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A Historical Archaeology of the Ottoman Empire

Breaking New Ground

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8

Daily Life in the Shadow of Empire

A Food Systems Approach to the Archaeology of the Ottoman Period

Øystein S. LaBianca

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter my aim is to present the case for a food systems approach to the archaeology of the Ottoman Empire. While this may strike some as being a very limited perspective, I shall try to show the opposite, namely that such an approach provides a powerful methodology both for investigating the "Ottoman period" as a historical era in its own right and for making the archaeology of this era relevant to a much broader scholarly audience. The case will be developed in the following manner: First comes a brief review of some background assumptions and definitions pertinent to understanding what is meant by a "food systems approach." This is followed by a discussion of macro-level issues having to do with how archaeologists think about and investigate the influence of Ottoman imperial interventions on the operation of local food systems. Next come some thoughts on some micro-level issues related to carrying out archaeological research on local food systems, particularly as it relates to understanding the response of indigenous peoples to Ottoman policies and interventions. Thereafter I discuss briefly some implications of the food system concept for understanding the impact of the Ottoman centuries on the local environment. The conclusion offers some reflections on the promise of a food systems approach to making the archaeology of the Ottoman Empire relevant to global archaeology and world history.

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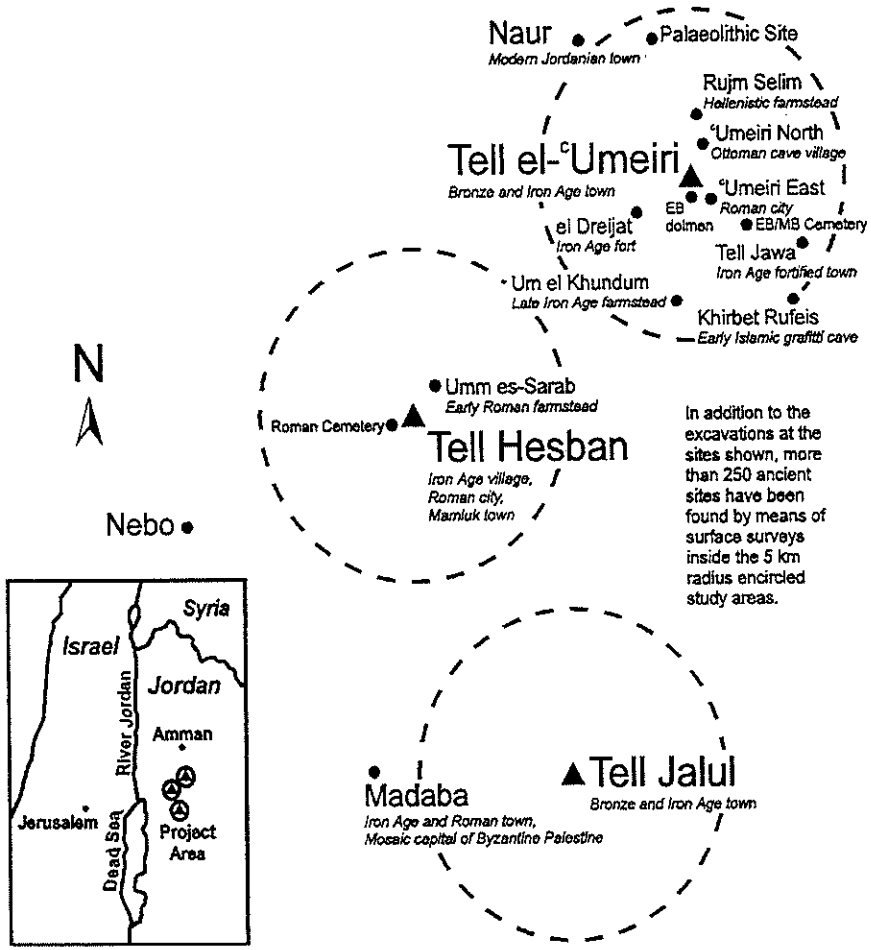

Figure 8.1. Madaba Regional Survey, Jordan.

WHAT IS MEANT BY A FOOD SYSTEMS APPROACH?

The first and most basic reason for why a methodology which is explicitly concerned with people's quest for food needs to be reckoned with by Ottoman archaeologists is that, throughout most of human history, it has shaped the daily lives of the vast majority of human

beings. Furthermore, attention focused on this quest leads inevitably to concern with the lives of the rural masses living in the shadow of empire. And since the lives of most elites in the past depended, directly or indirectly, upon various mechanisms for inducing the rural masses to produce a surplus of food, a food systems perspective provides a window on their lives as well.

