

BEYOND THE RIVER JORDAN

A Late Iron Age Sanctuary at Tell Damiyah



Excavation work on the summit in 2015, looking northeast. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Lucas Petit and Zeidan Kafafi

Tell Damiyah, located in the Central Jordan Valley, is identified by most scholars with the historical city of Adama, an important town destroyed by Pharaoh Shoshenq I in the late tenth century B.C.E. It is mentioned in the Old Testament along with sites like Sodom and Gomorra, and was ruled by a king. However, the minute dimensions of Tell Damiyah – only a few hectares at its greatest extent – make this identification and description, at least at first sight, not very likely. A joint team of the Dutch National Museum of Antiquities (NMA) and the Jordanian Yarmouk University (YU) have recently discovered the remains of a late Iron Age sanctuary built on the summit of Tell Damiyah. The objects under study offer an alternative explanation for the important international role the site must have played during the Iron Age.

Since the 1960's the east bank of the Central Jordan Valley (fig. 1) has been investigated thoroughly by different excavation and survey teams (Kaptijn 2009). These investigations have shown that this semi-arid part of the valley was not a border zone during the Iron Age, as is commonly thought, but an important area for Levantine society (see, for example, the Bala'am Son of Be'or Inscription at Tell Deir 'Alla). Interesting as well is the fact that

all Iron Age sites here, with a possible exception of Tell Damiyah (Table 1), show a discontinuous occupation history with multiple abatement phases (Van der Kooij 2001; Petit 2009a). The underlying motives of the inhabitants for migrating temporarily still remains obscure and forms one of the main research questions of the project *Recycling the Valley* initiated by the NMA in 2012 (Petit 2013a).

Commanding a Ford of the Jordan River

The Central Jordan Valley consists of a flat valley floor, the Ghor, and a gorge cut out by the Jordan River, called the Zor. This rugged valley is almost 50 m lower than the Ghor and was in the past regularly flooded by the Jordan River. Tell Damiyah is one of the very few sites located in these lower flood plains, close to one of the few fords and directly south of the confluence of the az-Zerqa River and the Jordan River. The site covers, at its greatest extent, an area of only 2.9 ha, and it has relatively steep slopes all around, rising ca. 17 m above the recent walking surface (fig. 2). It consists of two parts: the upper Tell, and a lower terrace that occupies the western and southern slopes. This lower terrace seems to have been used only temporarily (fig. 3). The upper

Tell has a strategic position, commanding the ford of the Jordan River, and direct visual contact with Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, one of the most important and largest contemporaneous sites of the Ghor.

Victor Guérin was the first to recognize the importance of Tell Damiyah, in the 19th century (Guérin 1869: 238–40); however, it took decades before the site was eventually surveyed (e.g., Yassine et al. 1988: 191). Pottery sherds found during those surveys dated to the LB II, Iron Age I, Iron Age II, Persian, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Periods. In response to mechanical destruction in the early 2000's, Lucas Petit (Leiden University) and Omar al-Ghul (YU) carried out small test excavations in 2004 and 2005 with intriguing results (Petit 2009a). Archaeological research was continued on a larger scale from 2012 onwards (fig. 4).

The earliest pottery sherds found at Tell Damiyah during the more recent excavations date to the Early Bronze Age, although the number of these sherds is very small; they could have been brought to the site together with building material. An intensive site survey in 2004 has resulted in

a more substantial number of sherds from the Late Bronze Age, and the authors suggest that permanent occupation started during this period and lasted at least up to the Late Iron Age. During

the Persian and Hellenistic Periods, Tell Damiyah was used as a storage place for semi-nomadic or nomadic groups (Stratum III). Similar finds were excavated at other sites in the area, like Tell es-Sa'idiyeh, Tell Deir 'Alla, and Tell al-Mazar (Petit 2013b). Two cemeteries represent the latest occupation at Tell Damiyah: one is dated to the Byzantine Period and the other to the Ottoman Period (Strata I-II). Investigations of the burials are ongoing and will be published in the near future.

