

KHAN GESHER (JISR EL-MAJAMI')

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INTRODUCTION¹

The ruins of Khan Gesher (Jisr el-Majami'; map ref. NIG 2532/7254, OIG 2032/2254) are located on the western bank of the Jordan River, 9 km south of the Sea of Galilee and 14 km north of Bet She'an, on the middle terrace (*ghor*) of the three topographic terraces that make up the northern Jordan and Bet She'an Valleys. The khan site occupies a small peninsula surrounded by the river on its northern, eastern, and southeastern sides. To the south, Nahal Tavor (Wadi Bira) runs through a small fertile valley before its confluence with the Jordan River. The valley was occupied during various periods. Among the numerous archaeological sites dotting it are Tel Shamat, H. Yaqush, Tel Zan, Tel Shushan and H. Minḥa (Fig. 1).

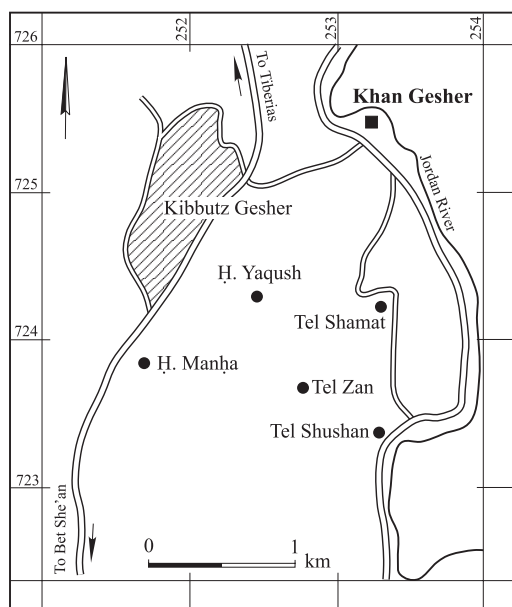


Fig. 1. The khan and its vicinity.

The khan was built at the site of an important ford between the two banks of the Jordan. This relatively convenient crossing point makes use of the local basalt rock formation that narrowed the riverbed and provided a solid foundation for the construction of bridges (see below).

Two medieval sources apparently mention the building of a post station, possibly a khan, early in the fourteenth century, at the "Sama" bridge—one of the names by which the nearby bridge was known throughout the ages (Peterson 2001:186; Cytryn-Silverman 2004:83 and see below). More recently, in 1799, Jacotin indicated "Pont du Majama", i.e., Jisr el-Majami', and a road station next to it on his map. It therefore seems that the khan was still in use at that time (Carmon 1960:164). Later travelers describe the khan as being in ruin (Molyneux 1848:112; Guérin 1880:133; Conder and Kitchener 1881–1883, II:116). In 1904, following the construction of the Hijaz railway, a customs office was built onto the eastern wall of the ruin. In 1934, Kibbutz Gesher was founded, with some of its buildings actually constructed within the ruined khan, and reusing many of the old building stones. These structures were maintained there until 1948. In the late 1960s the site was heavily damaged by earth moving activities.

THE JISR EL-MAJAMI' BRIDGES

Three separate bridges, all known as Jisr el-Majami',² were built in close proximity to the khan, and most likely in association with it (Fig. 2): (1) during the Crusader–Mamluk period; (2) by the Ottoman authorities; and (3) by the British government. These connected

