

Pella & Iraq Al Amir, Jordan

Two Interesting Archaeological Sites Off the Beaten Tourist Track

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In this article, we are going to explore two interesting archaeological sites in Jordan, which are quite close to Amman and able to be visited in one day.

Let's start with the ruined city of Pella, which was a member of the famous Decapolis. You will need some imagination to envisage ancient Pella stretching over two steep hills and the narrow valley in between. Unfortunately only a small part of Pella has been excavated over the last 12 years. But be assured this was an immense city of great importance for a long time in antiquity.

Pella Ruins

Pella lies close to Gadara on the first row of hills on the eastern side of the Jordan valley. The 10ha ruined city extends over the hills of Khirbet Fahl, Tell Husn and the slopes of Jebel Abu el-Khas with Wadi Malawi and Wadi Jirm el-Moz in between.

Today's visible ruins represent the remains of the ancient Roman city which was built on a previous Hellenistic city, which again was built on the remains of an important Neolithic settlement dated around 10,000 years ago.

Only a small portion of ancient Pella has been excavated yet and the occupation debris of the different cities built on top of each other created over time a 20m high pile.

It is interesting to note that Pella was first mentioned in 1,900BC in Egyptian inscriptions, but there was no evidence found of any direct Egyptian occupation despite Egyptian Pharaohs, who must have been going past Pella to reach the Orontes river valley to hunt elephants, as reported, and attack rebellious city states

further north such as Karkemish.

Decapolis Association

With increasing Roman influence Emperor Pompey created the semi-autonomous Decapolis union, with many privileges to foster trading links and a joint defense line against future attacks from the east.

This economic union of ten cities included in Jordan, Philadelphia (today's Amman), Gerasa (today's Jerash), Gadara (close to today's Umm Qweis), Raphana (today's Abila), and Pella (in Arabic called Tabaqat Fahl); in Syria, Kanatha (today's Qanawat), Dion/Capitolias or Adun/Beit Ras, Hippos/Susieh or Bet Shean; and west of the Jordan river, Scythopolis.

The Decapolis was later even extended to 18 cities, unfortunately this created some uncertainties for historians as to which cities were part of the initial union of ten, as ancient



View from Khirbet Fahl with the ancient Canaanite Temple to the Roman temple in the valley



Excavation area next to Canaanite Temple



Multilevel occupation on Khibbet Fahh

sources are not clear about this. We only know that Bosra, the most important Roman metropolis at the time with 80,000 inhabitants and capital of the Province Arabia Petraea, became a member at a late stage.

Pella History

The Jordan Valley was an important center of early Neolithic settlements and in Pella there was a continuous Neolithic occupation from 8,000BC to the Chalcolithic period up to 4,000BC.

The first Neolithic permanent housing that has been found at Pella is dated to around 6,000BC and during the Early Bronze Age defensive stone platforms were built, followed in the Middle Bronze Age by a massive mud brick city wall.

Archaeologists have excavated three Bronze Age temples dated

between 1,700-1,200BC plus an Iron Age stone temple dated to about 900BC which falls into King Solomon times.

Talking about hostilities, which were very common in this region, in 83BC the large Hellenistic city was destroyed by Hasmonian King Alexander Jannaeus but later rebuilt. Alexander Jannaeus also had ongoing battles with the Nabataean state in Petra, some of which he lost, others he won.

Romans finally subdued the region around 60BC and the area became part of the East Roman Empire. By 150AD, the Romans had built a large city with amphitheatre, several public baths, many street fountains and plenty of housing for the growing population.

Around 550AD, three Byzantine churches and a massive fortress were added when the

