

The Lost City Umm el Jimal

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It is on the official list of Jordan antique sites, but nobody knows exactly where it is!

Even my guide, who is in the business for over 15 years had to ask for directions because there were no signs. But I had read an old excavation report and was fascinated by the descriptions and a few old black & white pictures. So I planned a trip to Jordan to see Jimal and some of the other interesting archaeological sites to which tourists do not normally go. An antique lost city totally built out of black basalt stones with three storey houses, I had to see it!

Finding Jimal

As there are no good directions let me give you a more detailed picture. Jimal was a prosperous desert city in the semi-arid South

Hauran lava region 15km east of Mafraq and very close to the Jordanian border with Syrian.

Bosra on the other side of the border is situated 25km north of Jimal and Gerasa or Umm Qeis is only 50km to the west. Jimal was part of greater Bosra and an agriculturally focused secondary market place.

The Bosra supply network also included towns in the densely populated southern Hauran region such as Azraq, Umm el-Quttein, Deir el-Kahf, Umm es-Surab and others. Jimal came to grow in the early Roman times and was inhabited until the Islamic Umayyad period.

But interestingly there are some traces of Nabataean settlement. A late Nabataean inscription on a courtyard wall reads *"this is the stele of Fihir, son of Shullai,*

teacher of Gadhimat, king of the Tanukh". During that time the Nabataeans from Petra under their ruler Aretas III in 85BC conquered and ruled Damascus for 13 years.

History

The first traces of a simple and poor settlement called Al Hirri village were found just 200m east of Jimal, including a cemetery with hundreds of cist burials found around Jimal and Al Hirri.

Jimal was built by predominantly Aramaic speaking settling Arab nomads under Roman protection on the edge of the East Roman Empire in the 3rd to 4th century AD.

It's peak population and construction surged in 5-6th century during Byzantine times,



One of the important & large triple storey housing complex with double arched windows & own cistern



Houses always built around a central court yard



Most houses are rather destroyed

when Bosra became a major regional center of Christianity in the Levant area.

Interestingly Jimal's population remained Christian during Islamic times, which is proof that it lay off the main trading tracks and had no real political importance. The area lost further importance when Abbasid Caliphs moved their capital to Baghdad.

Similar to all towns in antiquity, Jimal had a city wall with various gates constructed between 235-260AD. Following Nabataean tradition an excellent water irrigation system was able to support 10,000 inhabitants. A good irrigation and water collection system was important because of the limited rainfall of 100mm per annum.

Jimal therefore had an excellent water irrigation system with many canals and over 25 small, medium and large sized cisterns, some covered by

complex arch supported roofs. They were supplied by a ground level aqueduct with water from sources many kilometers away.

Unfortunately Jimal was destroyed by one of the regular earthquakes in 747AD and was never rebuilt as the Hauran region lost importance in Muslim times. This is also a benefit as no stones have been removed to build new houses since and the impression when visiting Jimal is really that of still walking through an earthquake riddled town.

Jimal only a Rural Town

Jimal was always under Bosra control and this explains the missing civic buildings except of the small praetorium.

Jimal has no grid like layout or

plan, no monumental temples, or colonnaded main street or theatre.

It just was a town for agricultural production and supply to Bosra with small streets with varying width and changing directions. Houses are crowded together without forecourt and simple plain and undecorated domestic buildings were the norm.

With no colonnaded main street and monumental public buildings, a visit to Jimal gives a very different impression compared to visits to Gerasa or Gadara. In total there are 153 recognizable buildings, 128 houses, 15 churches and approximately 24 cisterns.

Based on these numbers it can be assumed that the intra-mural population was around 3,000 centered on number of rather big residential complexes with extended families of up to 20 members. Not having a bath or



Another large clan housing complex - all houses built of local black harrat stone



Arched underground cistern



Another arched underground cistern

theatre is proof that no Romans were stationed here and Jimal was home to mainly to local Hauran farmers and goat and sheep breeders.

Architecture

The unique architecture, interesting long arched churches and vaulted underground cisterns is really why you want to see Jimal. Built of black basalt stone like Bosra it really gives you the feeling of a lost and deserted town.

The specific building style is determined by nature of the basalt building material with no decorations but using some Roman construction

techniques, but not the Roman grid like city layout and monumental design.

The strength of basalt allowed unusual architectural style called corbelling with ceiling stone beams 2-3m long with cantilevered supports protruding from the walls. Therefore rooms are not wider than 3m, but length is not a problem as can be seen in the three main churches which are cathedral sized.