Tell Damiyah is identified by most scholars as Adama, a place name mentioned in two sources. According to the OT (e.g., Gen. 14:2; Joshua 3:16), Adama is attested as an important royal town near one of the few fords of the Jordan River and close to Zarethan, Sodom, and Gomorra. Although the existence of the last two cities remains obscure, the biblical city of Zarethan has most frequently been located at Tell

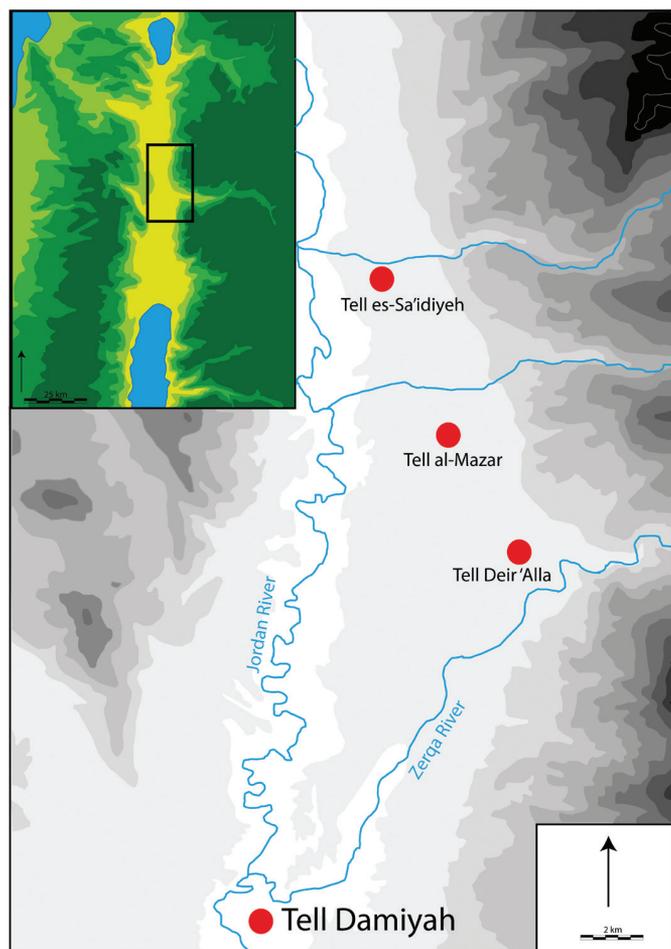


Figure 1 (above). Map of the Central Jordan Valley and the location of Tell Damiyah. Drawing by Lucas Petit.

Table 1. Stratification of Tell Damiyah

Period	Site Strata	Absolute Date	Description
Ottoman Period	I	2 nd millennium C.E.	Cemetery
Byzantine Period	II	1 st millennium C.E.	Cemetery
Persian-Hellenistic Period	III	5 th –3 rd century B.C.E.	Storage facilities
Iron Age IIc	IV–VI	7 th –6 th century B.C.E.	Meager occupation remains
Iron Age IIc	VII	8 th –7 th century B.C.E.	Sanctuary and domestic architecture. Destroyed.
Iron Age IIa/b	VIII–X	9 th –8 th century B.C.E.	Sanctuary and domestic architecture?
Not excavated			