What is meant by a food systems approach is something far broader than a concern simply with what people eat! This becomes clearer as one reflects on the implications of the following definition of the food system concept: A food system is a dynamic and complex unity consisting of all the purposive, patterned and inter-dependent symbolic and instrumental activities carried out by people in order to procure, process, distribute, store, prepare, consume, metabolize and dispose of food.[1]

The implications of this definition are manifold. To begin with, it provides a common frame of reference for thinking about all historical periods—the palaeolithic through the present. An important benefit of this is that it makes possible temporal comparison of food system processes. This is because local food systems are never static, but are always undergoing some sort of change. Such change is either in the direction of intensification or abatement depending on changes over time in the intensity with which a given local region is being exploited in order to provide people with food. Generally, as a region's food system intensifies, its inhabitants tend to become increasingly land-tied due to increased investment in plough agriculture. Consequently their residential patterns tend to become more sedentary. Intensification, therefore, normally is accompanied by sedentarization. Abatement is said to occur when a given region's inhabitants diminish their reliance on plough agriculture in favor of livestock production within a given territory or homeland. This generally involves adoption of more mobile residential patterns, or nomadization, whereby people, for the sake of their increased investment in pasture animals, turn to seasonal migration between watering places, ploughlands and pasturelands within a given territorial homeland. Such shifts occurred ubiquitously throughout rural landscape of the Middle East in the distant past, and surely also during the Ottoman period.

This leads to a second advantage of the food system concept, namely the fact that it brings under a common analytical frame of reference the various strategies employed by people to procure food—hunting, gathering, farming, herding, and trade. This makes the concept much less limiting than, for example, the concept of 'agriculture' which tends to be associated with sedentary production of crops

and husbandry animals. More often than not, when investigation of food getting practices is carried out under the heading of agriculture, it tends to lead to superficial or altogether inadequate consideration of the role of other methods of food procurement.[2]

A third advantage of the food system approach is that it leads automatically to a concern with how rural landscapes were utilized by people in order to procure food. It thus focuses investigation on patterns of land use and settlement in the hinterlands of human settlements. In other words, it forces the archaeologist to get off of her archaeological mound and out into the surrounding fields as a natural and complementary dimension of her research activities. Mention must also be made of the utility of the food system concept when it comes to fitting together and interpreting the results of archaeological excavations and surveys. In this regard, the above-stated definition leads one to understand more clearly the function of a wide range of rural structures (used for housing and protecting food producing households, storing their food and protecting their animals); pottery (used for storing, serving, distributing and serving food); stone objects (used mostly in some way in connection with food preparation); and animal and plant remains occur as they do in the archaeological record. The concept also helps link discoveries made by means of archaeological excavations to those made by means of regional surveys in the hinterland of a particular dig site.

There is much more that could be said with regard to all of the above points, and other points could easily be added to bolster the case for using a food systems approach when doing archaeology. What has been said, however, should suffice to give an idea of the scope of the concept and its relevance for understanding the activities of the rural masses and the elites of the Ottoman Empire.

CAN WE SPEAK OF AN IMPERIAL OTTOMAN FOOD SYSTEM?

One of the intriguing questions which follow from a food systems approach to the history and archaeology of the Ottoman Empire is the extent to which it is possible to distinguish analytically the salient features of an imperial food system? In other words, can we speak of an imperial Ottoman food system just like today reference is made to 'the global food system' (Warnock 1987) or the 'American food system' (Bodley 1996). In certain ways, this question has already been answered in the affirmative by economic and social historians who

have examined the development and implementation of economic policies by various Ottoman sultans and their administrations (e.g. Issawi 1980; Inalcik 1983).

There is a need, however, for closer cooperation between historians and archaeologists in addressing questions about the actual impact of such imperial policies on the grass-roots level of local food systems throughout the empire. Cooperation is needed, for example, to answer questions about the grass-roots impact of sporadic initiatives to improve the rural infrastructure necessary to protect, transport and sell agricultural commodities; to promote production and export of certain specific agricultural products from particular local regions; to regulate the migration of agricultural laborers in and out of a particular local region; to intervene in the pricing of agricultural products; and to impose various forms of taxation and tariffs on the population of particular localities. A complicating factor, in this regard, is the emergence during the Ottoman Era of the capitalist world system (Wallerstein 1990). What is complicating about this development is that it makes it harder to ascertain whether increases in production and export of agricultural commodities at the grass roots level were the result of successfully enacted imperial policies or local entrepreneurial initiatives responding to new opportunities created by the rise of the capitalist world system. For example, a compelling case for the role of the capitalist market in stimulating the development of large-scale commercial agriculture in the Ottoman Empire has recently been published in a collection of papers edited by Keyder and Tabak (1991).