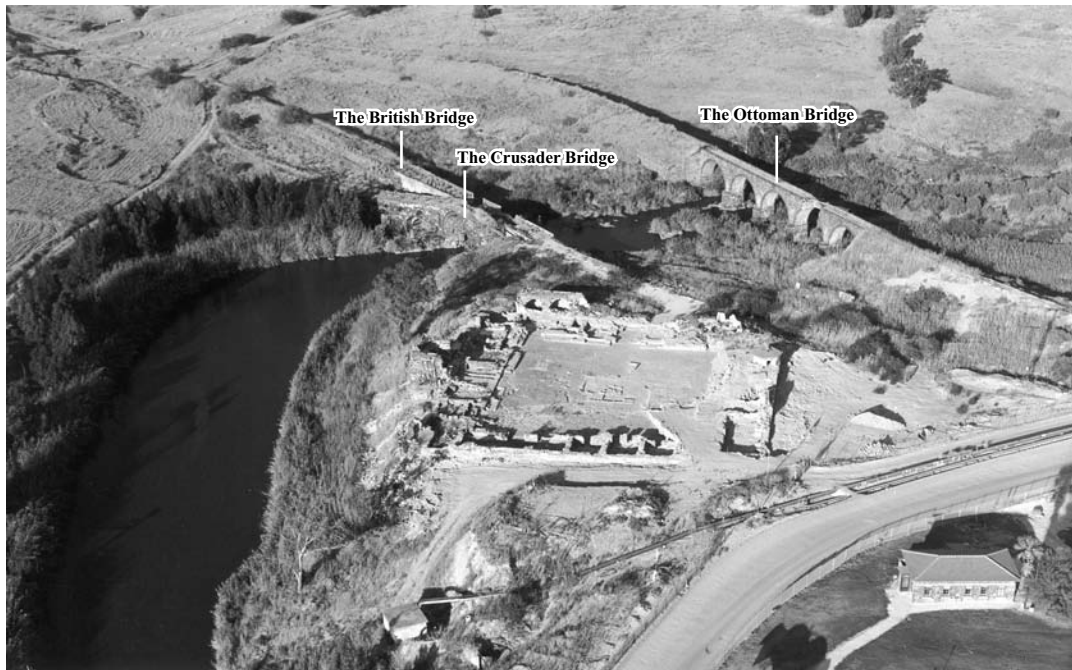


Fig. 2. Aerial view of the khan and the bridges, looking east.

the roadways on the eastern and western banks of the Jordan, thus serving an important function on the road between Egypt and Syria—the ancient Via Maris.

The Crusader–Mamluk Bridge

The western end of this bridge is only 40 m distant from the gate of the khan. The bridge, which is about 70 m long, slopes gently upward from either bank with its apex above the center of a large pointed arche over the main channel of the river (Fig. 3). The bridge was built of hard, roughly hewn basalt stones. The western part has four small arched vaults supported by two medium-sized vaults. The eastern part has but one small arch with an additional medium-sized arch below. The central part of the bridge, with its two sloping roadways, resembles the Mamluk bridge, Jisr Jindas, at Lod, dated by the stone-cut royal inscription on it to 1273 (Clermont-Ganneau 1896:113), and shows some similarity to the later Ottoman bridge at the

western entrance to Bet She'an (Rowe 1930: Pl. 12). The bridge may have possibly been mentioned by a few historical sources as early as the tenth or eleventh centuries (see discussion by Peterson 2001:186). During its 1217 campaign to the Gilead and the Golan, the Crusader host crossed the Jordan on the bridge called “Pont du Gidir”, which Prawer (1963:130) identified with Jisr el-Majami', and which was repaired in 1266 during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars (Peterson 2001:186). The dating of this bridge to the Crusader–Mamluk period is thus based on architectural as well as historical considerations.

The Ottoman Bridge

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century the Ottoman authorities built a railroad bridge 50 m south of the Crusader–Mamluk bridge. It served the railway between Haifa and Dera', of which this section was completed in 1904. The bridge, constructed of large, squared local basalt stones bonded with white mortar, consists



Fig. 3. The Crusader-Mamluk bridge in the 1930s, looking south.

of five symmetrical barrel vaults over the main stream of the Jordan.

The British Bridge

In 1925, the British Mandatory government constructed yet another bridge, with concrete arched vaults, adjacent to the Crusader-Mamluk bridge. This bridge served the electric power plant at Naharayim in addition to connecting both banks of the Jordan.