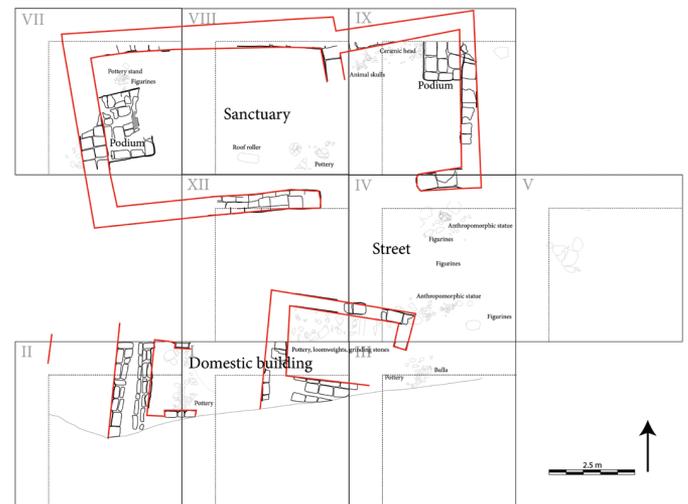
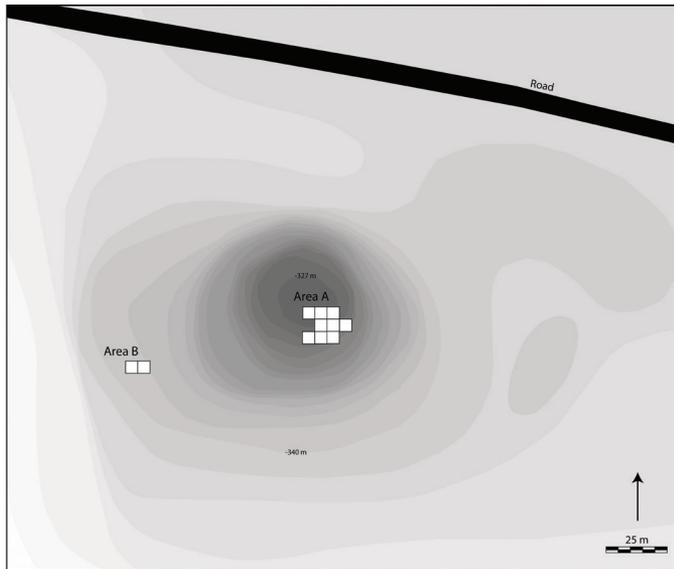


Figure 2 (top left). Contour map of Tell Damiyah with excavation areas. Drawing by Muwaffaq Bataineh.

Figure 3 (top right). Trenches on the lower terrace, looking northeast. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Figure 4 (middle left). Excavation work on the summit in 2014, looking north. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Figure 5 (middle right). Top plan of the Iron Age IIc occupation (Stratum VII) at Tell Damiyah. Drawing by Lucas Petit.

Figure 6 (bottom left). The sanctuary, looking northeast (walls are red, the western podium is blue). A Persian-Hellenistic pit with mud brick lining is visible in the upper right corner. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Figure 7 (bottom right). The sanctuary, looking northeast (walls are red, the eastern podium is blue). Photograph by Lucas Petit.



es-Sa'idiyeh (fig. 1). Adama is also mentioned on the victory stele of Shoshenq I in Karnak. This topographic list from the late tenth century B.C.E. enumerates the names of annexed towns in the Southern Levant (Kitchen 1973: 293–300). One of these towns happens to be *idmi*, which is generally accepted to be Adama. Together with neighboring sites like Succoth, Penuel, and Mahanaim – all of these places are said to be located in the area immediately north of Tell Damiyah – this apparent town was captured and possibly destroyed. However, looking at the size of Tell Damiyah, one could question its identification as Adama. On the Tell itself, there seems to be only space for a few houses, let alone a city with a royal palace, and recent excavations at the foot of the Tell has not yet revealed evidence of a lower city. Thus, either the identification supported



by most scholars is wrong, or the character of the site was different to what biblical and Egyptian sources described.

Platforms and Cultic Objects

The most extensively excavated occupation phase on the summit (Stratum VII) dates provisionally to Iron Age IIC – around 700 B.C.E. – and consists of at least two mud brick buildings (fig. 5). Both structures were completely destroyed by a very intense fire, and a thick debris layer sealed off all utensils on the floors and surfaces. The reason for this seemingly site-wide destruction is unclear, but a similar event seems to have been detected at Tell Deir 'Alla (Phase VII) and Tell al-Mazar (Phase V). The remains at Tell Damiyah were unfortunately heavily damaged in post Iron Age times, the latest disturbance being by a bulldozer in the early

Figure 8 (above). Jar-like pottery stand with figurines, looking northeast. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Figure 9 (bottom left). Two-headed horse figurine. Photograph by Yousef al-Zu'bi.

