

Review

Reviewed Work(s): The Shammakh to Ayl Archaeological Survey, Southern Jordan (2010–2012) by Burton MacDonald, Geoffrey A. Clark, Larry G. Herr, D. Scott Quaintance, Hani Hayajneh and Jürg Eggler

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***The Shammakh to Ayl Archaeological Survey, Southern Jordan (2010–2012).* By Burton MacDonald, Geoffrey A. Clark, Larry G. Herr, D. Scott Quaintance, Hani Hayajneh, and Jürg Eggler.**

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The Shammakh to Ayl Archaeological Survey (SAAS) is the latest in a series of surveys in central and southern Jordan directed by MacDonald since 1979. Taken together, these surveys have sampled a substantial block of upland territory between Wadi al-Hasa in the north and Ras an-Naqab in the south, with extensions down to the rift margins in the west and out towards the Desert Highway in the east. The SAAS study area comprised ca. 590 km<sup>2</sup> of the southern Edomite plateau, being that 30 km north-south x 20 km east-west area lying above the 1,200 m contour between Shammakh in the north and Ayl in the south.

This volume presents the primary data collected by the SAAS, but not its detailed interpretation nor integration with the earlier surveys, for which one must turn to two separate publications (MacDonald 2014, 2015) which are not reviewed here. The sevenfold objectives of the SAAS are clearly articulated (on p. 1) and ambitious, forming a benchmark against which the success or otherwise of the survey can be assessed:

1. “to discover, record, and interpret archaeological sites in an area of approximately 590 km<sup>2</sup>”;
2. “to determine the area’s settlement patterns from the Lower Paleolithic . . . to the end of the Late Islamic period”;
3. “to investigate the Pleistocene . . . sediments and lakes in the eastern segment of the survey territory”;
4. “to document the many farms, hamlets, and villages that provisioned the major international sites of the area”;

5. “to investigate further the *Khatt Shabib*”;
6. “to record the inscriptions, rock drawings, and *wasms* . . . within the area”;
7. “to link up with previous work that the project director and others have carried out in southern Jordan.”

Scrutiny of the small print makes it clear that the bulk of the fieldwork was completed over one six-week and one seven-and-a-half-week season, each with a team of six people in the field. In this context, it is difficult to avoid coming to the conclusion that the ambition of the survey outstripped the resources allocated to it. Although MacDonald is to be congratulated on covering so much ground with limited resources, one wonders whether the survey might have benefitted from a more targeted approach?

The book comprises eight clearly presented chapters and a number of appendices.

Chapter 1 (“Introduction”) sets the context and outlines the methodology. The survey area was divided into three zones on the basis of elevation: Zone 1 in the west (1,200–1,500 m asl), Zone 2 in the centre (>1,500 m asl) and Zone 3 in the east (1,200–1,500 m asl). Each of these was sampled by means of randomly generated 500 x 500 m squares, representing approximately 5% of each zone. Transects were walked across each square and artefacts collected. Sites were recorded in and adjacent to squares, and also whilst transiting between squares. Whilst this approach does, as the authors note, “force survey team members into all areas of the territory” (p. 7), it also has significant limitations. First and foremost, human settlement is rarely randomly distributed, especially in a dry environment like southern Jordan, but tends instead to be highly clustered around sources of water, agricultural land, lines of communication, etc. Unless random squares are combined with purposive sampling of resource-rich ‘hotspots,’ one runs the risk of missing significant parts of the settlement record entirely. On a more positive note, a useful list of SAAS sites that are promising candidates for further investigation is provided (Table 1.4).

At 425 pages, Chapters 2 (“Random Square Descriptions”) and 3 (“Site Descriptions – 1-366”) comprise the meat of the volume. Random squares and sites

(“any location where humans have left evidence of their activity” [p. 8]) are concisely described in a standardised format. Each entry includes details of location, periods represented, and a description, plus site name and bibliographic references if previously investigated, and line illustrations of selected pottery and chipped stone artefacts. Partial pottery descriptions are provided, but as these don’t include detailed fabric descriptions their utility is limited. On the whole, it is unclear on what basis sherds were attributed to periods and how they fit into established local and regional sequences. These chapters would have benefited from appropriate provision of photographs and site plans, as well as of fully captioned maps showing the locations of the random squares and sites being described.

