



Dimitri Baramki: Discovering Qasr Hisham¹

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The ancient land of Palestine began attracting Western archaeologists almost from the birth of the field as a scholarly discipline, yet it was not until the 1920s that the country produced its first tiny crop of Palestinian archaeologists. Albert Glock, in a posthumously published article,³ identifies the four most prominent pioneer Palestinians working in the field during the British Mandate:

Only a fraction of the seventy-three Palestinians employed by the department [of Antiquities] held higher positions: three of the six inspectors commonly mentioned were Palestinians (D. Baramki, S.A.S. Husseini, and N. Makhouly) and a Palestinian (the self-taught scholar Stephan H. Stephan) worked in the library.⁴

Dimitri Baramki in the early 1930s. *Source:*
Private collection.

Baramki and Husseini became colleagues again in Libya in the mid 1960s; Makhoul's 1941 *Guide to Acre*, published by the Department of Antiquities, still turns up at sites like the sole Palestinian-owned hotel in Acre; and Stephan H. Stephan's work continues to be cited today, as for example, in Mahmoud Hawari's essay on the Citadel of Jerusalem in this publication. But it was Dimitri Baramki (1909-1984), frequently called the first Palestinian archaeologist, who was the most productive, and the only one who pursued a lifelong career in the field. He began as a student inspector of antiquities during the British Mandate two months short of his eighteenth birthday, and achieved an internationally acknowledged standing as a UNESCO expert, Professor of Archaeology and Curator of the Archaeological Museum at the American University of Beirut, and lecturer at the Lebanese University and the University of Balamand.

Baramki's career consists of two phases, the Palestinian, during which he conducted most of his field work, excavating at numerous sites across Palestine, and the Lebanese, which centered more on training young archaeologists and building up a university archaeological museum unique in the Middle East. The first phase began when his older brother Jalil, who eventually left the field to pursue legal studies, drew him into archaeology and the Mandate Department of Antiquities, where he remained until the *Nakba* of 1948. After a brief stay in Amman he returned to Jerusalem to work first as Acting Curator of the Palestine Archaeological Museum (1948-49), now called the Rockefeller Museum, then with the American School of Oriental Research, currently the Albright Institute, until 1951. In that year he was recruited by the American University of Beirut, thus launching the second, more academic phase of his career.

Just over a year out of St. George's School in Jerusalem, where he had studied on a choirboy scholarship, the young Dimitri Baramki was promoted to Inspector of Antiquities at the start of 1929. He began working on sites and writing reports that were published in the *Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine* (QDAP) from 1931 into the late 1940s (also managing to earn a B.A. Honours external degree from the University of London in 1934). These early publications covered a variety of remains, from an Iron Age tomb to Early Christian and Byzantine churches, spread across the length and breadth of Palestine. But he seems to have been especially drawn to Jericho. He excavated a Christian basilica at Tell Hassan in Jericho in 1934, then a synagogue of Byzantine and early Islamic date near Tell Sultan in 1936, and finally two mosques at Khirbet al-Mafjar, one inside the Palace in 1936 and then the Umayyad mosque in 1941.

When he inspected the three mounds of ruins known as Khirbet al-Mafjar in 1932, he reported monuments of great importance being destroyed through looting of stones. The Mandate authorities gave him permission and funding to make excavations at what he thought was a monastery in 1935. He soon realized that these monuments must belong to the early Islamic period, "no earlier than the eighth century." During the next thirteen years he would continue to carefully uncover the Palace and then other buildings, all filled with the most beautiful sculpture, fresco and mosaic decorations.

Baramki realized that this complex was one of the so-called "desert castles." Archaeologists were beginning to understand that these discoveries were among the first foundations of the Umayyad dynasty and the earliest examples of Islamic art and

architecture. At that time there were only two or three known desert castles, and Khirbet al-Mafjar was the most highly decorated. The only comparison was to Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi near Damascus, built by the Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (724-743). Baramki discovered an ostrakon, a fragment of marble with the name of Hisham written on it; this is the only evidence for the founder and gives the popular name of this most important Palestinian site, Qasr Hisham.

Baramki published four detailed reports of the excavations in QDAP; these are models of clear descriptions and explanations of the discoveries. After World War II, the excavations continued but with the participation of the former Director of Antiquities (1938-1948), the British architect Robert Hamilton. He had published articles on stone and plaster carvings and then took an active interest in the architecture of the Audience Hall and Bath. Meanwhile Baramki wrote two reports on the archaeology of these buildings and others, which languished unpublished and unread until included in his dissertation completed at the University of London in 1953. Some years later Hamilton published a book on the site, *An Arabian Mansion in the Jordan Valley* (1959), a large monograph of the art and architecture but without the archaeological information contained in Baramki's reports and field experience.