Figure 10 (bottom right). Two-headed horse figurine from a Persian-Hellenistic pit. Photograph by Yousef al-Zu'bi.



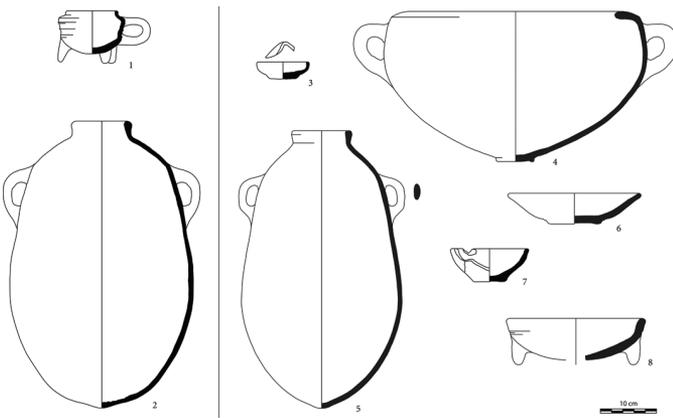


Figure 11 (top left). Animal skulls on the floor of the sanctuary, looking north.

Figure 12 (right). Ceramic male-head.

Figure 13 (left). Pottery found in (nos. 1–2) and around the sanctuary (nos. 3–8). Photographs and drawing by Lucas Petit.

2000's. A few more buildings can be expected towards the north and west of these structures, but all together the settled area during Iron Age IIc is intriguingly small.

The larger of the two buildings is rectangular in shape, oriented east-west, and has a doorway in the central part of the long southern wall (figs. 5–7). The building was created on top of a layer of artificial fill. This construction fill was also found in other places southeast of the central building together with some interesting discoveries (see below). At a few places, the remains of older walls were used as foundations and one of those stumps acted as a division wall between the eastern and western part of the large room. The floor of this rectangular building was of beaten earth and all inner walls and installations were coated with white lime plaster. The inner dimensions are ca. 10.6 m in length and 4.2 m in width and the building is considered large compared to contemporaneous structures at other sites in the vicinity. Since the northern wall is unexcavated, it remains unclear if this structure was free standing or not. The doorway is extremely wide (2.8 m) and a wooden pole in the middle must have held the lintel. Wooden columns supporting the flat roof can be expected although none have been preserved. The roof itself was made of wooden beams, covered with smaller branches, reeds, and packed clay. A heavy, stone roller was found on top of a layer of roof debris inside the building.

Two mud brick installations, some type of platforms, were found: one against the western wall and one in the northeastern corner. The remains of the latter one are difficult to interpret due to its location close to the present surface. The platform against the western wall, probably the primary offering installation, is step-shaped and was plastered with lime. On top of this feature, approximately 0.6 m above the walking surface, a flat and smoothed stone was found. Immediately north of this platform, the excavators encountered the remains of a restorable cylindrical pottery stand (fig. 8). This jar-like stand with a height of 44.5 cm shattered on the floor during the final catastrophic event. A two-headed horse and rider figurine, decorated with paint on the white coating, was found in between the sherds (fig. 9). This figurine was most likely standing inside the cultic stand just before both fell off the podium. Three other equine figurines were encountered nearby. These Late Iron Age figurines have many parallels on both sides of the Jordan Valley, in the western hill countries, as well as the Ammonite region. Two-headed horse figurines are more frequently found in Cyprus and there are only a few examples known from the Levant, such as at Beth Oula and Khirbet as-Sallah (Kletter and Saarelainen 2014). A second two-headed figurine was found at Tell Damiyah in one of the Persian-Hellenistic pits that cut through the floor of the sanctuary, and