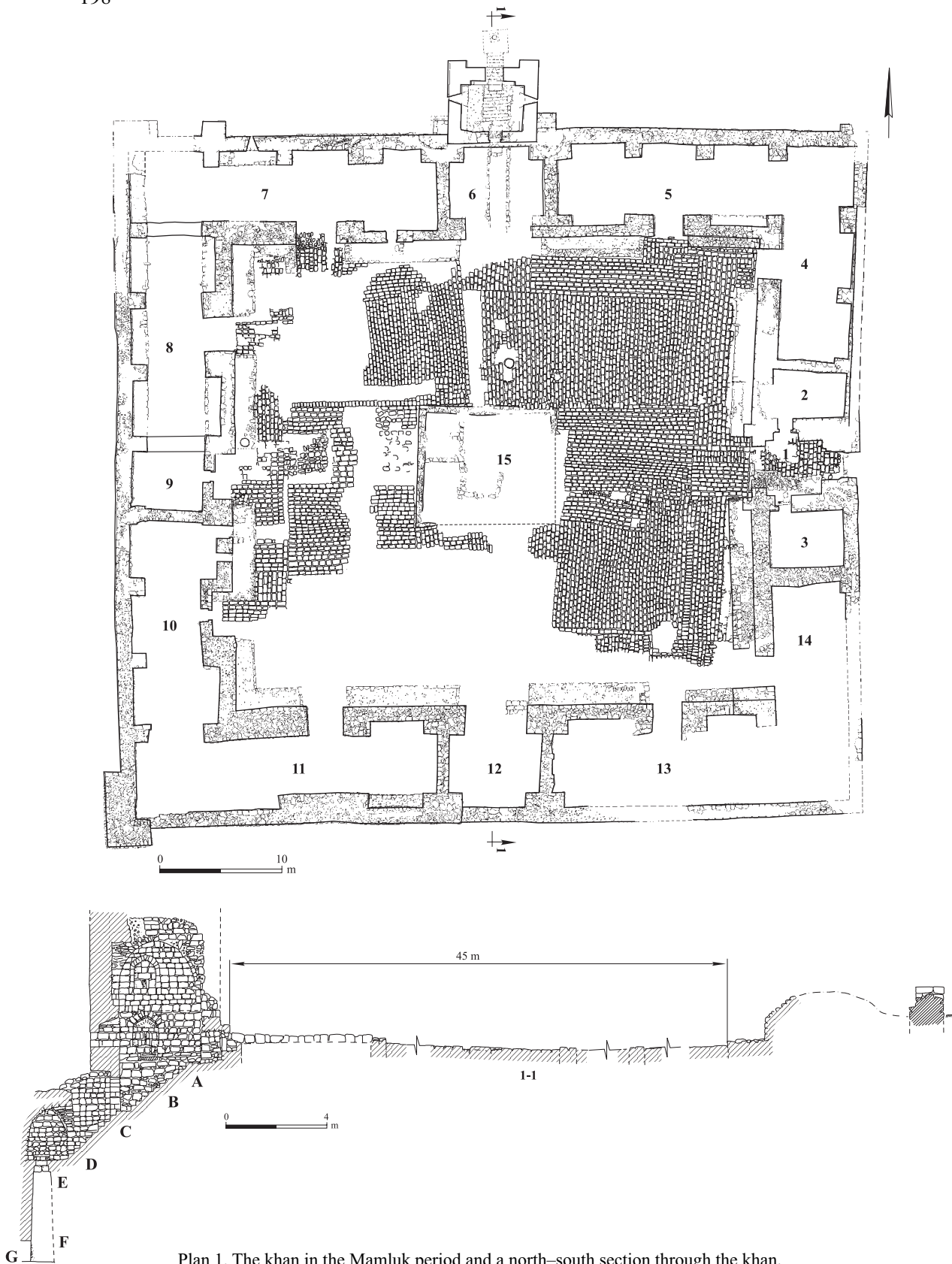
THE EXCAVATIONS³

The damage and the poor state of preservation of the khan dictated the removal of all modern debris down to the original floor level. Three periods of occupation were revealed. Due to the long period of use of the khan itself, the modern kibbutz occupation, and the ensuing damage to the site, no *in situ* finds were recovered. The random finds which did come to light consist of pottery sherds, ceramic tobacco pipes⁴, some

iron tools, 99 coins from different periods (see Berman, this volume), as well as various vessels from Kibbutz Gesher in the 1930s. All these were found mixed in the fallen debris, having no stratigraphic value or context, and so are not presented here (see n. 4). As a result, our study of the khan is based on an analysis of its architectural remains supported by historical indications, with only minor references to the small finds.

The Mamluk Period

The khan was first built during this period as a square complex (60 × 60 m), with a central courtyard and surrounding rooms and halls (Fig. 2; Plan 1). The original outer walls were 1.5 m thick. The northern wall, reinforced by five buttresses along its outer face, extends along the edge of a steep slope descending to the Jordan River. Each of the four wings of the khan conformed to a similar architectural pattern of two large halls separated by a small



Plan 1. The khan in the Mamluk period and a north-south section through the khan, the tower and the water system.

room. Apparently, all the halls and rooms had beaten-earth floors (see below).