One must note that there are no artifacts found in Hamilton's monograph. Prior to 1948, Baramki had begun to rectify this situation with his major article on "The Pottery from Khirbet al-Mafjar."⁵ This is a remarkable study, which begins with the British tradition of pottery drawings and expands the presentation into a comprehensive analysis of the ware types, relative dating and even functions. This was truly pioneering work since Islamic ceramics were known at that time only from Arthur Lane's books on art historical styles. This was a new guide for archaeologists and has been used by generations of scholars. One of the most recent was a study by the author in 1988.⁶ Using information provided by Baramki, the pottery could be re-organized into a sort of stratigraphic sequence for new dating and historical analysis of the palace. This is information that is not found in the publication of many modern excavations and shows that Baramki was not only thoroughly scientific but well ahead of the archaeology of his time. More recent excavations often do not reach the quality of his early work. Nearly seventy years later this information led Donald Whitcomb and Hamdan Taha to renew excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar, and to a reanalysis showing the archaeological phases of the site, based on Baramki's careful attention to stratigraphy of the palace. His 1953 doctoral dissertation on Umayyad architecture and Qasr Hisham is full of important information and observations on this remarkable monument and guides the current research.

After 1948, Baramki was briefly acting curator of the Palestine Archaeological Museum and at some point Lancaster Harding seems to have offered him the position of Director of Antiquities for the Arab part of Palestine (presumably the West Bank), but this was refused. Rather he switched to the American School of Oriental Research, where he was archaeological advisor and librarian. This could not keep him away from Jericho and he soon returned with a new project. He joined James Kelso in 1950 for new excavations at Tulul Abu el-'Alayiq, popularly known as New Testament Jericho, and at Khirbet en-Nitla, erroneously thought to be Gilgal, both in Wadi Qelt near the



Hisham's palace, east gate. *Source: Library of Congress.*

city of Jericho.

Baramki organized the excavations at Tulul Abu el-‘Alayiq, mainly Roman in date but with an early Islamic occupation on the top. The most important find was a slab of marble with writing of five *suras* from the Qur’an, datable to the late eighth century. When he returned the following year, he spent his time cataloguing the 266 Islamic coins from the site, again mainly from the eighth century but showing connections with all of Syria and many from Egypt. This passion for coinage was adopted from his brother Jalil, a noted numismatist, and he would later publish the large numismatic collections in the museum in the American University of Beirut.

Baramki’s final excavation in Jericho was the small site of Khirbet en-Nitla where he returned to his first interest, the excavation of a small church, dating from the fourth to the ninth centuries. He was able to determine that the church went through five different architectural phases with mosaic floors in each. One can sense the excitement in his report on the pottery from Nitla; as he states, these sites present “a cross-section of Palestinian pottery from the close of the Hellenistic period through the Roman and Byzantine and into the Early Arabic.” His years of study at Khirbet al-Mafjar made him the only scholar who could identify and evaluate this segment of the history of Jericho.

Baramki moved to the American University in Beirut in 1951, where he became professor of archaeology and curator of the museum. Lebanon did not grant him much opportunity to excavate beyond the significant Tell el-Ghassil in the Bekaa Valley, but the university entrusted him with what he regarded as two priceless treasures: a handful of eager students, and two dark rooms lined with old-fashioned wall cases full of antiques and many crates of ancient artifacts. He thus devoted his energies to developing the first

into a full-fledged masters degree program in archaeology and ancient history, training his students at Tell el-Ghassil, and the second into one of the most significant archaeological museums in the Middle East, and certainly the most important university museum in the region. For more than two generations officials in the Jordanian and Lebanese departments of antiquities were his students, as are the current Professor of Archaeology at AUB, and the Curator of its Archaeological Museum.

Baramki turned to the study of the Phoenicians and wrote a very popular book on the subject in 1961. He also produced numerous articles for scholarly as well as popular journals, and published catalogues and guidebooks for the university museum. He continued fieldwork by consulting on projects in Libya, Iraq, and perhaps most importantly Dubai. In the early 1970s he discovered an early Islamic settlement at Jumairah with remarkable similarities to the first excavations at Khirbet al-Mafjar.

Despite his busy work in Lebanon, and his later excavations in the region, Dimitri Baramki never forgot Palestine, which he visited frequently with students and colleagues until 1967. Among his publications is a survey of Palestinian ancient history and archaeology which he concludes with these words:

Throughout the history of the country, there was a Palestinian entity. Circumstances have forced the Palestinians time and again to change their nationality and creed but basically they remained the same. No solution to the country's problem can be based on justice if these facts are completely ignored. The entity of Palestine must be preserved. Palestine must belong to the Palestinians be they Christians, Jews, or Moslems. A state based on the tenets of one faith is inconceivable in the Twentieth Century.⁷

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Endnotes

- 1 An earlier, shorter version of this article appeared in the February 2013 issue of *This Week in Palestine*.
- 2 The author thanks Alex Baramki for his assistance and extensive additions to this article.
- 3 "Archaeology as Cultural Survival: The Future of the Palestinian Past," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 23, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 70-84. Albert Glock (1925-1992) was the founder and director of Birzeit University's Institute of Palestinian Archaeology. He was killed by an unidentified gunman on 19 January 1992.
- 4 Glock, "Archaeology," 75.
- 5 Dimitri Baramki, "The Pottery from Khirbat al-Mafjar," *QDAP* 10 (1944) 65-103.
- 6 Donald Whitcomb, "Khirbet al-Mafjar Reconsidered: The Ceramic Evidence," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 271 (1988), 51-67.
- 7 Dimitri C. Baramki, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Palestine* (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, 1969), 242.