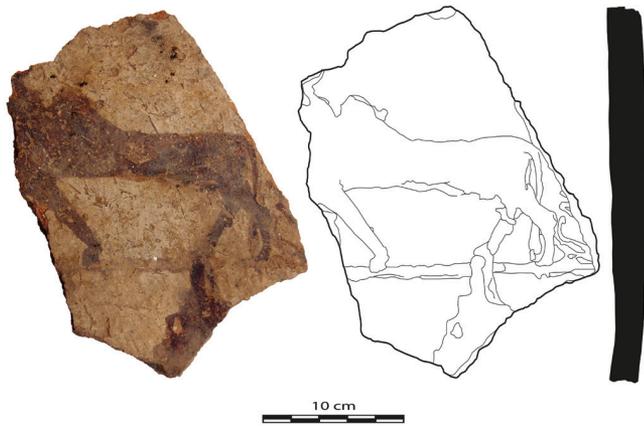


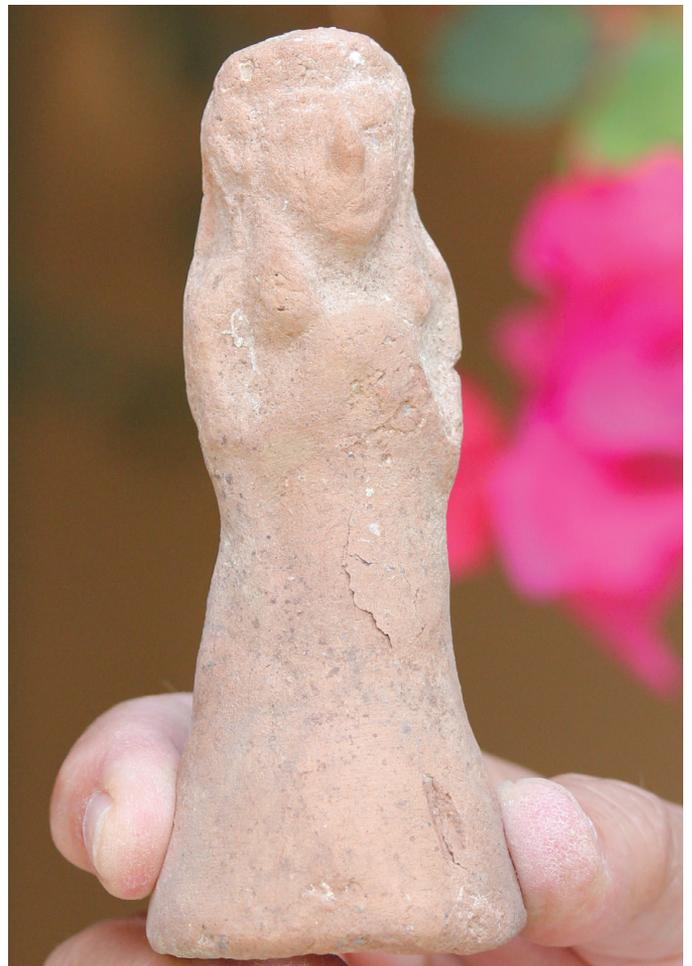
Figure 14 (top left). Pottery sherd with depiction of a cow dragging a plough. Photograph by Mariette Grimbergen and drawing by Lucas Petit.



Figure 15 (top right). The street, looking south. Photograph by Yousef al-Zu'bi.

Figure 16 (bottom left). Figurine found in the street layers. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Figure 17 (bottom right). Figurine found in the street layers. Photograph by Lucas Petit.



it can be assumed that this one belonged to the same phase as well (fig. 10).

In the northeastern corner of the building, a second mud brick installation was encountered, again surrounded by intriguing finds. Unparalleled are two bovine skulls deliberately placed on the floor: one 'looks' towards the east, the other towards the entrance in the south (fig. 11). East of the podium the remains

of a ceramic male head were found (fig. 12), once part of an anthropomorphic statue similar to the ones found in front of the building (see below; fig. 18). The head was humanized by attaching a large protruded nose, two eyes, lips, and a modelled beard, broken off in the past. Horn-like protuberances and grooves represent the head dress. The head was made separate from the rest of the statue and fixed on the rim before firing. Similar

anthropomorphic statues were discovered at sites like Wadi Thamad 13, 'En Haseva, and at the sanctuary of Horvat Qitmit.

