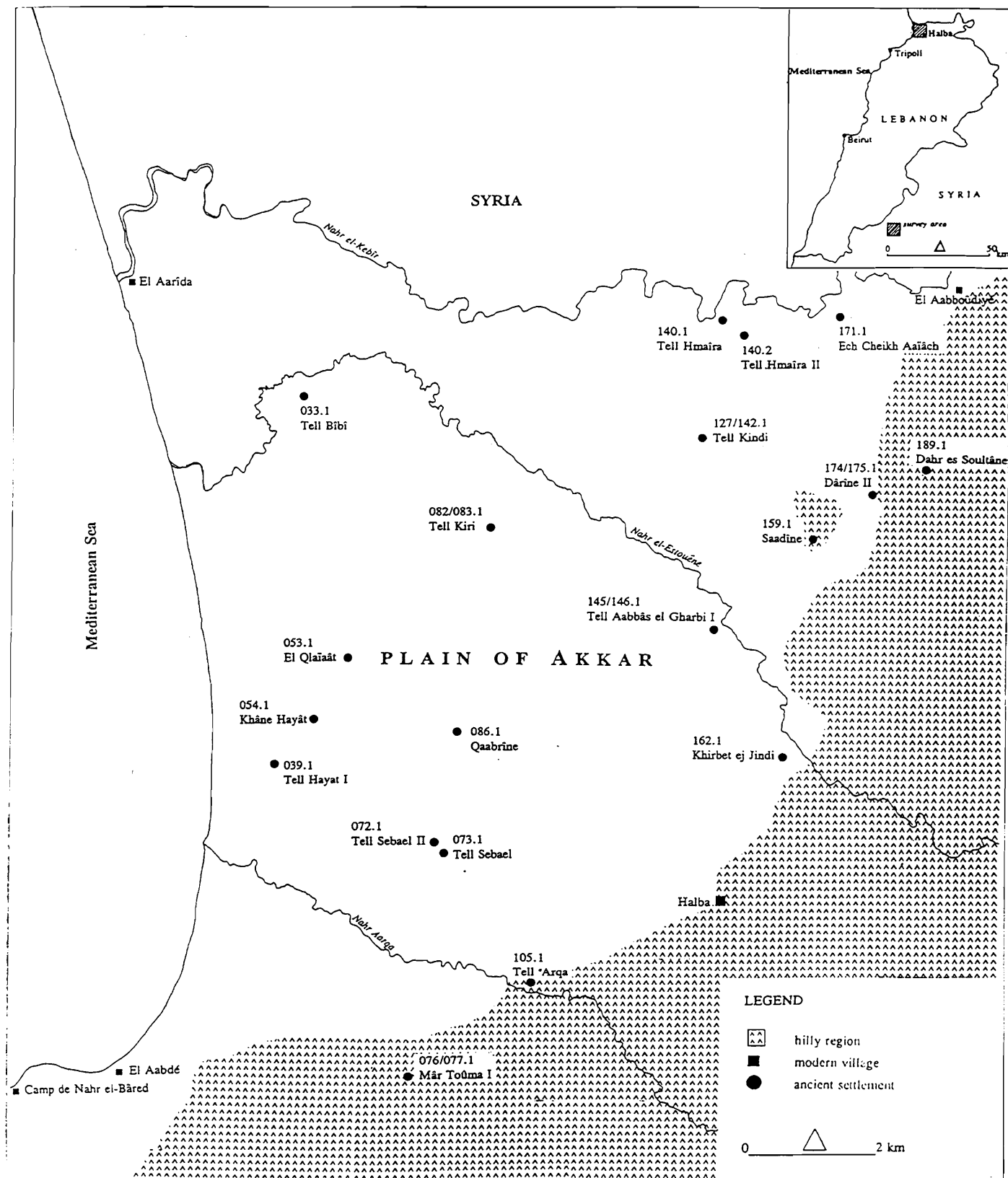


Figure 1. Settlements of the Islamic period in the plain of Akkar.