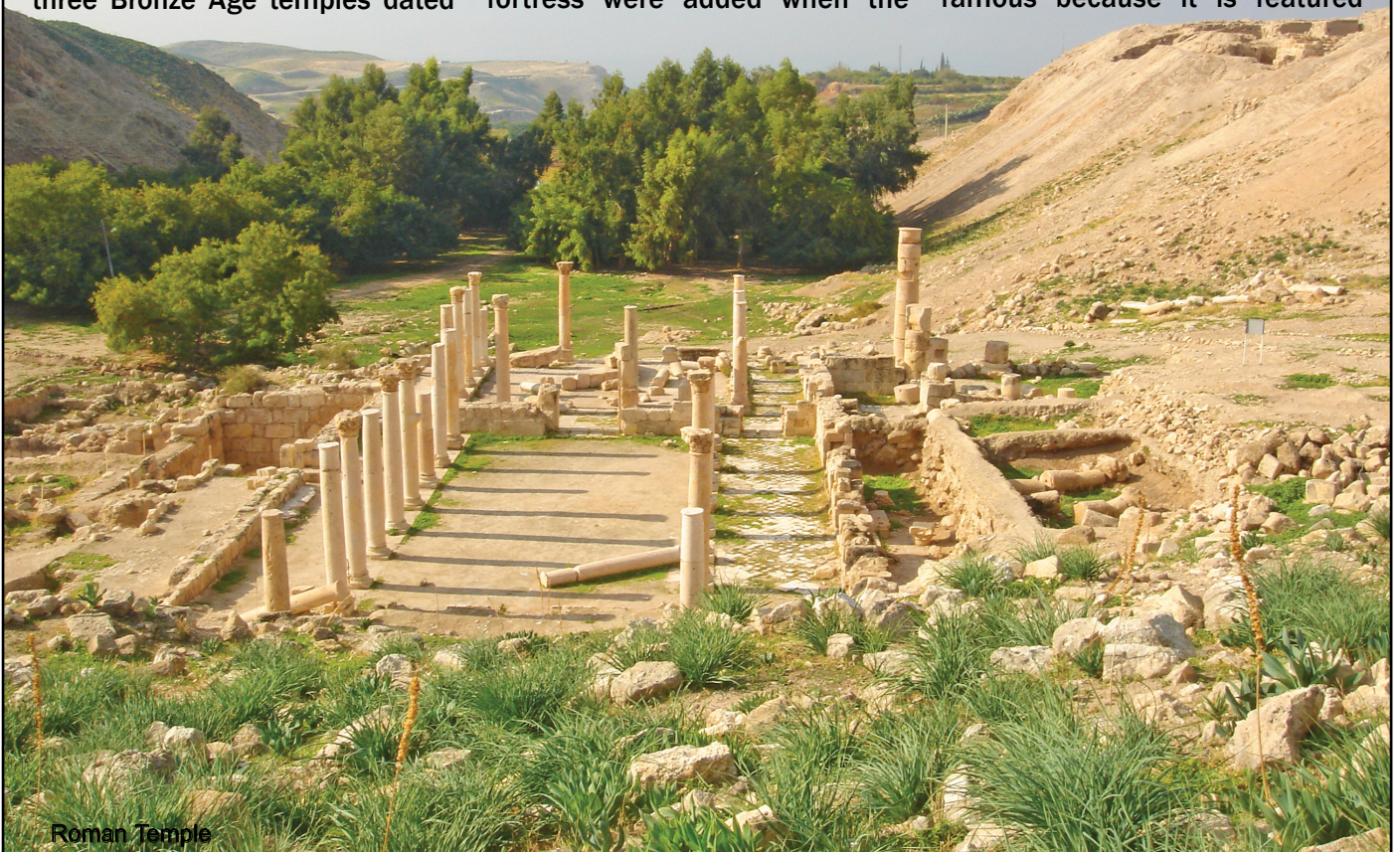
Roman Empire, under the reign of Constantine, adopted Christianity and moved its capital to Constantinople (modern day Istanbul).

In Pella one of the first Byzantine churches in the area was built when Christians fled there during the Jewish revolt in Jerusalem in 100AD. The excavations of this church revealed beautiful polychrome mosaic floors.

But in 750AD the early Islamic city was destroyed by the powerful Golan earthquake and never rebuilt thereafter. Its fate was further reduced when later populations used Pella's ruins as quarry for their modern buildings in the villages erected in the surrounding area.

Pella's Roman Temple

The Roman temple at Pella is famous because it is featured



Roman Temple



Roman Temple only partly excavated

on coins minted by Emperor Commodus in 184AD and by Emperor Caracalla in 217AD. These coins show a dominating temple with a tetra style entrance situated on a high hill with colonnades running around the hill's base.

Archaeologists are still searching today for this temple on Tell Husn or Khirbet Fahl. They have found certain structures on both hills, but there is no sign yet of any surrounding colonnades at their foot. Might they have been used too as quarry for modern housing in the surrounding area?

It is known that Pella's main temple was dedicated to the city's Canaanite god Hadad and later to Greek tutelary god Apollo.

So we are still waiting for future excavation results from Pella, and we may be surprised one day to hear that this famous temple actually was found in a completely different city, such as Philadelphia

today's Amman.