The gate (Plan 1:1; Fig. 4) is located in the eastern wing, facing the Crusader-Mamluk bridge. According to Guérin (1880:133), the gate and probably also the vaulted openings into the various halls, were built of alternating blocks of black basalt and white limestone—“a favorite fashion of the Arabs”, probably referring to the Mamluk *ablaq* building style. Thus, apparently, the gate and other halls still survived in the middle of the nineteenth century. The gate complex consists of an outer doorway (2.4 m wide), with a threshold incorporating a granite column in secondary use lying on its side, an inner doorway, and a 3 × 9 m basalt-paved passageway between them. The passageway was flanked by two guardrooms (2.6 × 4.0 m each; Plan 1:2, 3).

The gate led into the square central courtyard (40.5 × 40.5 m; Fig. 5). Its floor was paved by a 3 m wide band of basalt paving stones (average size 0.3 × 0.5 m) along the walls, and with pavers laid in a different pattern over the rest of the courtyard. In the center of the courtyard was a square pool (10 × 10 m; Plan 1:15; Fig. 5), which is mentioned by Molyneux

(1848:112). Although only the lowest course of the pool’s walls survived, its plan is clear. Narrow mastaba-like stone platforms were built onto the outer walls around the courtyard. Four flat basalt stones (0.25 × 0.40 m) set on edge, with pierced horizontal holes intended for tethering pack animals, protruded from these structures slightly above the courtyard floor adjacent to Halls 4 and 14 (Fig. 6). Similar flat pierced stones were found in front of Hall 5, and probably others were installed around the rest of the courtyard. These platforms presumably served for loading and unloading pack animals, or as bases for troughs. A rectangular stone foundation (3.0 × 5.5 m) was uncovered at the northwestern corner of the courtyard adjacent to Halls 7 and 8—perhaps a base for a staircase leading to the roof, which was also used for various functions.

On both sides of the gate-guardrooms were two halls. The northern hall (6.0 × 17.5 m; Plan 1:4) was entered from the northeastern corner of the courtyard. Its ceiling was supported by cross-vaulting of which two pilasters were uncovered. The southern hall (6.0 × 17.5 m; Plan 1:14) was entered from the southeastern corner of the courtyard, but is now partially occupied



Fig. 4. The gate, looking east.



Fig. 5. The courtyard with the water pool, the west wing and the north wing with the tower.



Fig. 6. The platforms with pierced stones for tethering pack animals in the southeast corner of the courtyard.

by a military outpost built into its southern end during the 1948 Israel–Arab war, and which is now being preserved as a historical monument.

The northern wing consists of two halls (Plan 1:5, 7; 7.0×24.5 m and $5.7\text{--}6.7 \times 25.4$ m respectively) separated by Room 6 (6.0×7.7 m),

through which the tower above the water system was approached (see below). Pilasters of four crossing arches, which supported the ceiling of this room, were in each corner, and four pairs of pilasters were also in both Halls 5 and 7.

The western wing was similarly laid out with one small central room (5.0×5.7 m; Plan 1: 9) flanked by two large halls (7×24 m each; Plan 1:8, 10). Hall 8 has stone platforms with pierced vertical stones like those in the courtyard. Although these were not found in any other hall, we tend to associate them with the original khan. Four pairs of pilasters, which bore the vaulting that supported the ceiling, were in each of Halls 8 and 10. Both halls were entered from the courtyard through 3 m wide doorways adjacent to the southwestern corner of the courtyard. The location of Room 9 in the center of the western wing, directly opposite the gate, may indicate that it served a special function, perhaps being reserved for the khan's administrative official. It is noteworthy that al-'Umari (quoted by Cytryn-Silverman 2004:83) mentions that the new post station built at el-Majami' included also the house of the 'counselor'.

The southern wing had the same three-unit layout. Hall 11 ($5.7\text{--}6.0 \times 24.7$ m; Plan 1) probably served as a stable, as attested by the pierced stone installations. A *miḥrab* was built into the southern wall of Room 12 (6.0×7.5 m), indicating its function as a prayer room (Fig. 7). This wall and the *miḥrab* were built of fine, dressed limestone ashlar whose white coloration contrasted with the dark basalt stones of the khan. An additional military outpost from the time of the 1948 War was built over the ruins of Hall 13 and are presently also being preserved.

The above descriptions of the halls suggest that they all served as stables. This, and the fact that the rooms and the central courtyard served non-residential functions (the gate, the water system, and the prayer room), raises the possibility that the khan, at least in its original phase, had a second story where the travelers' lodging units were located. On the other hand, there is evidence from other khans that both travelers and pack animals shared the same rooms. If this was so here, it may explain the lack of evidence for the existence of a second floor.

