

Frontiers of Empire: Qasr Al-Azraq and the debate over conflict damage to heritage

In Jordan's north-eastern desert sits Qasr Al-Azraq, an arguably overlooked castle that has been a site of strategic importance from Roman times through to the romanticised exploits of "Lawrence of Arabia". Whilst travelling in the region members of the Heritage in the Crossfire team visited the site in a tourist capacity and found exciting evidence of the scars of this long history as a site of military significance.

Map showing the location of Qasr Al-Azraq, and a view of the central courtyard from the western tower.



Qasr Al-Azraq is believed to have begun as a Roman fortification, constructed from locally sourced basalt at the centre of a network of lookout posts and stations to secure important sources of freshwater and protect trade roads along the empire's eastern frontier. An altar with Latin inscriptions discovered in the courtyard of the castle dates Roman occupation to the 3rd century AD, and inscriptions found nearby detail the legions involved in the construction of roads. The rectangular nature of the fortifications with a central courtyard is also typical of Roman engineering.

The importance of Qasr Al-Azraq as a fortification continued for over 100 years and likely into the Byzantine period, attested to by renovation under the reign of Constantine in the 4th century, and Greek inscriptions found at the site.

Following the Arab Muslim conquests of the region in the 7th century, it has been suggested that the castle ceased to serve as a border military installation, and served instead to monitor trade routes and camel trains. The site may also have been used as a royal retreat for the Umayyad dynasty, similar to the nearby Qasr Amra, constructed in the 8th century.

After the crusader invasions of the 12 and 13th centuries, the Ayyubid dynasty sought to secure their control of northern Jordan. To achieve this Izz al-Din Aybeg undertook massive renovations between 1236-1237. During this time, a three-story gatehouse and stables were added, and it is likely that the central mosque was also built during this period.

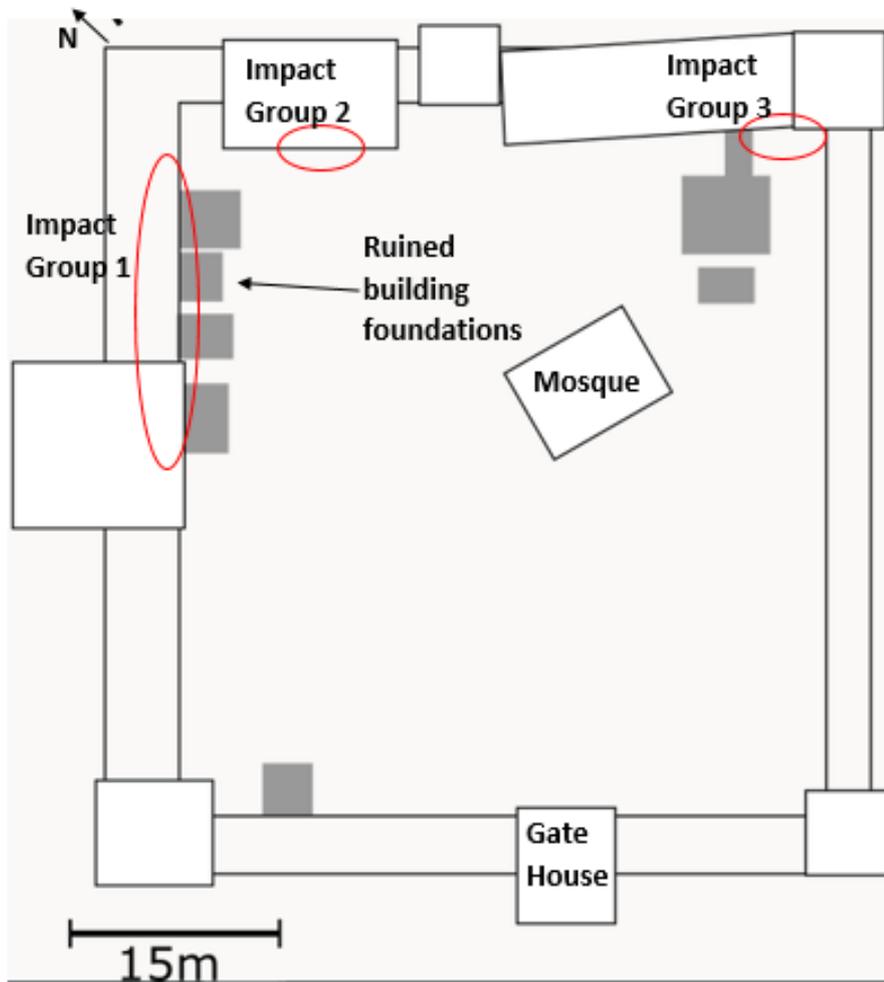
The castle was home to an Ottoman garrison after the conquest of the area in the 16th century, but as Ottoman power was cemented, the site seems to have lost much of its strategic importance, probably acting as a stopping off point for pilgrims journeying south to Mecca.

