

Khirbet al-Khalde— A Road Station in the Wadi al-Yutm

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In August 2023, an international team from Aarhus University (Denmark), the University of Alberta (Canada), and the University of Milan (Italy) explored the archaeological remains at Khirbet al-Khalde. This site, located 26 km to the northwest of Aqaba in the Wadi al-Yutm, had previously been the subject of only limited exploration by travelers and archaeologists.

The most prominent features at the site are two rectangular structures (Figs. 1 and 2), the largest of which is a *castellum* with four corner towers and a gate along its northeastern long side. Its interior is divided into two courtyards, with rooms built against the perimeter walls and a cistern placed at the center of the larger courtyard. The smaller structure to the southwest of the *castellum* has often been described as a caravanserai in modern literature, although no hard evidence has yet proven this hypothesis conclusively. This presumed caravanserai was accessible through an opening from the northeast, had a single courtyard, and, like the *castellum*, included rooms built against its perimeter walls. Other visible remains at the site include an aqueduct, a burial ground, two watchtowers, and two rock-cut cisterns.

The main objective of the 2023 campaign was to survey the remains of the buildings and their surroundings to clarify the extent of their occupation in antiquity (Harvey et al. 2024a). A surface collection was conducted in and around the fortlet, the presumed caravanserai, the two watchtowers, and the cemetery. In addition, the team carried out drone photography, a study of declassified satellite photos and old reports, an architectural survey, and a damage assessment of the site and its remains.

The pottery and glass retrieved from Khirbet al-Khalde are currently being studied but appear to confirm an occupation of the site spanning from the Nabataean to the Late Byzantine period as suggested by S. T. Parker, although tentatively later finds were also collected. This chronology is corroborated by the existence of ashlar blocks dressed in a Nabataean fashion within the *castellum*, coins, and an inscription. A few potsherds also suggest possible Iron Age and Middle Islamic activity.

The site has been heavily damaged in modern times. The construction of a branch of the Hejaz railway from Ma'an to Aqaba destroyed the northern tower of the *castellum*, and a transmission line with a service road damaged a section of the aqueduct (Harvey et al. 2024b). The construction of the service roads increased accessibility to the site and, by extension, looting activities. Concentrations of looting pits are prevalent in and around the *castellum*, the presumed caravanserai, and the cemetery. Evidence for looting was found as far as the spring at the head of the site's aqueduct,



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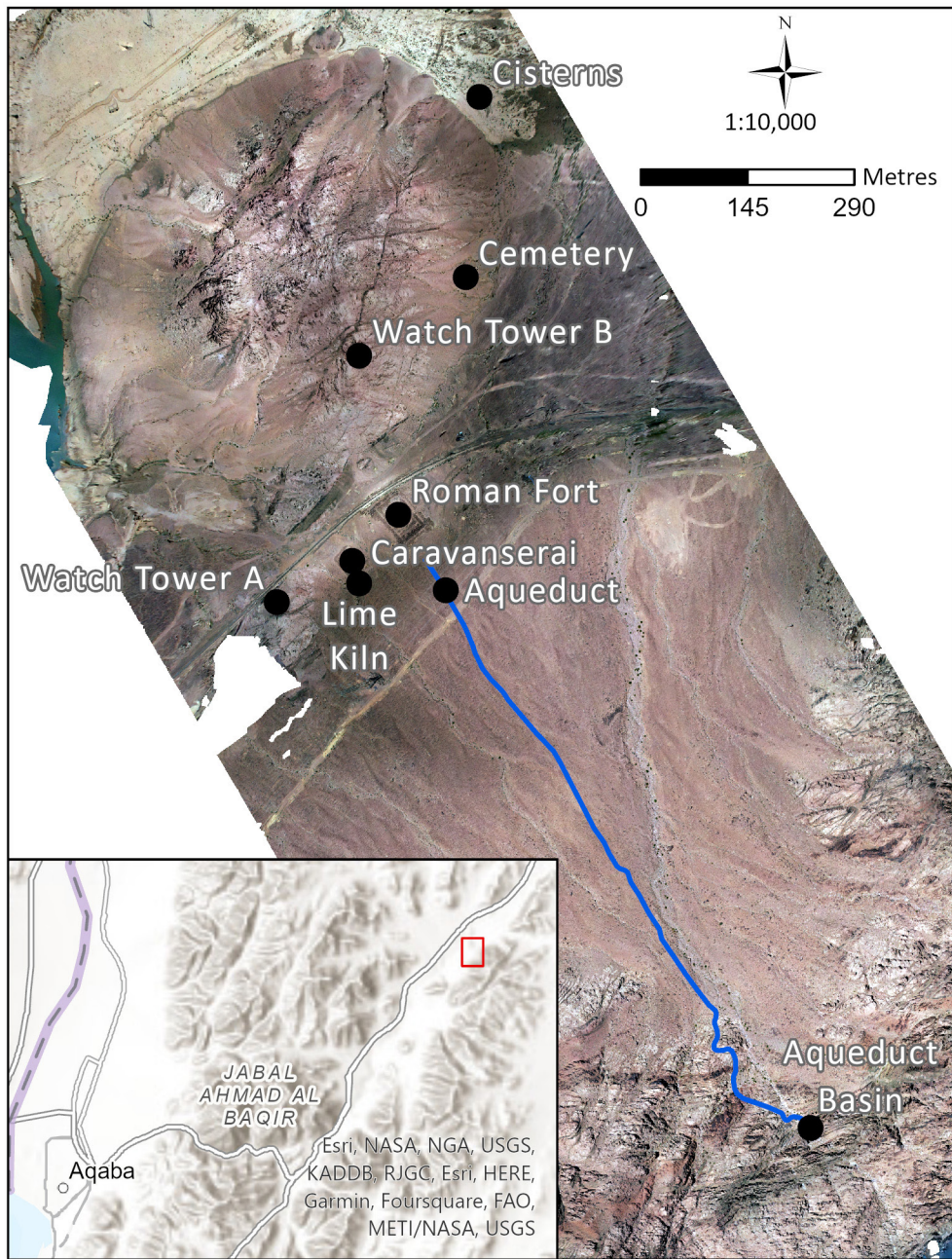


Fig.1. Plan of the site with main features. (Image courtesy of the Khirbet al-Khalde Archaeological Project.)



Fig.2. The site from the north. (Photo courtesy of the Khirbet al-Khalde Archaeological Project.)

suggesting this is a widespread phenomenon at Khirbet al-Khalde.

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