Our efforts on the Madaba Plains Project to document the grass roots impact of Ottoman agrarian policies have involved three main lines of inquiry.[3] The first has been documentary research by members of our team aimed at reconstructing the history of re-settlement and economic growth inside our project area over the past century and a half (Russell 1989; Abujaber 1989; LaBianca 1990:53–106).[4] Sources for this history have included imperial and local government administrative records; the accounts of nineteenth century geographers and travelers to our project area; family archives of early settlers; and interviews with elderly local residents.

The second line of inquiry has involved attempts to learn more about the history of rural buildings in our project area from the Ottoman period such as the fortified residential compounds known locally as *qusur* or *qasr* (LaBianca 1990:201–232). One of these appear to be over two hundred years old, namely the one located near Ain Hesban which belongs to the Adwan tribe—a tribe whose ancestors

existed in Jordan throughout the entire Ottoman period. It served as a sort of headquarters for the tribe, having been one of the residences of the tribal chieftain.

The third line of inquiry has involved the use of a metal detector to search for coins from the Ottoman period throughout our project area. A major reason for implementing this procedure was because of the disappointing results of all other archaeological attempts to discover finds which could be clearly associated with initiatives of the imperial Ottoman administration. We started this procedure in the summer of 1994 and found over three dozen coins as a result, many of which could be positively identified as being from the Ottoman period (Bochenski 1994, personal communication).

When the results of the various archaeological undertakings mentioned above are brought together they contribute preciously little in the way of direct archaeological evidence for Ottoman imperial intervention in the project area.[5] There are no official buildings or public works which can be identified as having been built because of Ottoman imperial interventions in the area. The only tangible evidence of any kind linked more or less directly to the imperial powers are coins. When it comes to indirect evidence, however, the picture is different. For example, the very fact that villages and towns came into existence again in the project area toward the end of the nineteenth century—after four centuries during which there were apparently no permanently lived-in towns or villages in the project area—is attributed by many contemporary witnesses to renewed efforts by imperial Ottoman rulers to provide protection for agricultural villagers and townspeople as far away as Central Transjordan. One could infer from this, therefore, that during the earlier centuries of Ottoman administration there was little or no initiative on the part of the imperial administration to promote the welfare of settled folk, whereas toward the end of the nineteenth and during the early twentieth century many pro-settler initiatives were implemented.

Interestingly, these late Ottoman imperial interventions aimed at fostering settlement of villages and towns appear to have gone hand in hand with efforts on the part of local entrepreneurs to cash in on the rising demand for grain brought about by the rapidly expanding capitalist market economy (cf. Abujaber 1989; Schilcher 1991). Thus, even as far away as Central Transjordan, one can detect the dual influences of the imperial Ottoman administration and the emerging capitalist world economy. From this particular case it would appear, in fact, that the interventions of the Ottoman imperial administration were intended to promote—whether by design or accident—linkage of

the grain markets of Transjordan with those of the capitalist world economy.

CAN WE SPEAK OF AN INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE TO IMPERIAL INTERVENTIONS?

As important to our understanding of the Ottoman Empire food system as is the concern with imperial policies and interventions is the need to grasp the response of indigenous residents to their predicament as subjects. In this respect, a distant backwater in the imperial landscape such as Transjordan provides a particularly good opportunity, although the phenomenon of resistance was surely widespread throughout the empire. It appears, however, that the region of greater Syria—which typically includes Transjordan—was a region in which resistance was rampant. Schilcher (1991:195) writes:

> The fact that Syria's peasantry continued to rebel, generation after generation, is perhaps the strongest indication that something in their local social, economic, and political arrangements sustained them and gave them the aspiration and motivation to continue the struggle. How else can we explain the fact that the Syrian peasantry of the late Ottoman period retained a stronger bargaining position vis-a-vis the government and vis-a-vis interlopers than was retained by peasantries of peripheralized economies elsewhere in the region, or, for that matter, in many parts of the world?

