Current understanding of Mamlūk rule in Bilād al-Shām, in which strategic objectives were paramount, has heavily informed archaeological investigations of the Middle Islamic period. Such conceptions about imperial authority and provincial programs emerge primarily from narrative sources, namely chronicles, geographies, and travelers’ accounts, as well as the so-called “secretaries’ manuals.” Valuable as these sources are, they reflect the ideals of administration, emphasize the political and military spheres of the state, and frequently resort to tropes in their descriptions of places and people far from Cairo. In this way they offer an incomplete picture of the relationship of the Mamlūk state with the peoples of Syria. What has been missing from archaeologists’ use of medieval Arabic texts is an engagement with documentary sources, the kinds of economic and legal texts that are rarely published and are generally preserved in scroll and register form, housed in archives. While difficult to access and to use, they are precious for their information on administrative practice and the daily encounters between officials and rural peoples, as well as their emphasis on the socio-economic spheres of the state, which are collectively the areas of scholarly inquiry that are of the greatest interest to many archaeologists. In this manner they complement (and complete) in important ways the picture the narrative sources provide about the Mamlūk state and the societies over which it ruled.

The following is an archaeological perspective on written sources relevant to the Mamlūk period, using Jordan as the primary point of reference. It suggests ways in which textual—both documentary and narrative—research and

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1 Many of the ideas in this paper first appear in my monograph, Jordan in the Late Middle Ages: Transformation of the Mamlūk Frontier (Chicago, 2011), and the article, “From Ceramics to Social Theory: Reflections on Mamlūk Archaeology Today,” MSR 14 (2010): 109–157.

2 I use Jordan here to refer to the region of the modern Hashemite Kingdom, which, under the Mamluks, constituted the Province of Kerak (Mamlakat Karak) and the southernmost district (safaqah) of the Province of Damascus (Mamlakat Dimashq).
archaeological fieldwork, when done in tandem, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the Mamlūks’ program in Jordan, of relations between state and local society, and of the general settlement history of the region. The texts examined in this particular study include Mamlūk-era waqfiyyas (endowment registers), shari'a court documents, and price lists, as well as the more familiar narrative genres of the period. Waqf, the endowment of revenues from an income-producing property, most often ultimately earmarked for charitable purposes, was a key financial institution in medieval Islam, used to support a range of vital public services. Moreover, it is one gauge of proprietorship, as endowed properties, by law, had to be owned (in title, not merely usufruct) by the donor before the endowment could be registered in a religious court. They describe both the recipient of the donation (such as a mosque or madrasa), as well as the properties set aside to see to the financial support of the recipient. In addition, Ottoman-era documents—including tax registers (tapu defterlî), waqfiyyas, and the qadi’s court records (sijill)—are explored for their potential to refine debates on Mamlūk-era economy. We consider the interplay of such textual sources and the archaeological record in light of recent fieldwork at Tall Ḥisbān and as part of the Northern Jordan Project (hereafter “NJP”), which are under the co-direction and senior direction, respectively, of the author (Fig. 6.1). In an effort to keep pace with current developments in the broader field of Mamlūk studies, the NJP has prioritized research on contemporary documents; its commitment to conducting simultaneous research in medieval archives renders it in this regard something of a novelty in Jordanian archaeology.3

1 The Interplay of Narrative and Documentary Sources in Interpreting Archaeological Data

There are only a handful of scholars today actively engaged in writing a history of Mamlūk Jordan.4 It is no easy task, as Transjordan represented the imperial frontier and is visible to us in contemporary Arabic texts only occasionally and quite inconsistently. The most accessible textual references are found in

3 These archives include the National Libraries, National Archives, documents centers, and Religious Endowment headquarters in Cairo, Amman and Damascus.

4 Most notable are the Jordanian historians Yusuf Ghawānimah and Muḥammad Adnān al-Bakhīt and, among archaeologists, Robin Brown, Jeremy Johns, Alison McQuitty, Benjamin Porter, Alan Walmsley and Marcus Milwright. For a list of their works, see the bibliography in Walker, *Jordan in the Late Middle Ages*. 