In Chapter 4 (“The Old Stone Age in the SAAS Area”), Clark provides a thoughtful appraisal of the evidence for the Palaeolithic period. This includes a brave assessment of the limitations of the data (“whether or not the ‘sites’ are distinct from the background lithic scatter is arguable” [p. 452]; “the SAAS data are exceptionally coarse grained” [p. 455]; “Epi/PPN sites almost certainly exist in the SAAS survey area, but none were detected by the sampling design adopted here” [p. 464]). Nevertheless, by jumping through methodological hoops it is convincingly argued that “the strongest ‘signal’ was that of the Middle Paleolithic” (p. 463) and that a “kind of seasonally mediated forager transhumance” (p. 464) may have been practiced. Clark also identifies six random squares in Zone 3 with convincing evidence for a Lower Palaeolithic presence and draws a comparison with the well-known Acheulian site of Fjaje (Rollefson 1985) close to ash-Shawbak.

Chapter 5 (“Settlement Patterns Developed on the Basis of the Ceramics Collected”) constitutes the interpretation of the ceramic-period survey results, insofar as it goes. It is introduced by summaries of regional palaeoclimatic data and the natural resources of the area. Whilst it is good to see attention paid to the former, the bibliographic referencing is somewhat out of date for such a fast-moving field, with the majority of sources dating to the mid-1990s. This section would have been improved by a more critical assessment of the evidence for southern Jordan based on more

up-to-date research (e.g., Clarke et al. 2016 and references therein). The conclusions reached in this chapter can be summarized as identifying periods of “ebb and flow” of human presence in the SAAS territory” (p. 503) on the basis of the number of random squares and sites from which artefacts of a particular period were collected. The Chalcolithic-Early Bronze, Iron II, Nabataean-Roman, Byzantine and Late Islamic periods are all thought to have seen peaks of human settlement activity, with dips in the Middle-Late Bronze, Persian-Hellenistic, and Early Islamic periods. These conclusions would, however, have been greatly strengthened by more rigorous quantitative analysis of relative artefact density during the different periods (rather than simple presence / absence), as well as more transparency about the basis on which material was attributed to period in the first place.

In Chapter 6 (“Ancient North Arabian Inscriptions, Rock Drawings, and Tribal Brands [*Wasms*]”), Hayajneh provides a comprehensive catalogue and interpretation of the epigraphic material, rock art, and tribal brands recorded by the SAAS. The introductory remarks on rock drawings and *wasms* (pp. 514–18) will be of particular interest to non-specialists seeking a way in to this field of study. It is to be hoped that more researchers will follow the example set by MacDonald and his team in providing such a comprehensive publication of this oft-neglected category of data.

Chapter 7 (“Seal Impression on an Iron I Jar Rim”) consists of two pages that hold few surprises.

The volume is concluded by Chapter 8 (“Summary and Conclusions”), in which MacDonald returns to the objectives laid out in Chapter 1. Measured against these objectives, it is the opinion of this reviewer that the SAAS can only be considered partially successful. The ambitious multi-period, multi-thematic objectives set for the survey were not matched by the resources allocated to it, with the result that few of the objectives set have been addressed in sufficient detail to allow firm conclusions to be drawn. MacDonald is open about the need for further study (p. 545), but in view of the fact that the “SAAS project has particular relevance for understanding the major site of Petra during the Nabataean, Roman and Byzantine periods” (p. 549) and is “important relative to the site of Udruh . . . and . . .

ash-Shawbak" (p. 549), it is hard to avoid coming to the conclusion that it would have been better to focus limited resources on more tightly defined, research-led objectives from the outset.

As it stands, the publication is more a partial Sites and Monuments Record than a fully interpreted work of landscape archaeology by the modern standards of the discipline. Nevertheless, MacDonald and his team are to be congratulated on bringing this work to publication so promptly. The volume is nicely produced and edited (although a few minor typographical errors inevitably remain) as well as reasonably priced. In view of the rapid pace of development in southern Jordan, they have performed a great service to all with an interest in the archaeological heritage of this region, especially those bearing the heavy burden of responsibility for its management and preservation.

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