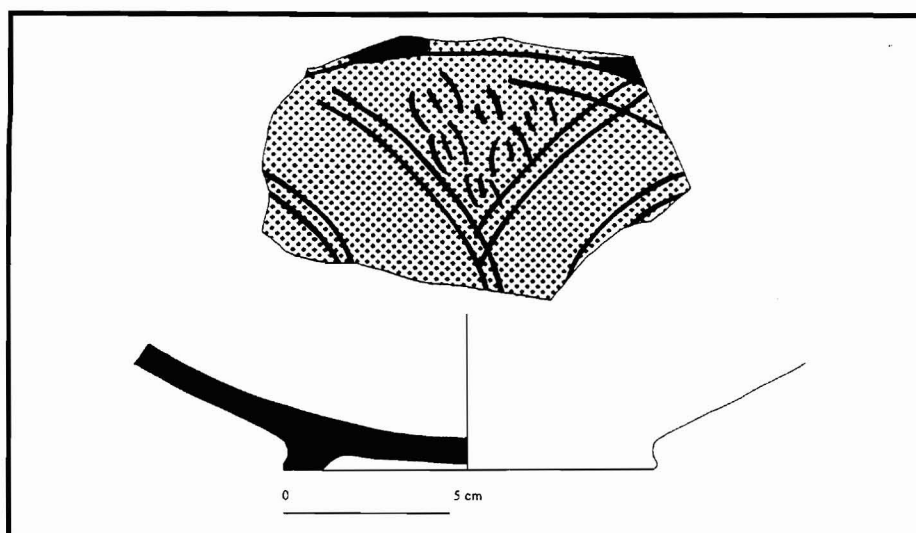


Figure 2. Sgraffito ware, yellow glaze with brown decoration, green splashes.

pipes (fig.5). To sum up, 18 settlements show traces of Islamic and Late Ottoman period occupation, 12 of which could be roughly dated (fig.1).

With regard to the type of settlements it can be stated that only a few sites of the Middle Islamic period are new foundations. Most of them seem to have been inhabited periodically or continuously since the Hellenistic/Roman period or even earlier. The sizes of the sites are mostly difficult to determine. Since there are few large (2-3 ha) settlements in the area at all, almost all of the places might have been small to medium-size villages or single farmsteads. The most important places during the Islamic era were 'Arqa ('Irqa according to Islamic sources) and Halba (Albe of the Crusaders), both situated at the southern fringe of the Akkar plain. The site of 'Arqa seems to have dominated the plain since the first urbanization during the Early Bronze Age and was inhabited almost continuously since then (Thalman

1997). The ancient site of Halba is completely covered by the modern village, so that archaeological traces are hardly to be found on the surface.

The political history of the plain of Akkar during the Islamic period is strongly connected to the history of Tripoli since, in a broader sense, it was part of its hinterland. During the Early Islamic period the region formed the northwestern part of the Jund Dimashq and came under Fatimid rule at the beginning of the 11th century. A short period of autonomy began with the reign of the Banū 'Ammār in 1070. In 1099 the crusaders under Raymond de St. Gilles started a substantial attempt to conquer Tripoli, which succeeded in 1108. In both years 'Arqa was besieged as well. After the fall of Tripoli the plain of Akkar became part of the county of Tripoli, which

remained an independent political unit for nearly 200 years. During the Crusader period estates of 'Arqa as well as several other sites in the Akkar plain were given as casale to the Hospitallers. The most important was Coliath/Qulei'at which is to be identified with Qlaiaât, today a huge ruin on top of a rock. Others were Manacusine, Merjemin, Castrum Rubrum and Somaquie, probably all of them located north of the Nahr el-Kebîr. Difficult to localize are the forts of Babiya, Loutouros, and Ḥiṣn el-Hamām mentioned by Idrisi. It was suggested they might be at Tell Bîbî, Tell Kîrî and Qlaiaât (Dussaud 1927:90), an assumption which could not be verified until now. However, with the Mamluk reconquest in 1266 the most important sites of the region like 'Arqa, Albe/Halba and Qulei'at came under their dominion.