Qasr Al-Azraq regained its military purpose in 1917 when it was garrisoned by the Arab Army and T.E. Lawrence during their campaign for Arab independence from Ottoman rule. The castle lay only 60 miles from Amman and the Hejaz railway, one of the prime targets of Lawrence's guerrilla campaign. Indeed, they had launched a successful raid that had destroyed a section of the line the night before they rode into Azraq. In *The seven pillars of wisdom*, Lawrence recounts the refurbishment of several of the abandoned castle's ruinous buildings including the mosque which had been used as a sheep-pen, and the gatehouse which he used as his private quarters.

Lawrence also highlighted the tactical advantages of the castle, describing the basalt stone door as being over a foot thick and that the castle commanded its' surroundings:

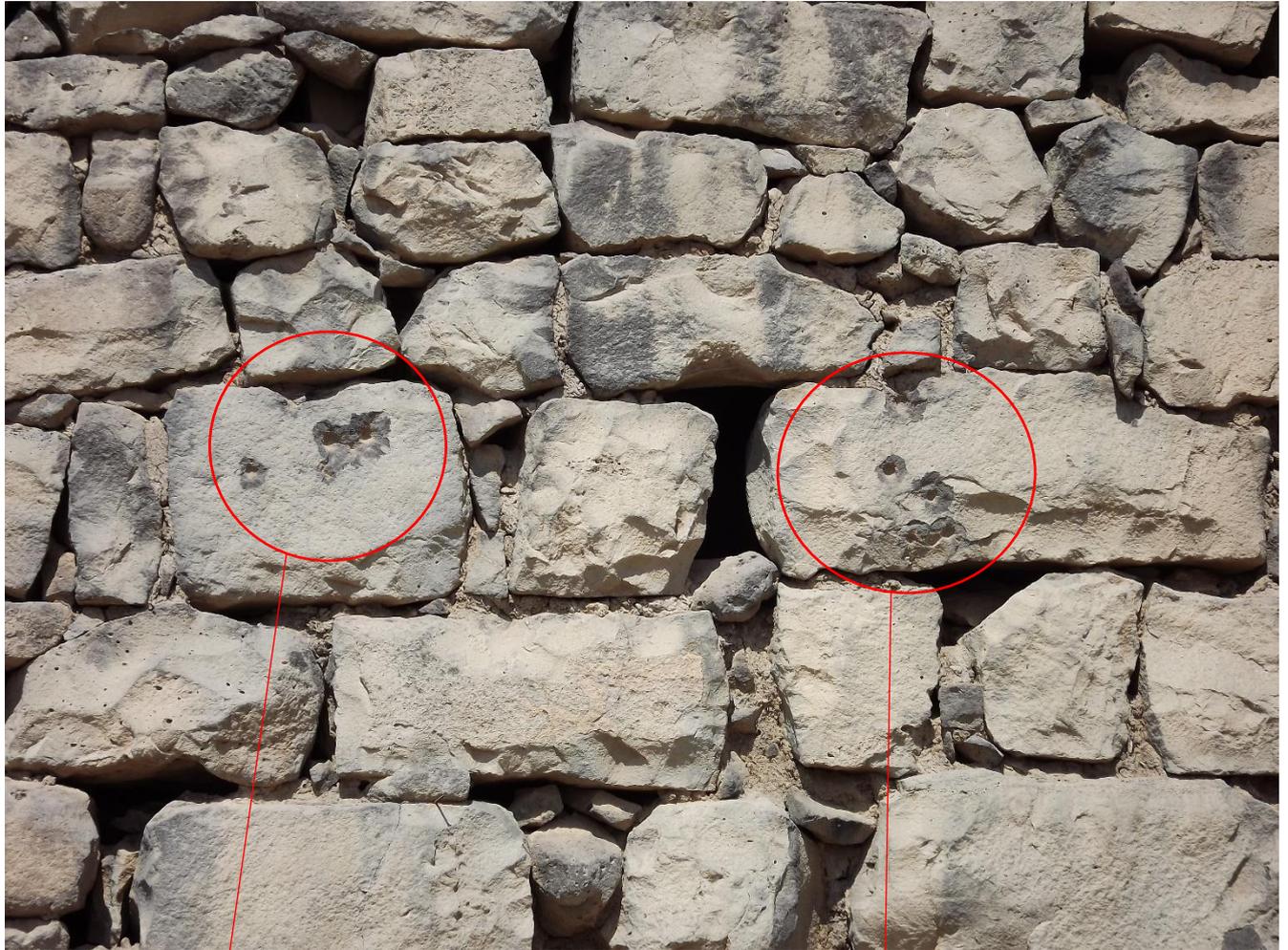
“Our...next labour was to make positions for machine-guns in the upper towers, from whose tops the approaches lay at mercy”.