The Water System.— A sophisticated subterranean water system was discovered under

the tower (5.4×7.4 m), which projected from the outer wall at the center of the northern wing of the khan. This well-planned and well-constructed complex secured a reliable drinking-water supply from the Jordan River to the khan. It comprised the front room (Plan 1:6), an underground staircase, an underground shaft chamber, the stone-built shaft, and a stone-built tunnel (Plan 1). In Room 6 was a passage between two walls, leading from the courtyard to Doorway A in the inner wall of the tower (Plan 1: Section 1–1:A). This 1.1 m wide doorway led to the top of the underground staircase, which comprised two flights of stairs. The upper flight of 10 steps (1.1 m long, 0.2 m high, and 0.25 m wide; Plan 1: Section 1–1:B) was built within the tower itself and descended northward to a depth of 2 m below the level of the courtyard. At the bottom of this flight of stairs, an arched doorway (1.8 m high, 1 m wide; Plan 1: Section 1–1:C; Fig. 8) led through the outer wall of the tower into the arched passageway (max. height 2 m, 1.2 m wide) of the lower flight of eight steps (Plan 1: Section 1–1:D), which descended an additional 2 m. At the bottom of the staircase was a small vaulted chamber (2×2 m, 2.4 m high; Plan 1: Section 1–1:E; Fig. 9) in whose floor was a 5 m deep, vertical stone shaft (0.7×0.7 m; Plan 1: Section 1–1:F). The system thus reached a total



Fig. 7. The prayer room and the *miḥrab*.



Fig. 8. The water system, looking down to the lower flight of stairs.

depth of 11 m below the level of the courtyard. A 20 m long stone-lined horizontal tunnel (0.7 m wide, 1.2 m high; Plan 1: Section 1–1:G) led from the shaft bottom westward to the Jordan River below the water line, well beyond the outer wall of the khan. The water flowed through the tunnel to the bottom of the shaft, from where it was lifted in buckets by rope and pulley, whose sockets were found in the walls of the vaulted chamber (Plan 1: Section 1–1:E). The water was then apparently brought by means of jars or other receptacles up the staircase, through the doorway and the front room, and to the pool in the courtyard. To the best of our knowledge, this ingenious underground water system is unique to the region.

Dating.— As mentioned above, objects from the original phase of the khan did not survive *in situ*. A tombstone dated to 1308, found in the fill of the water system (see Sharon, this volume), indicates only that the filling occurred after that year. This, together with the earliest pottery sherds found in the fill and debris of the khan, though mixed with much later material, suggests dating the establishment of the khan at least early in the fourteenth century, and possibly even earlier. This suggestion is further supported by the coins found in the excavation.