In Jimal you will also find a unique way staircases were built in the same way protruding from outside walls, increasing the usable space and reducing architectural structural needs. In this way most houses could easily be built with three floors, which was very rare, especially for a rural town.

Jimal was built in clusters as the need arose to extend residential units. Clusters consisted of several houses attached to each other built around central courtyard with one entrance, indication that this was home to a clan.

The Praetorium

The so-called Praetorium is the only surviving Late Roman building of 2nd century AD. An inscription in the later built cathedral refers to the erection of a Praetorium. It is one of the finest architectural structures in Jimal and was the residence and office of the administrator with private and public access.

With eight rooms on the ground floor, including three bigger rooms, an atrium with four ionic columns, a cruciform room with unique vaulted ceiling and a basilica type room with three entrances from the atrium.

For this building, various roofing techniques were used



Byzantine West Church with 2 naves & central arched support wall



El-Jimal northeast area with triple floor houses

- a sloping roof for the atrium, a barrel vault and cornice for the cruciform room, an assumed high pitch wooden roof for basilica room and all backrooms had flat beam roofs. In the domestic compound you will find a closet in main room with stone toilet fixture.

Important Byzantine Churches

In total 15 churches were discovered in Jimal, with eight churches built into residential complexes most with entries from the domestic courtyards and are therefore assumed to have been private churches.

For some churches a flat roofed hall design was used, similar to most houses. This simple and different architecture did not make them immediately recognizable as churches. Their size made them just large enough to serve the families or immediate neighborhood.

The cathedral is one of the few free standing building dated 559AD and definitely was a public church in a central location in the open town area.

Close by, the West Church was erected with a three ship design separated by two rows of four high arches to support typical Jimal

roof structure. A large walled courtyard was the possible site of burials with various underground arched small halls including a cistern.

Another church of the same size and lay out included an exedra-type niche at the end of the hall, with steps covered with white marble of which pieces are still in situ today as are parts of the antique mosaic.

The area in front of the altar was separated by a balustrade, for which holes for its poles are still visible today.



Example of door & unique roof construction



Example of outside staircase construction

Residential Houses

The first houses in Jimal were built during the late 1st century, but the majority was erected later during the 5-6th century AD. These residential complexes were built around a central courtyard. Ground floor rooms were used as stables and store rooms.

For security reason exterior windows were used rarely with most windows facing the courtyard and covered with metal grilles plus shutters. Flat roofs were covered with small stones and mud for rain runoff, stairs were leading on the outside courtyard walls to upper rooms and roofs.

One of the largest houses in town had 15 rooms at the ground floor level and was owned by one of the wealthy farming clans. Different

to most houses in Jimal, there is no evidence that the ground floor rooms were used as stables due to the lack of mangers.

The living quarters on the first floor were reached by the typical cantilevered exterior stairs. And some other unique features are only found in this residential complex - a double arch window on the second floor with a middle column and a huge covered underground cistern with arched ceiling.

Late Military Post

The few public buildings that have been identified were erected rather late in the history of Jimal, such as the Roman Castellum dated between 235-260AD during Diocletian times. Unfortunately this was totally destroyed.

In a second attempt in 411AD a rectangular double storey building was constructed with 33 rooms on the ground floor surrounding a huge rectangular courtyard. The walls were 1m thick and the rest of the stucco found suggests that interior and exterior walls were plastered.

Later during Ummayyad times a 15m high watch tower was erected. Unlike other towers in the Middle East it was built inside the overall building structure and not protruding the perimeter walls.

After peace with Persia in 532AD guards might have left and it seems thorough remodeling took place, converting it into a Byzantine monastery. At this stage a chapel was attached outside building perimeter walls.



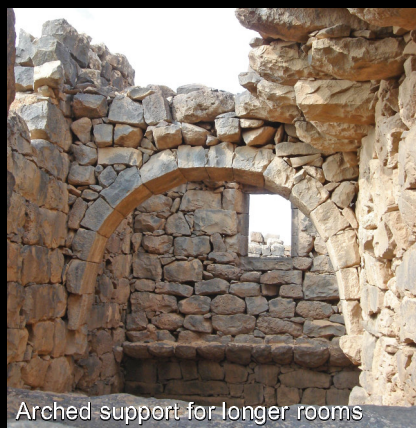
Different ways to erect arched roof support



