

Report on the outcomes of a Short-Term Scientific Mission¹

Action number:

Grantee name: Summer Courts

Details of the STSM

Title: **Power Games: Games Other than Chess in Early Islamic Qusur and Urban Contexts**

Description of the work carried out during the STSM

Description of the activities carried out during the STSM. Any deviations from the initial working plan shall also be described in this section.

(max. 500 words)

I travelled to Jordan and stayed at the American Center of Research (ACOR). During this time, I exceeded all of my objectives

The work undertaken during the STSM can be divided into three main categories:

a. During the STSM I visited 39 sites and museums (several repeatedly) to photograph unpublished graffiti gameboards for publication or in order to identify the presence of gameboards So I can request permission for future formal recording campaigns. The sites visited comprised:

1. Khirbet Salameh. 2. Mt Nebo. 3. Jordan museum. 4. as-Salt Archaeological Museum. 5. As-salt City Life Museum 6. Khirbet Suq. 7. Umm al-Walid. 8. Madaba. 9. Cave of the Sleepers, Amman. 10. Nymphaeum, Amman. 11. Theatre, Amman. 12. Odeion, Amman. 13. Folk Museum, Amman. 14. Citadel, Amman. 15. Jordan University Archaeology museum. 16. Jordan University Heritage Museum. 17. Qal'at Dab'a. 18. Qasr Mshatta. 19. Iraq Al-Amir Palace. 20. Iraq Al-Amir, Cave of the Prince. 21. Al-Bassah Church. 22. Qasr Halabat. 23. Qasr Amra (twice). 24. Qasr Kharana (three times). 25. Callirhoe. 26. Gadara. 27. Qasr Bshir. 28. Qasr Abu Al Kharqa. 29. Qasr Al-Qatrana. 30. Al Qatrana, Station. 31. Umm er-rasas. 32. Lahun. 33. Arar. 34. Dibhan. 35. Capitolias. 36. Iraq Al Habis. 37. Abila. 38. Al-Qastal. 39. Abu Jaber caves.

While not every site visited contained gameboards, a negative result is also an important outcome as it tells us about the places where games were less likely to be played (or about the sorts of biases which might condition our datasets, e.g. sites with hard-to-carve basalt surfaces had fewer gameboards).

¹ This report is submitted by the grantee to the Action MC for approval and for claiming payment of the awarded grant. The Grant Awarding Coordinator coordinates the evaluation of this report on behalf of the Action MC and instructs the Grant Holder Manager to verify the grant documents compliance and proceed with the payment.

Nevertheless, I estimate that I identified at least 100 gameboards which were not previously documented (final numbers tbc because I am still cross referencing with publications). This is a significant addition to the existing archaeological record in the region, particularly for the Islamic period (with significant new datasets at Qasar Kharana, Mshatta, and Al-Qastal. N.b. some of the sites visited were not on the original work plan, as they could not be visited due to unanticipated logistical issues but I was able to mitigate for this by visiting a broader range of other relevant sites in the company of Jordanian heritage experts whom I met during the trip.

b. By undertaking systematic trawls of books in the ACOR library I was able to identify over a dozen published gameboards that are not findable through digital searches (including Humayma, one of my original target sites) These gameboards are often noted (with illustrations) in older finds reports but not identified. They are not referenced in more recent publications, as there has been little serious boardgames archaeology in the region.

c. During visits to as-Salt I happened to meet Dr Ibrahim Al Masri, a Jordanian heritage expert with an interest in mancala games. He taught me to play a local mancala game and inspired me to undertake further ethnographic work into traditional games played in Jordan. Through talking to Jordanian colleagues in Amman and in the Eastern Badia, I was able to record information about several variants of backgammon and sijja. This was an unexpected outcome for this STSM but one which will enrich our understanding of heritage games in Jordan, about which very little has been documented by western scholars.

Description of the STSM main achievements and planned follow-up activities

Description and assessment of whether the STSM achieved its planned goals and expected outcomes, including specific contribution to Action objective and deliverables, or publications resulting from the STSM. Agreed plans for future follow-up collaborations shall also be described in this section.

(max. 500 words)

The STSM to Jordan has exceeded the goals and expected outcomes, as originally suggested in my proposal, and can be summarised as follows:

1. **A spatial dataset of potential early Islamic gameboards from Jordan:** My visit enabled me to collate the first ever spatial dataset of early Islamic gameboards in Jordan, comprising 18 sites: Jerash, Amman Citadel (west passage of mosque), Amman Citadel (Umayyad audience hall), Amman Citadel (Ayyubid watch tower), Umm al-Walid, Qasr al-Kharana, Qasr al-Mshatta, Qasr al-Hallabat, Umm Qais, Ghor as-Safi, Ayla, Abila, Dibhan, Madaba, Abila, Humayma, Bassah Church, Qasr Qastal. I found that the most popular games in the Early Islamic period were Mancala type games and Tab. Gameboards were most commonly located inside buildings or internal courtyard areas, as opposed to on the street frontage, suggesting that during Umayyad and Abbasid period people opted to play in private or semi-private places, unlike their Roman predecessors. More broadly my dataset shows that games were central to social life in the early Islamic South Levant, but this was not appreciated due to an almost total lack of publication.
2. **At least one peer-reviewed article:** I have now gathered relevant information for at least one, and more likely two peer reviewed articles. The first will focus on the archaeological evidence for graffiti games and what this can tell us about social space in the early Islamic south Levant. Focussing on Qasr Kharana, this paper argues that gaming in the Early Islamic period moved into more private, often indoor settings, in contrast to the Roman period, when games were regularly played in public spaces. It will be submitted to *Antiquity* in the first instance. The second will present the results of my ethnographic research and will be submitted to the *Board Games Studies Journal*.
3. **A bilingual typology of early Islamic games in the Levant: Work in progress;** I have gathered much relevant data (e.g. relevant gaming terms) during my archaeological and

ethnographic fieldwork and also made relevant contacts working in Jordanian Heritage in order to enable this work.

- 4. **This project developed and field-tested a low-tech, offline-first protocol for recording game boards in situ.** Each board is located on a site plan, measured to a standard set of dimensions, and logged through a call-back structure that links every record back to its position on the plan, so that boards can be relocated, re-examined and compared across sites. Because the method depends on nothing more than plans, a tape and a consistent recording sequence, it works where app-based recording does not: at remote sites with unreliable or no internet coverage*
- 5. **Groundwork for future funding:** I am now very well placed to seek further funding for follow-up work in this area, particularly covering sites in the south of Jordan it was not possible to visit during this trip. I will first seek funding from the Wainwright Fund, University of Oxford, and then from major postdoctoral fellowship providers, e.g. Leverhulme, British Academy, in order to write the first interdisciplinary work on games in the late antique and early Islamic Levant.*

By undertaking these activities, I have materially advanced our knowledge of games and gaming in the South Levant, thus contributing to GameTable's aims. I look forward to presenting my results to members at a webinar in due course.