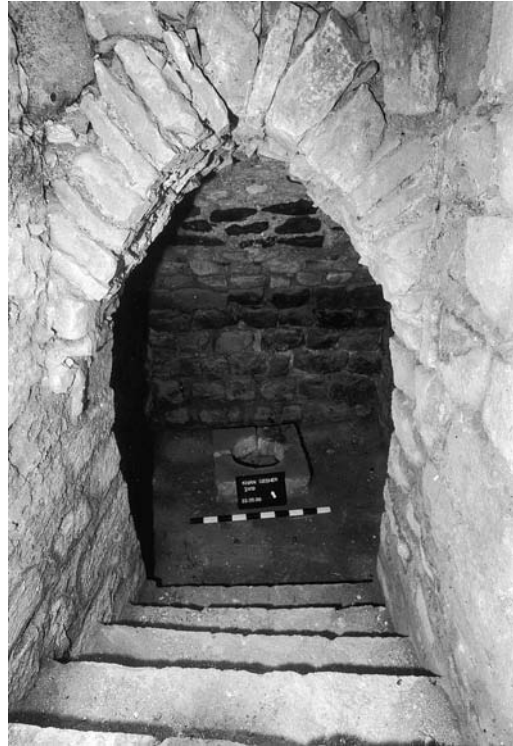
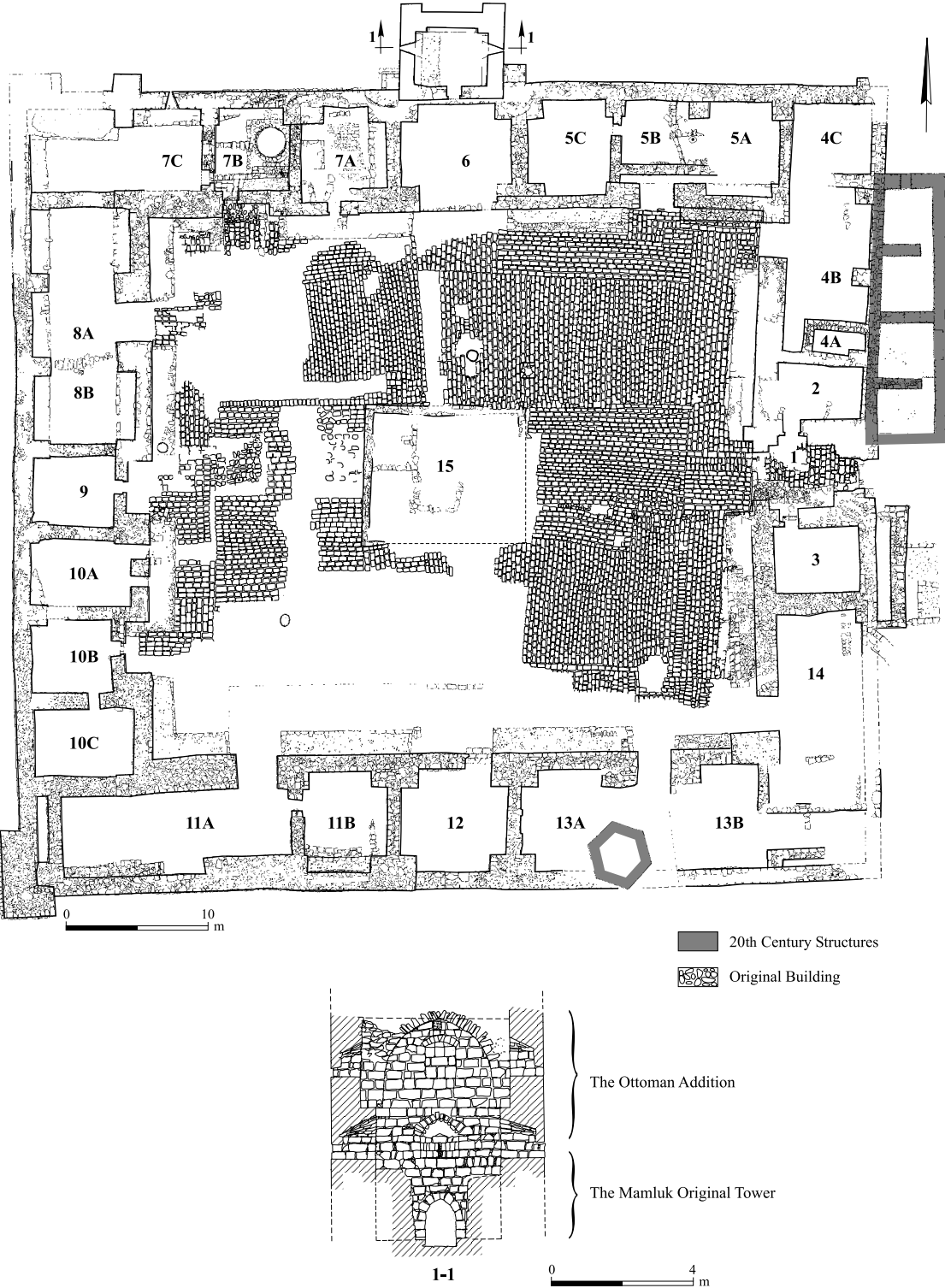


Fig. 9. The water system, the doorway to the shaft room.

About 67.7% of them date to the Mamluk period, while the remainder are from the Ottoman period (18.1%), from the twentieth century (9.1%), and miscellaneous (5.1%) (see Berman, this volume). These archaeological conclusions are supported by the evidence provided by both Al-‘Umari and Al-Qalqashandi who dated the building of a post station at el-Sama (= el-Majami‘) in 1340 (see discussions in Peterson 2001:188; Cytryn-Silverman 2004:83).