Example of arched vaults & corniced roof



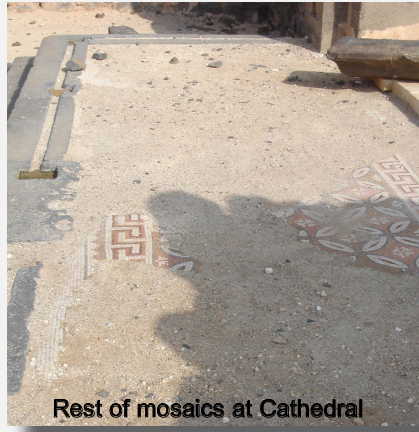
Typical outside wall stairs



Arched support for longer rooms



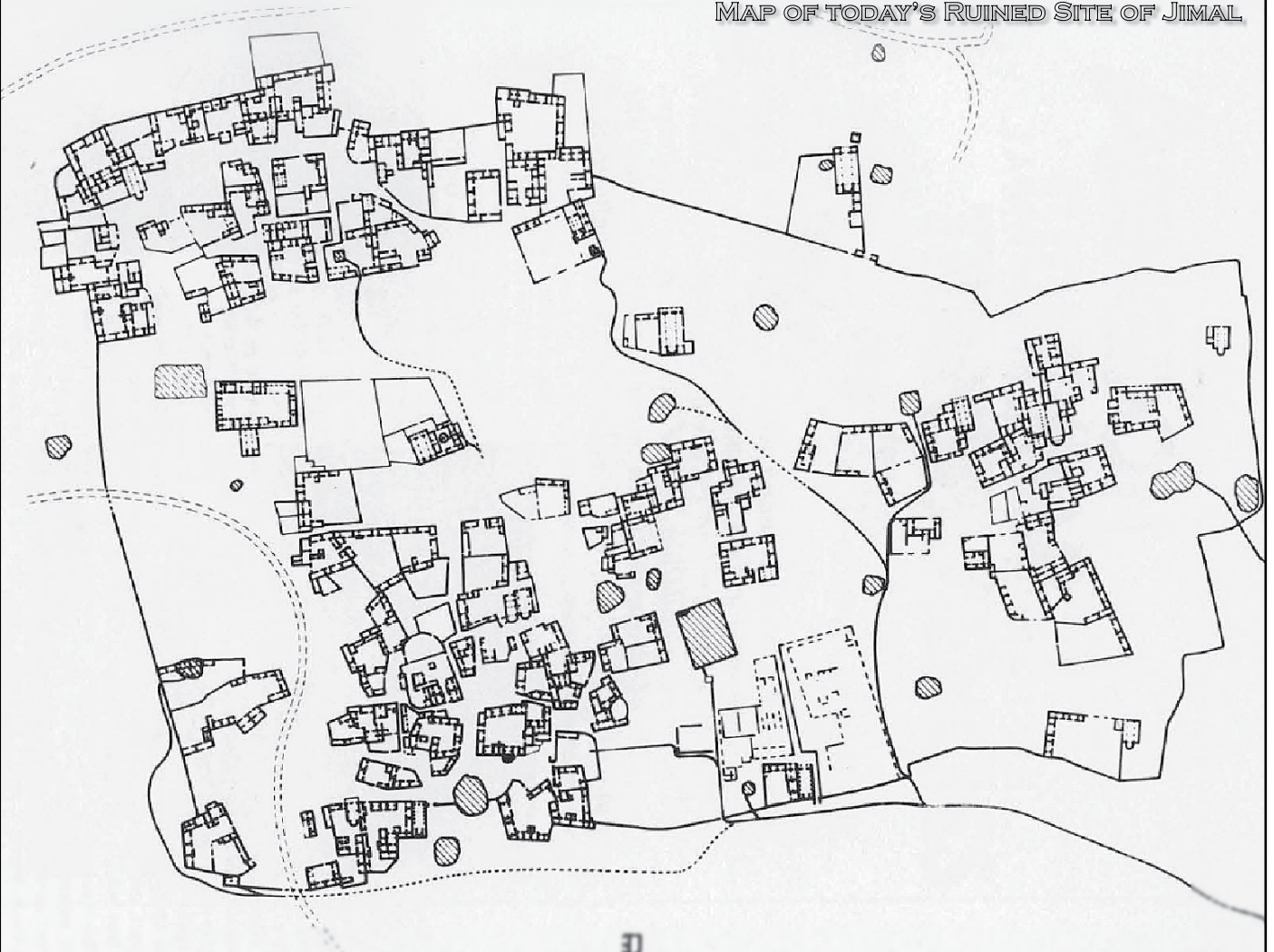
Ventilation holes above doors



Rest of mosaics at Cathedral



MAP OF TODAY'S RUINED SITE OF JIMAL



Palace at the military compound



16m high military watch tower



Palace at the military compound