Pella's Canaanite Temple

On Khirbet Fahl, a so-called migdol temple, meaning fortress, dedicated to god El was excavated and dated to 1,650BC during the Middle Bronze Age. With a size of 32x24m, it is the largest temple so far excavated of this period in the Near East and archaeologists have found out, that it had a checkered history. It is surprising what excavations can reveal to experts, interesting facts which visitors will never see when looking at these indifferent ruins.

In antiquity this temple featured two massive mud brick towers next to its entrance and under the thick white plaster, floors pits with buried sacred instruments were excavated. This temple experienced two major rebuilds, first in the Late Bronze Age around 1,350BC with a central pillared hall being erected. And again 200 years later when it

was destroyed by fire and only received a patched up repair.

But finally it was restored again 250 years later around 900BC, although to only one third of its original size, because of the limited economic means at the time.

Now, coming back to the science of field archaeology, under the temple a large raised stone platform of the Late Chalcolithic Period, dated to around 4,200BC, was found and carefully excavated. With a measurement of 6x3m it had an unprecedented size for that period. What makes this platform further interesting and special is the fact that it had a thick cover of very pure high quality grain.

Similar platforms covered in grain were discovered recently only 20km away at Tell Tsaf.

These excavation results clearly suggest a use for cultic practices



Roman Valley Temple only partly excavated



Tell Husn excavations



Roman Temple



Ganaanite Temple

with grain playing the major role, possibly for fertility rites. This is further supported by a Neolithic clay figurine of a female tambourine player found on the grain covered platform.

A parallel to our Pella temple precinct was also discovered at nearby Megiddo, Shechem and Hazor. And certain temples in the Nile delta show also a similar layout.

The “cherry” on top for archaeologists is always to find pottery, which can easily be dated with certainty by scientific carbon 14 tests done in a laboratory. They were very fortunate to find during their Pella excavations a rather specific ceramic cult stand in form of a conic pipe with a height of 1m and decorated with a painted human figure and animal plus further vegetation decorations.

This stand was the base to support a bigger offering bowl depicting a human figure again with outstretched arms wearing a cow or bull mask. The bull was a common animal used to

represent gods during the Bronze Age. In Mesopotamia many gods were depicted with hats and a pair of bull horns.

In later excavations various similar painted and incised cult stands were found. Another interesting discovery was a ceramic box with five molded cow or bull heads on its rim, possibly used as a model shrine in the temple. In addition some jars with the typical “tree of life” motif were found giving us a good insight into religious beliefs and which connect Pella to other cult sites and research results in the area.

Pella’s Khirbet Fahl Palace

What is an ancient city without a ruler and his palace? Pella was no different to any other chiefdom 3,000 years ago. Actually two palaces have been excavated, one from the Bronze Age and one from the Iron Age.

The Bronze Age palace was a huge square building of 50m, with thick walls and covering no less

than 2,500m².

The second palace built during the First Iron Age Period is dated to around 1,150BC and was smaller with 26 rooms spanning over 750m². It was erected with mud bricks on a low stone wall basis. This building was destroyed and rebuilt during the Second Iron Age Period around 900BC.

The palace and temple walls can be well seen today, when looking over the huge area on the edge of Khirbet Fahl hill, which archeologists have excavated to a depth of 15m.

Pella Tombs

On Tell Husn a Middle Bronze Age chamber tomb with five burials was found by excavators below the Byzantine housing ruins and dated to around 1,600BC. This tomb chamber contained one well articulated female burial including various elegant pottery vessels such as storage jars, bowls, jugs, jars and an alabaster ointment jar.



Khirbet Fahl Palace with various forms of columns



Inside Iraq al-Amir Palace



Palace built of huge stone block

Surprisingly a small dog was buried along side her excavators found out.

Iraq al-Amir

Iraq al-Amir is a very special archaeological site and different from all other sites in the Near East. It is the only site in Jordan which has a pure Hellenistic architecture with no Roman settlement that later followed on.

Based on inscriptions in the nearby tombs and textual evidence found, Iraq al-Amir was the seat of the Tobiad Dynasty. They were influential Jewish landowners in Transjordan during the Hellenistic period and played an important part in history during the last days of the Judean monarchy and the so-called Second Temple Period.