To conclude, it can be stated that during 12th to 14th centuries the plain of Akkar was a rather densely settled area dominated on a local level by 'Arqa/'Irqa and on the regional level by Tripoli. Probably, the ancient settlement pattern might have been similar to the recent occupation, characterized by only a few larger villages in the plain and a chain of villages at the hilly fringes of the east and south. However, it might well be that further research will modify these preliminary results.

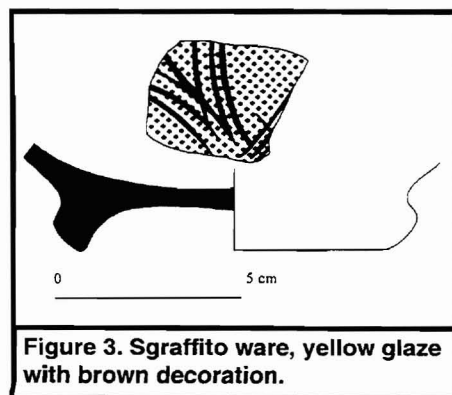


Figure 3. Sgraffito ware, yellow glaze with brown decoration.

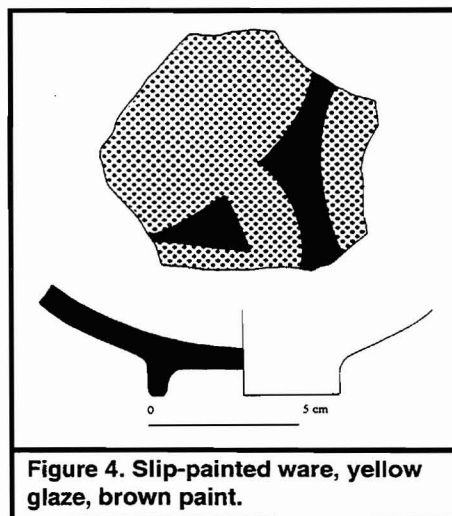


Figure 4. Slip-painted ware, yellow glaze, brown paint.



Figure 5. Clay pipe.

Appendix

An Early Islamic Coin from the Plain of Akkar

by Stefan Heidemann

The Akkar survey produced few early Islamic finds other than pottery. One of the exceptions was a coin, found in Dahr al-Biara, a site known for several rock-cut tombs. It is situated ca. 3.5 km west of Tell 'Arqa/'Irqa. The coin is a typical product of the mint of Ba'labakk (17mm; die-axis 5h) (Walker, no.766). Following the newly proposed sequence of issues for Palestinian mints, this particular Ba'labakk issue dates probably into the 120s/740s or 130s/750s (Ilisch, no.496ff). On the basis of the diameter and the photographs examined, this coin belongs to the early issues of this type, which runs well into the early 'Abbāsid decades. Ba'labakk was one of the two major mints, beside Ḥimṣ, active in the immediate region in the early Islamic period, and probably influencing the circulation within the plain of Akkar.

The neighboring town of 'Irqa also served at this time as a mint, for at least two copper coin issues. (This mint was identified by Lutz Ilisch to whom I gratefully owe this information.) The first issue corresponds to this Ba'labakk issue, which indicates that 'Irqa belonged to the administrative district of Ba'labakk in the late Umayyad or early 'Abbāsid period. The second issue was published by H. Lavoix and newly attributed by L. Ilisch (Lavoix, no.1665). Both issues indicate the impor-



Figure 6. Coin from Dahr al-Biara.

tance of 'Irqa as a local market and administrative center. Further coin discoveries from the survey will yield additional information on the political and administrative organization of the Akkar plain during the early Islamic period.

Bibliographical Note:

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The present essay is a summary of part of a longer report prepared by K. Bartl, in cooperation with A. Chaaya, to be published as: *Akkar Survey 1997. Archaeological surface Investigations in the Plain of Akkar/Northern Lebanon*, (Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises, 4).

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