THE EXCAVATION OF AN UMAYYAD PERIOD HOUSE
AT PELLA IN JORDAN

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The systematic archaeological excavation of domestic areas in the major urban centres of classical, late antique or Early Islamic date in the Levant has not been a priority of most research programs, with only a few notable exceptions. Rather, the focus has been on the spectacular public monuments of temple, street, bath, theatre, circuit wall and church for instance, which still visually dominate the archaeological landscape of such sites and, admittedly, impress the casual visitor. In part to redress this imbalance, and to further our understanding of urban change in the late antique—Early Islamic transitional period (ca. A.D. 550–750), a sizable area of housing was uncovered at the eastern end of the main archaeological mound (tell) at Pella (Tabaqat Fahl) in Jordan (figure 1).1 The work was undertaken during 1979–1983 under the auspices of the University of Sydney, Australia, with major funding from the Australian Research Council, and was supervised by the author.

The excavations of the eastern tell encompassed an area of almost 2000 m². Work progressed by establishing a 10m² grid, and excavating a square of 9 × 9 m within the grid (thereby leaving an intervening baulk of one metre)—otherwise known as the box-grid (or Wheeler-Kenyon) method. A planned housing quarter first constructed in the mid-6th c. A.D. was thereby exposed, which originally consisted of contiguous houses but was rearranged into more independent two-storied units opening out onto courtyards in the mid-7th c.2 The surviving ground floors consisted of walls, paving, columns and other architectural features constructed of dressed stone; the upper levels were originally of unbaked brick, but these collapsed into the ground floor rooms—filling them—in the fierce earthquake of 130 H./A.D.

1 McNicoll, Smith and Hennessy (1982); McNicoll et al. (1992); Sheedy, Carson and Walmsley (2001); Walmsley (1992a) and (1992b).

L. Lavan, L. Özgenel and A. Sarantis (edd.) Housing in Late Antiquity (Late Antique Archaeology 3.2 – 2005) (Leiden 2007), pp. 515–521
Fig. 1 General plan of mid-8th c. housing, at the east end of the main mound at Pella.

Fig. 2 Representative baulk section across houses A and B: note collapse lines and whole objects, fallen from upstairs rooms (Winikoff).