The Tobiad clan enjoyed a highly autonomous status as regional rulers and was even commanding their own cavalry garrison. The clan was well connected to the Jewish priesthood and had some influence in Jerusalem. It is generally assumed that Tobiad ruler Hircanus built Iraq al-Amir during 2nd century BC during the rule of Seleucus IV, one of the succeeding kings in the split up of

the Greek empire after the death of Alexander the Great in 323BC.

Iraq al-Amir History

The first settlement on the site dates back to the Iron Age around 1,100BC and featured a fortification wall, some residential buildings with paved floors and drains including two beehive ovens.

Several Iron Age fortresses marked the western border of the Tobiad area. In total 174 archaeological sites belonging to the Tobiad period have been recorded in the area. The first group of settlements were all fortified and situated along Wadi es-Seer and Wadi Kafrein on high points with visual contact to each other.

Concluded archaeological work on city walls and towers has shown that security was a major concern at the time. Various metal arrow heads and even parts of a plated iron armor were found. A second group of settlements in the Wadi Amir area also belong to the Tobiad era.

Iraq al-Amir was permanently occupied from the Iron Age to the Persian and Hellenistic

periods. Recent research is evaluating assumptions of some experts pointing to the Tobiads being rather autonomous Persian governors, which moved away from Jerusalem after political and religious disagreements.

It is further proposed that the Tobiad area was a separate province to the Rabath-Ammon and Madaba Plains. Their economy, wealth and survival was very dependent on ample water supply in the valley and sufficient agricultural production, good animal breeding including horses and extensive wine production, which was also exported.

Iraq al-Amir Ruins

Situated in Wadi es-Seer only 17km west of Amman and 4km upstream from the confluence with Wadi Kafrein, Iraq al-Amir was strategically placed between the Transjordan plateau and Jordan Valley trade routes.

Today there is only one key monument left to see, the megalithic Hellenistic palace called Qasr al-'Abd, but it is worthwhile the effort as it is unique in Jordan - just look at the



Hellenistic Tobiad Palace at Iraq al-Amir

compelling photographs.

There is little left of the ancient village around the palace, as the modern village was possibly built on top and only a few scattered ancient structures including many columbaria can be found today.

Of interest are also the two manmade and some natural caves only 200m away from the palace. You see them driving down to the palace right next to the road at the foot of the cliff on your right. Both caves feature large inscriptions with the name of Tobiah in the official Aramaic square script. In total ten caves were found near the Tobiad palace.

Tobiad Qasr al-'Abd

When I first heard about Iraq al-Amir it was difficult to find any useful information about it. But after some search I found an old picture of this impressive

Hellenistic palace and immediately I decided to go and visit this little known archaeological site on my next trip to Amman.

Standing on a platform surrounded in antiquity by a precinct wall, Qasr al-'Abd reflects some of its ancient splendor. The rectangular palace had two columned entrances on the north and south side. Measuring 15x35m with the outer walls going up to the second floor, this palatial residence offered its residents at least 1,000m² in living space and its ground floor rooms had a height of up to 5m.

All the room walls on the ground floor are still visible today to get a good idea of the layout and their possible use. Interestingly these rooms were built with different floor levels possibly to separate quarters. A wide staircase in one corner leads to the first floor with huge columned windows overlooking the valley.

I never have seen any building in the region using this kind of massive stone block material, measuring 2x4m with a thickness of 1m and which must be weighing between 10-15 tons each.

One of the most interesting features are the two lion fountains integrated into the outside ground floor corners close to the main entrance. In addition all four corners of the first floor are adorned with lion sculptures with merged and precluding heads at each corner. This feature makes this palace unique in the Near East region. As so many other ancient buildings, this palace was destroyed by an earthquake in 362AD and only recently partly restored.

The Columbaria Myth

After some research I believe we can now demystify the uncertainty, which still exists today, about the true use of what archaeologists



All what is left of Tobiad Palace at Iraq al-Amir



Only partly rebuilt palace



Wall with 2 lion figures



Corner lion friese



North entrance

call columbaria. But let me first explain what role columbaria play and where they can be found.

To date, columbaria finds are recorded in Cyprus at the famous Aphrodite temple, in Marissa close to Sidon in Lebanon and at the Masada mountain fortress close to the Dead Sea. The columbaria I have visited and investigated were those at Petra and Iraq al-Amir in Jordan. In Iraq al-Amir the greatest number of columbaria has been discovered and they also offer the highest variance in form and size plus other special features.