What, then, is this "something" which has sustained the inhabitants of Transjordan in their quiet resistance against Ottoman policies and interventions in their homelands. It is, as we shall see, a particular cluster of sentiments and practices—a set of indigenous hardiness structures—by means of which the inhabitants of this area have become inured to fatigue and hardship and thus have managed to persist and at times prosper despite greatly fluctuating political and economic fortunes.[6]

Thus far we have been able to delineate at least seven such hardiness structures—all of which have been integral to local resistance. Important in this regard has been their role in facilitating movement by individual households and larger groups along the sedentarization-nomadization continuum. I turn next to briefly describing each one of these seven secret weapons of the indigenous resistance.

- *Tribalism.* First, and most important by far, have been their kin-based social networks as members of large extended

families and tribes. These kin-based networks have provided shepherds and farmers alike with a highly flexible mechanism for welding people together for their common good, whether on the open range as groups of nomads or on cultivated lands as members of villages and towns. It has provided a means by which small groups of kin have been able to adjust successfully not only to a fragile natural environment, but also to shifting political landscapes and very uncertain economic conditions.

- *Multiresource economy*. Another secret of their survival has been their mixing of production of cereals and tree fruits with raising of sheep, goats, donkeys, and camels. This ancient agricultural regime, which goes back at least five thousand years, has helped them to easily shift back and forth between agricultural and pastoral pursuit. They have thus been able to adjust their livelihoods to maximize chances of survival in the face of constantly shifting economic and political conditions.
- *Fluid homeland territories*. In order to pursue such a variety of economic options, both settled and nomadic tribes have tended to maintain fluid homeland territories. Although a somewhat fixed center of gravity may have prevailed at any given point in history, the outer boundaries of homeland territories have been allowed to continually change in order to accommodate new social, economic or environmental realities.
- *Residential flexibility*. Over the centuries people have used stone houses, residential caves and tents to live in. As the population has sedentarized or nomadized, the amount of time they spend living in one or another of these residences in any particular year would vary.
- *Small-scale water sourcing*. Because of the risks involved in constructing and maintaining the sorts of elaborate water works developed, for example, by the ancient Romans, the indigenous population has for the most part relied on small-scale water sourcing arrangements—access to natural springs and streams and re-use of ancient cisterns.
- *Hospitality*. The emphasis on hospitality for which the Arab population of Jordan is famous has its roots in more than good manners. By means of their generosity to fellow tribesmen and strangers, people have been able to accumulate I-owe-you's which can be banked until such a time as a pay-back favor can come in handy. Also, by means of hospitality, information which is vital to their existence as shepherds and farmers may be shared.
- *Honor*. The institution of honor, whereby members of families and tribes demonstrate their solidarity with each other as a group of kin, also has a very practical function in tribal society. Its built-in system of rewards and punishments serve to assure that individuals and families don't shirk their obligations toward one another as kin. Cooperation in feuds is only one of many examples of the operation of this institution at work.

The point to be stressed here is that all of these practices and institutions have evolved and persisted at the grass-roots level in Jordan over a very long time. In other words, they did not come about just because of the nominal Ottoman occupation of the country. Indeed, these structures were all well in place by the time of the first world empires in the ancient Near East in the third millennium B.C. In the particular case of Transjordan they have become particularly deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the country's inhabitants as a result of three synergistically related uncertainty producing factors: namely the unpredictability of the annual rainfall; the frontier conditions created by the country's proximity of the Arabian and Syrian desert; and its position astride a much fought over intercontinental landbridge. This third factor accounts for why the country has experienced almost continuous foreign domination since the second millennium B.C.

Pivotal to the research which has led to the delineation of these indigenous hardiness structures has been the same food system perspective which guided our research on imperial intervention in the local situation. It was this perspective, for instance, that led us to concentrate effort and time on trying to understand the "gaps" in the occupational history of Tell Hesban. These were the centuries during which nothing or very little in the way of accumulation of occupational debris occurred on the tell. Significantly, the most recent such "gap" was that between the strata representing the Mamluk and the early modern period—the centuries of Ottoman domination.

