The Fortress of the Raven
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Karak in the Middle Islamic Period
(1100–1650)

By
Marcus Milwright
In memory of my father
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NOTES

Dates and centuries are given according to the Common Era. Hijrī dates are only provided in the case of monumental inscriptions and other dated artefacts. Archaeologists working in the Middle East have been unable to reach a consensus concerning the labels to be given to the broad phases within the Islamic period. Where possible the century or centuries are specified, but when this is not feasible the term ‘Early Islamic’ can be taken to refer to the period from the end of Byzantine rule in the early seventh century through to c. 1100 C.E. and ‘Middle Islamic’ to the period from c. 1100 until c. 1650. The term ‘Late Islamic’ is avoided in this study and for the period after c. 1650 the relevant century or centuries are given instead. The geographical term Bilād al-Shām (i.e. Greater Syria) refers to an area now covered by Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestine Authority, and the southeast of Turkey.

The system of transliteration for Arabic is that employed in the International Journal of Middle East Studies. Arabic words that have a modern English equivalent are unitalicised and written without diacritics. Most place names in Bilād al-Shām are given according to their modern Arabic spelling, with exceptions made in the cases of some of the cities and towns well known by Westernised names (Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, Damascus, Aleppo, Gaza, and so on). Some archaeological sites are referred to by their ancient names (alternative names and spellings of archaeological sites are listed in appendix 2). Ottoman technical terms employed in the region of Bilād al-Shām between 1516–1918 have been given according their Arabic form. I have not attempted to standardise the spellings of technical terms, personal names and place names in Persian, Turkish, Mongol and Chinese.

Pottery Numbering System and Maps

Shards from the Karak assemblage (areas A–F) are cited according to the following system: the number is prefixed by a letter (A–F) that refers to the area where the shard was found. This letter is followed by the catalogue number (1–8201) and a second number (given in square brackets) provides the location of the illustration of the artefact.
in the catalogue (appendix 1). Distribution maps for selected wares (figs. 9–21) cover only sites in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Palestine Authority. Reported finds from outside this area are given in the footnotes of chapters 6–8. The locations given for pottery found on regional surveys are only approximate.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

From the mid twelfth century to the present day Karak has played an important role in the political and economic life of Jordan. The massive fortress located at the southern end of the old town must have been a familiar, if forbidding, sight for merchants and travellers using the southern section of the King’s Highway (darb al-malik) during the Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman periods. For those performing the hajj from Damascus the stop at the village of Thaniyya, located just east of Karak, was a valuable chance to buy provisions from local traders and villagers before taking the road south and then east towards Ma'an, and thence into the Arabian desert. One such pilgrim on the arduous trek south to the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina was the famous Maghribī adventurer Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 1377). Karak evidently made a lasting impression on Ibn Baṭṭūṭa for he provides the following description in his travelogue:

Then the travellers came to the castle of Karak which is one of the most marvellous, most inaccessible and most celebrated of castles. It is called the ‘Fortress of the Raven’ (hisn al-ghurāb). It seems to be surrounded on all sides by valleys, and has one gate, the entrance of which is hewn in the solid rock, as also is the entrance to its vestibule (dihlīz). This fortress is used by kings as a place of refuge in times of calamity.¹

Similar accounts are to be found in the works of other Arab and European authors of the medieval period.² The sources dwell upon the ideal location of the settlement and the defensive strength of the fortifications. This reputation for impregnability was well founded, for no army before the Ottoman period succeeded in storming the fortress

¹ Ibn Baṭṭūta (1853–58), 1, pp. 254–55. Adapted from trans. in Ibn Baṭṭūta (1958–2000), 1, p. 72. It is not clear where the epithet, hisn al-ghurāb, comes from, but it is used earlier by Ibn al-Wāṣil when discussing an event during the rule of al-Muqṭith ʿUmar. See Ghawanma (1982), p. 303. A fortress of the same name exists on the coast of Yemen, while another possible link might be drawn with the heraldic bird that occupies one side of the lead seal of Reynald of Châtillon, last Crusader lord of Oultrejordain (pl. 1).