The Ottoman Period

It is impossible to determine whether the khan was in use continuously from its establishment in the early Middle Ages to its destruction, probably in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The evidence from its final stage shows that during the Ottoman period a number of changes and modifications were undertaken, although it is difficult to date them exactly (Plan 2). It seems that the southwestern



Plan 2. The khan in the Ottoman period and a west–east section through the tower.

corner of the khan suffered some damage that necessitated building a new wall inside Hall 11. The stone pavement of some sections of the courtyard, mostly in the western part, was replaced by voussoirs, probably taken from fallen arches and sunk into the ground. Three *tabuns*, of which the best preserved one was in front of Room 9 in the western wing, were uncovered in the courtyard. New partition walls were built inside all of the original halls, turning them into a new pattern of small Rooms: 4A–C, 5A–C, 6A–B, 7A–C, 8A–B, 10A–C, 11A–B and 13A–B (Plan 2). Both Rooms 7A and 7B were stone-paved. In Room 7B a rounded stone-built kiln-like installation (diam. 2.4 m) was found sunk into the stone pavement.

The Tower.— A significant change in the khan can be observed in the tower. Directly on top of the old tower, which protected the water system, a new one, two stories high, was constructed of well dressed basalt stones (Plan 2: Section 1–1; Fig. 10). Plan 1 shows the Mamluk tower with the elevation of its doorway leading to

the water system (Plan 1: Section 1–1:A) upon which stands the new tower. This construction required the filling-in of the underground water system (Plan 2: Section 1–1).

On the dirt floor of the lower story (Plan 2: Section 1–1; 4×4 m; max. height: 3 m), which was laid on the fill of the old water system, were a *tabun* and some pottery sherds, the latest of which are Rashayat el-Fukhar Ware and clay tobacco pipes, all dating from the late Ottoman period. The level of this floor is 1 m higher than the courtyard and it was probably approached by several steps, which have not survived, or by a ladder. No trace of the floor of the upper story (4.5×5.0 m, 2 m high) was found. The stone corbellings in the west and the east walls of the tower may have supported a wooden construction that served as the ceiling of the lower story as well. In each of the stories were three arched embrasures facing east, north, and west (Plan 2). This type of embrasure was intended for the use of rifles, indicating a dating to Ottoman times rather than to earlier periods. A small section of a wall on the northwestern



Fig. 10. The tower under reconstruction.

corner of the roof of the tower, now newly restored, may attest to the existence of a porch.

An inscribed limestone tombstone (0.40 × 0.45 m) and human bones probably associated with it were found in the fill of the water system. It is possible that this grave was taken in its entirety from a nearby place and was thrown into the system with the fill material. The five-line Mamluk tombstone inscription commemorates 'Uthmân 'Abd al-Barr b. Sayyid 'Uthmân al-Badlisî, also known as al-Is'irdî, who died on 12 October 1308 (see Sharon, this volume: Fig. 1).

The latest addition to the ruined khan was "the customs' office" built in 1904 in conjunction with the construction of the Hijaz railway. This building, with a red-tiled roof, has four square rooms (4 × 4 m each) and a separate entrance facing the river. Its western wall was built onto the lower part of the outer eastern wall of Hall 4.

The Period of the British Mandate

In 1934 the members of Kibbutz Gesher settled among the ruins of the khan (Fig. 11)

and reused the upper, Ottoman story of the tower, where they constructed a small hidden compartment with a pivoting stone door in its northern wall. Cement floors of several rooms were found, most of them in the northern wing. The "customs' office" was also reused and turned into a military outpost during the 1948 War, and is now also being restored. Objects from this time were found throughout the site. These include tools, kitchenware, and medicine bottles. The kibbutz remained there until 1948, after which it moved to its nearby permanent location. This relocation marked the ultimate abandonment of the khan.

SUMMARY

The excavations at Khan Gesher revealed one of the earliest khans in Galilee. Although some historical records may refer to the establishment of khans in Galilee already in the Early Islamic period, in the ninth–tenth centuries (Hartmann 1918:55), the archaeological evidence is very vague. The only khan that may be associated with this period is the western Khan et-Tujjar,



Fig. 11. Kibbutz Gesher built into the ruins of the khan in the 1930s.