Columbaria are numerous rows of small niches or holes measuring 30cm square and 10cm deep on average, carved into stone walls either inside caves or outside on rock faces.

At Petra most tourists miss the interesting Columbaria Tomb only 100m right behind the main Qasr el-bint Faroun Temple in the center of Petra. It is easy to be missed because it lies at the bottom of the el-Habis mountain behind a huge rock fall and you have to

find your own way up the slope between rocks, as there is no trail.

Looking like a typical Nabataean tomb, the Columbaria Tomb is different nevertheless. This columbarium is actually a cave with an open hall in front with all outside and inside walls covered from top to bottom with rows of equal sized small niches.

First they were believed to have served for cultural purposes to either place urns or betyles. Betyles are small conical stone idols representing gods, which caravan leaders carried with them for protection and placed them into votive niches for worshipping. These votive niches have been found throughout the Nabataean kingdom including in at Mada'in Saleh in Saudi Arabia.

With Petra being the capital where all caravans ended, it was assumed their leaders needed a place to keep their betyle idols and worship them. For urns the niches are too small and in addition no graves in the ground were found in the so-called Columbaria Tomb which therefore can not be a tomb at all. These grave pits are common in all of Petra's tombs as all tombs were family funeral sites used for multiple burials over time. All votive niches used for pocket sized betyles had small holes to position the idol stones, a feature observed to be missing in the columbarium at Petra.

The Latin meaning for columbarium is dove house. The dove was a holy animal playing an important part for various ancient deities, but was most important for goddess Aphrodite also known in certain areas in the Near East as Atargatis or Isis.

So why wouldn't the



South entrance & first floor windows & corner lions sculptures



Also called Qasr al-Abd

sophisticated Nabataeans, who controlled the key caravan routes of the Arabian Peninsula, know and make use of the special directional senses of doves? It would certainly be of great benefit with regards to fast and secure long distance communication and help enhance trade relations. Caravans could easily have carried doves across the Arabian Peninsula as gifts of gods to other rulers or as means of holy communication.

So it is no surprise that various different uses of columbaria have been discussed in the past, but the most likely explanation being sacred dove breeding, as part of the known Aphrodite-Atargatis cult. The most important center of this cult being practiced around 300-200BC at Marissa, a Sidon commercial colony in today's Lebanon.

Now coming back to the many columbaria found at Iraq al-Amir, there is support for this dove-theory by the finding of an elaborate dove depiction carved into a rock at a nearby quarry site.

The first columbarium is a 4x4m stone with 10 equilateral niches carved in two rows. Only 20m away there is a second

columbarium and close by two further columbaria stones are also found. Different to all other columbaria, these four are detached blocks and all niches are facing east. It can be assumed that these heavy blocks were never moved, as they are still facing the rising morning sun.

Four more columbaria stones are situated close to the Tobiad cave complex with approximately 80 niches. Another interesting columbaria site is the close by cave at Mu'llagah ed-Deir consisting of two chambers with windows and doors cut in rock with about 800 triangular niches carved into inside walls. The triangular shape of the niches is unique for any columbarium, but makes perfectly sense for dove breeding purposes, when faced with carving into harder rock.

Nabataean Connection

Mu'llagah ed-Deir is very similar in size to the Nabataean columbaria, but nevertheless different in some respects. In addition, there are no other traces of Nabataean origin in Iraq al-Amir despite the fact that the Tobiads lived at the height of the Nabataean trading empire and were situated only 250km

north of Petra in what was still seen as Nabataean territory.

But we also know that the Nabataeans were never the majority population in what was seen as their kingdom's territory. They were in fact just controlling the trade routes in this area and allowed others to live and trade with them as long as they paid taxes and did not pose a threat.

It might even be that the Tobiads were supplying horses to the Nabataeans and were even supporting them from time to time in military campaigns against the Hasmonian kings. For example in 93BC the Nabataeans destroyed the Hasmonian army at Gadara, north of Iraq al-Amir.

In 85BC the Nabataeans even conquered the Syrian Hauran region and Damascus, which they controlled for 13 years. This might be the reason why Alexander Jannaeus attacked his Jewish brothers in 83BC, who left Jerusalem in disaccord and helped his arch enemy the Nabataeans.

So we have to assume that, based on various indications, the Tobiads after leaving Jerusalem actually co-operated and traded with Nabataea.



Lion fountain next to entrance



Lions images at all 4 corners on first floor