To discover how people managed to meet their basic needs for food, water and shelter during this most recent "gap period" we launched a survey aimed specifically at learning more about the history of migratory food production or transhumance in our project area. This, in turn, led quickly to the discovery of the crucial role which habitation caves had played in people's lives during the Ottoman period. To learn more

about these and life in general during these centuries, we began to carry out extensive interviews with older residents who remembered having lived in the caves when they were younger. Thus, gradually the clues to their hardy existence—as represented in these seven structures—began to come to light.[7]

As for the obvious question of why the majority of local residents chose not to live permanently in villages and towns throughout most of the Ottoman centuries, the answer is that it didn't make much sense in this particular corner of the empire! To do so meant being constantly harassed either by imperial Ottoman taxation officials or by enemy tribesmen. Consequently people opted to resist by following the time-honored practice of living lightly and simply on the land. In other words they opted to seek shelter in tents, caves and abandoned ruins and to rely on pasture animals and cereals produced during winter months in the fertile valleys behind their seasonal cave villages. In an indirect sort of way, this situation adds further to our understanding of the agrarian policies of the imperial Ottoman administration!

HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTIONS

There is one more important line of research which a food systems approach facilitates, and that is inquiry concerned with the human impact in a given locality on the natural environment and visa versa.

What makes this approach particularly helpful in this regard is that, as a methodological framework, it has its roots in ecosystem theory. Thus it leads naturally to a concern with short and long-term changes in the natural environment and the role of humans in bringing them about.

Some intriguing questions arise in this regard when attention is focused on the Ottoman period. For instance, is it fair to assume as some scholars have that the natural environment simply deteriorated in Palestine throughout the Islamic centuries? Is it possible that a certain amount of regeneration of the environment might have occurred as a result of the low intensity with which at least the Transjordanian landscape was exploited during most of this era?

What a food systems approach provides is a set of hypothesis about the processes by which the environment gradually was changed to how it appears today. It posits that such change occurred in large measure as a result of the cyclic episodes of intensification and abatement in the local food system—accompanied as these were by cycles of sedentarization and nomadization. It posits further that as each

such episode took place, it set in motion spasms of rapid environmental degradation followed by rest periods during which the landscape underwent partial regeneration. The present-day rather barren appearance of the landscape of Transjordan is thus the cumulative result of multiple such spasms and rests over the past ten thousand years. To what extent the Ottoman centuries added to this cumulative impact remains very much an empirical question.[8]

THE RELEVANCE OF OTTOMAN ARCHAEOLOGY

In conclusion, I believe firmly that archaeologists working on the Ottoman Empire can reach across the distances which separate theme in terms of location of their projects and time periods of interest. One way to do so—although certainly not the only way—is by means of a common concern with local food systems. This approach also has the merit that it links the concerns of Ottoman archaeologists with those of global archaeology and world history.

This volume's introduction asks whether the archaeology of the Ottoman Empire should be regarded as the archaeology of an empire or a time period. My view is that it should be both. Surely archaeologists working anywhere in the empire must be concerned with looking for subtle and obvious signs of imperial intervention in their localities. Such interventions may be more pronounced during some time periods than during others, thus the temporal dimension is also going to be crucial. In the case of our Transjordanian test case, it seems one can never quite eliminate from the picture the existence of the empire, for as we have seen, its policies appear to have had a lot to do with how people lived throughout the entire period of the empire's existence.

About the relevance of archaeology of the Ottoman period to archaeologies of the more distant past and to mainstream Middle Eastern archaeology there can be no doubt. Again, from the vantage point of our work in Jordan, what we have learned about "people living lightly on the land" from our research on the Ottoman centuries has been essential to developing hypothesis and research strategies for studying earlier episodes of low intensity occupation in our project area. The importance of the Ottoman period for mainstream Middle Eastern archaeology, therefore, lies in that it offers a near-at-hand opportunity—in terms of data accessibility—for archaeologists to learn about the dynamics of pre-industrial complex society in the Middle

East. Research on this era is also essential to archaeological undertakings which take seriously the challenge of advancing understanding of long-term patterns of cultural change throughout the world.

There can also be little doubt about the relevance of Ottoman archaeology for the current debate on the aims and political uses of archaeology. One of the valuable contributions of the post-modern critique is precisely the fact that it has brought to our attention the Eurocentric bias of traditional Orientals archaeology. It is precisely this bias which has caused Ottoman archaeology to languish in comparison to research on earlier "more important" periods such as the biblical or the classical periods. In our own case, it was only as we began to focus our research on a problem which was equally applicable to all historical periods that we began to take seriously the Ottoman centuries.