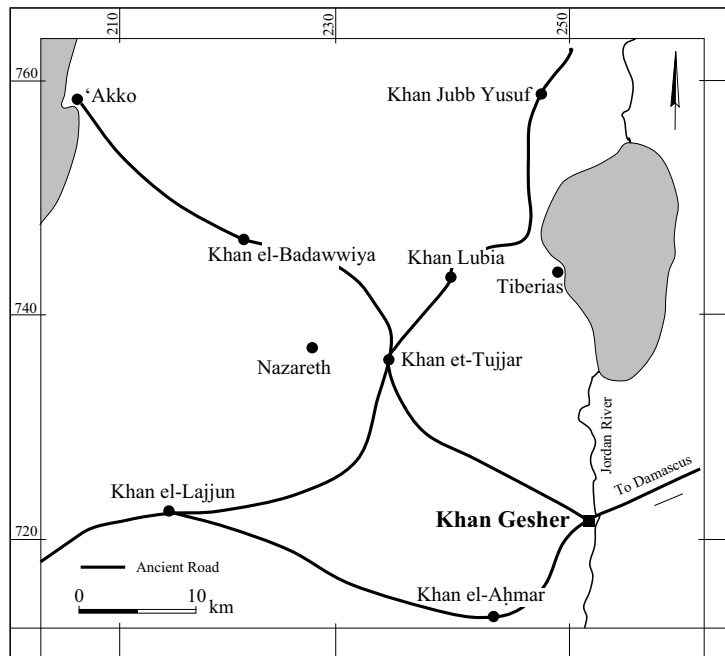


Fig. 12. The network of khans in Galilee.

as was suggested by Gal (1985:114–115). Of the other khans, e.g., Khan Jubb-Yusuf, Khan Lubia, Khan el-Badawwiya, Khan el-Lajjun (Megiddo), Khan et-Tujjar, and Khan el-Aḥmar (Fig. 12), only the latter two were systematically, though only partially, excavated and studied. Khan el-Aḥmar, at the northwestern outskirts of Bet She'an, was dated to 1308 according to the inscription found there (Rowe 1930:10, Pl. 3). The results of the survey and excavation carried out in Khan et-Tujjar suggest dating its earlier phase to the fifteenth century (Gal 1985; Gal and Muqari 1998:47*–48*).

Of the known khans in the entire medieval Near East, the khans in Palestine were small in size, poor in architectural quality, and the road network they were part of was quite limited. Most of them are dated from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, although, as mentioned above, some earlier ones can be identified. The chronological gap between the earliest and the later khans is being filled as a result of the excavations at Khan el-Aḥmar, and now Khan Gesher. Its

close proximity to the ford on the Jordan River and the bridge built there during the Crusader period, endow Khan Gesher with special interest. Apparently, Khan Gesher and Khan el-Aḥmar both belonged to the same road system which served the Mamluk postal service (*barid*). The two khans are situated on the ancient Via Maris, the roadway which led from Egypt, by way of the Palestine Coastal Plain, to the Jezre'el Valley, and continued to Khan el-Aḥmar (Bet She'an), and then to Khan Gesher where it crossed the Jordan River on the way to Damascus.

During the Ottoman period Khan Gesher and its vicinity became a major crossroads where the north–south Bet She'an–Damascus road intersected the east–west road which led from the Gilead through the Sirin Plateau, passing Khan et-Tujjar, toward the port of 'Akko. Traffic on the bridges ceased during the 1948 War. Today, following the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, it seems appropriate to renovate the three bridges and conserve them as historical monuments for both nations.

NOTES

¹ We thank Katya Cytryn-Silverman for reading this paper and for her valuable suggestions.

² There are several versions regarding the origin of the Arabic name of the khan: Jisr el-Majami‘—“the bridge of the meeting”. All of them, however, tell the story of a group of young Bedouins who chanced to meet at the bridge and discovered that each one of them was crossing the Jordan River in search of the Sheikh’s beautiful daughter (Vilnay 1932:166–167).

³ The excavations were initiated as part of a tourist development project carried out by the Israel Antiquities Authority and Kibbutz Gesher. Three seasons of excavation were conducted in the khan: the first season in November 1994 (Permit No. A-2217), the second season in January 1996 (Permit No. A-2419) and the third season from November 1998 (Permit No. A-2951) to May 1999 (Permit No.

A-2992). The excavations were directed by Abdullah Mokary with the participation of Butrus Hana (area supervisor in the second season), Abed el-Salam (area supervisor in the third season), Vadim Essman, Viacheslav Pirski and Dov Porozki (field surveyors), Sando Mandrea (photography), Yossi Ya‘aqobi and Hezi Dangur (administration) and workers from the region. Kibbutz Gesher offered generous assistance to the project. Following the excavations, the site was subjected to a conservation process planned by Ami Sabah, Eduard Kolnik, and Lilya Dobnovski and directed in the field by Vadim Zeitlin—all of the IAA conservation department.

⁴ The pottery was examined by K. Cytryn-Silverman (2004:35 and n. 34). It dates mainly to the Mamluk and Ottoman periods, with some minor exceptions from the tenth–thirteenth centuries CE.

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