This passage was particularly exciting with respect to our fieldwork, as upon arrival at Qasr Al-Azraq we immediately began to spot evidence of ballistic impacts on several of the interior walls of the courtyard, numbering at least 35+. The locations of these impacts are shown below:

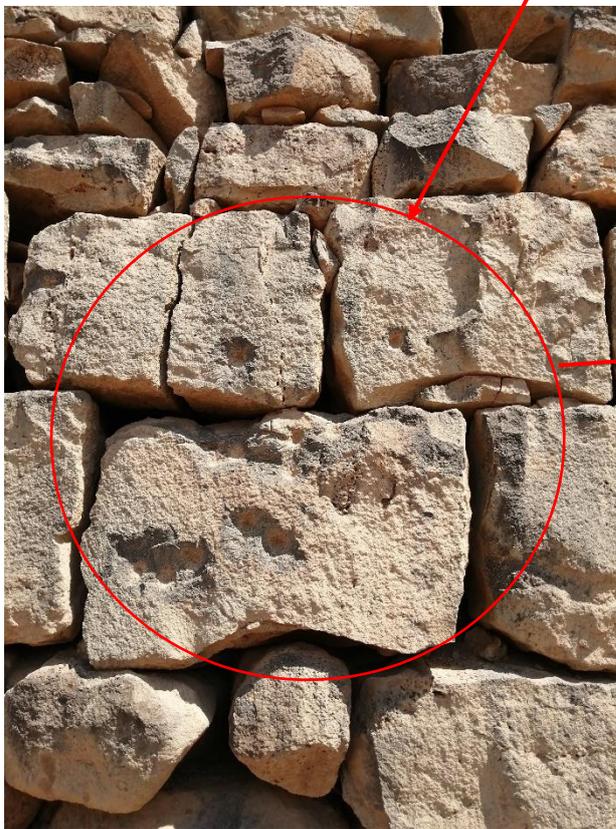


These impacts were often found in large numbers, and frequently tightly clustered:

Images taken from impact area 1



Images taken from Impact area 3



It is worth noting that one of the stone blocks in impact area 3 has a large vertical fracture to the left of an impact crater. This fracture could possibly have been exacerbated by the ballistic damage. This demonstrates the potential for increased decay that ballistic impact can cause to heritage monuments, a chief research area of the Heritage in the Crossfire project.

Given that these impacts are on the interior walls, they could conceivably be a result of the Arab troops undertaking target practice inside their headquarters. This notion is supported by the sizable impact clusters suggesting a designated target, and Lawrence's description of the troops' steps to ensure that the castle was prepared for attack, refurbishing buildings and establishing machine gun nests.

Further work would be required to verify this hypothesis, but the possibility that these impacts were caused by troops of the Arab army under the command of T.E. Lawrence cuts to the core of a key theme in our research. On the one hand, the impacts could be seen as a source of damage and degradation to a monument almost 1,700 years old. Conversely, they can be interpreted as an important part of the site's history as a military installation, a direct link to a defining moment in the establishment of Arab identity, and a reminder of a hugely significant and romanticised military leader. Perhaps the damage could become a heritage asset itself, with the prospect of seeing such direct evidence of historic events and characters enhancing engagement with the site, increasing visitor numbers and revenue for the area. Such discussions lead to broader debates on whether conflict damage should be repaired to ensure the longevity of the site, or efforts made to preserve the damage, as a testament to collective identity and history.

Perhaps questions surrounding the nature and ethics of conflict damage and restoration of heritage monuments are best addressed on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with local communities, and taking in to account the scientific and technical issues presented by each site. The impacts at Qasr Al-Azraq can be seen to typify this issue, and it is hoped that this initial investigative fieldwork will enhance the discourse around these topics.

Sources

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