When it comes to the feminine critique of archaeology there is much to be said for a food systems approach. Because of its concern with the complete range of instrumental and symbolic activities carried out by people in their quest for food, it automatically brings the contribution of women, and also children, to the fore. It thus gets beyond the traditional masculine concerns with fortifications and building remains, something which actually has been crucial to our attempts in Jordan to operationalize research on the Ottoman period. Indeed, from this period, it is more the work of women than the work of men that has left residues for archaeologists to study. I would like to conclude by explaining what I see as being the merits of a Marxian world systems approach as compared with the food systems approach which I have advocated here. In my view, the world systems approach is useful as a means to understand the oscillations during historical times in the operation of local food systems. It provides some of the answers to why during certain periods we see a pumping up of the local food system and during other periods we see a slacking off in the intensity of this system. The approach does not provide an adequate framework for operationalizing research on all historical periods, however. Furthermore, it is inadequate as a tool for operationalizing research on pre-industrial agrarian society in the Middle East because of its emphasis on unequal exchange in a hierarchy of world markets. During some historical periods, and certainly during prehistoric times, this assumption simply does not apply. Finally, however, what I find most useful about the food systems approach is that it really is not grounded in any particular deterministic dogma. I view it rather as a heuristic, as a thinking aid for helping archaeologists to think integratively about the wide range of materials they

uncover in their surveys and excavations. This is because, as noted earlier, the vast majority of the finds we encounter as archaeologists—especially those of us working in rural contexts—can be set in some sort of functional or symbolic context using this perspective. I believe that alone, the food systems perspective is insufficient for explaining long-term cultural changes. While it is useful as a framework for operationalizing research on rural regions and settlements regardless of time period; and while it goes a long ways toward helping to make some sort of integrative sense out of a wide range of artifacts and biofacts, it has to be supplemented by other theoretical orientations in order to provide adequate explanations for the cultural patterns it helps to uncover. Such supplementary frameworks might include the role the capitalist world system; or it might include the role of religion. For example, the archaeology of Transjordan in the first millennium A.D. cannot be adequately understood without reckoning with the influence of Christianity and Islam.

Thus, to conclude, no single framework is likely to provide all the answers to the complex task of understanding the Ottoman world. My aim here has merely been to remind us as scholars comfortably at work in our offices that for the masses living in the shadow of empire, the quest for food was more than a just brief interruption lasting a few minutes every day. For the majority of these men, women and children, whose lives we are trying to understand by our scholarly endeavors, it was what daily life was mostly all about!

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I would like to applaud Uzi Baram and Lynda Carroll for taking the initiative to "break new ground for an archaeology of the Ottoman Empire." I have long felt the need for such an effort and am glad that, thanks to their efforts, the conference was organized and now has been published.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the intellectual roots of the food system concept and its implications for archaeology, see LaBianca (1990:1–30, 107–134; 1991).
2. The food system concept is also less limiting than the concepts of 'subsistence' and 'livelihood,' for whereas the former is commonly associated with food production primarily for the sake of survival; the latter has the drawback of being too broad—of referring to any type of work that a person does to earn a living.

3. The Madaba Plains Project is a large-scale archaeological investigation of the territory located between Amman and Madaba in Jordan (e.g. Geraty *et al.* 1987 and Herr *et al.* 1991). It began in 1968 with excavations at Tell Hesban, and has expanded over the years to include excavations of two other major tell sites, namely Tell el-Umeiri and Tell Jalul. In addition to the excavations undertaken at these major sites, their hinterlands have also been intensively surveyed and a number of small-scale soundings of farmsteads, habitation caves, cemeteries and other ruins have also been carried out. The project is sponsored by a consortium of international educational institutions headed by Andrews University. Sources of funding includes numerous private donations and the National Endowment for the Humanities.
4. By project area I mean first of all the hinterlands located within a radius of five kilometers of the three major tells, namely Tell Hesban; Tell el-Umeiri and Tell Jalul. These territories have been intensively scrutinized by means of surface surveys and soundings over ten seasons of fieldwork. The goal of much of this work has been to reconstruct the history of landuse and settlement in order to illuminate the temporal dynamics of the local food system.
5. I am now speaking strictly about the territories surveyed by our team as described in the previous note.
6. I have written about this phenomenon elsewhere in a paper entitled "Indigenous Hardiness Structures and State Formation: Towards a History of Jordan's Resident Arab Population." The paper was originally presented at the Third Nordic Conference of Middle Eastern Studies held in Finland in June 1996. It can be accessed on the World Wide Web.
7. For a more detailed account of the research which went into discovering these structures see LaBianca 1987 and 1990.
8. I discuss these proposal in greater detail in a paper presented in June 1996 in Torino, Italy, at the Sixth Annual Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan. The proceedings of the conference is being prepared for publication by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

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