Close to the southern wall and the entrance two restorable vessels were found: a tripod ammonite bowl and a large storage jar (fig. 13). These were the only pottery containers found inside the sanctuary. The fragmentary pottery from this level is a mixture of local and imported items. Although found inside one of the Persian-Hellenistic pits, a decorated pottery sherd with an image of a cow dragging a plough (fig. 14) probably belongs to the same earlier phase, since an adjoining piece was found just outside the sanctuary.

Approaching the Sanctuary

Visitors to the sanctuary had to climb a sloping passageway from the southeast in order to reach the wide doorway of the sanctuary. The occupation deposits on the street contain primarily frag-

been observed at Hirbet el-Mudayne in central Jordan (Daviau 2012). At Tell Damiyah two small fragments of a kernos and numerous figurines were found in the passage, of both horses and females (figs. 16–17). They represent well-known types from the Iron Age IIc. Furthermore, two restorable anthropomorphic statues were found here, discarded before the final days of the sanctuary (fig. 18; Petit 2009b). The heads of both statues are missing, but the ceramic male head found in the sanctuary gives an idea of what the complete statue must have looked like. The diameter of the standing rim measured between 20.6 cm and 22 cm, the preserved heights are 41 cm and 40.5 cm. The bodies consist of a pottery stand made on a slow pottery wheel. Hands and arms were hand-modelled. The earliest examples of such wheel-made statues originate from the Mediterranean World and can be dated to the Bronze Age (Kourou 2002: 13). The best parallels from the Levant, however, date to the Iron Age II, such as 'En Haseva,



Figure 18. Two anthropomorphic statues (height is ca. 41 cm). Photograph by Lucas Petit.

mentary pottery, bones, and small pebbles, all imbedded into the sediment by frequent footsteps (fig. 15). Although some of the finds certainly originate from an older occupation phase, a few objects were discarded during the use of the sanctuary. The activity of discarding cultic objects in front of a sanctuary has also

Horvat Qitmit, and Wadi Thamad 13 (Daviau 2012). This last site, where twenty hollow statues and numerous figurines were discovered, represents a similar context as Tell Damiyah.

Another unusual object was a broken clay bulla with cuneiform writing in Akkadian (fig. 19). String impressions on the

reverse show that this clay-ball sealed some flexible material, like papyrus or a leather roll. The front has two lines with at least 18 cuneiform signs. The upper line mentions numbers (“3x10, 2, 3x10”), whereas the meaning of the lower part is still unclear. The discovery of a broken bulla suggests that someone at Tell Damiyah had contact with the Neo-Assyrian Empire and could read Akkadian. A relationship with northern Iraq is clear, as pottery in Neo-Assyrian style, such as glazed sherds, the typical carinated bowls, and fragments of jars with long necks, are frequently discovered

The street deposits also contained evidence for earlier cultic activities. Within a fill immediately below the above described occupation layers, several figurines were unearthed: three represent women (e.g., fig. 20) and one an equid figurine. The fill is contemporaneous with the construction fill on which the main sanctuary from ca. 700 B.C.E. was built. Although a votive offering deposit cannot be completely excluded, the random location of the findings in the street makes this unlikely. The figurines suggest that Tell Damiyah was a place of worship over a longer period during the first millennium B.C.E. (Strata VIII–?).

There are traces of a few other buildings around the sanctuary. The remains of a second structure were found south of the street, although heavily damaged by a bulldozer in the early 2000’s (fig. 5). The structure consists of at least two rooms and was in use at the same time as the sanctuary. The mud brick walls were set up in shallow foundation trenches and plastered on the inside and outside with mud. This building suffered a destruction accompanied by fire as well. The finds on the beaten earth and cobbled floors, however, point to a more domestic function. No figurines or other cultic items were found; rather, a more mundane domestic assemblage with grinding bowls, grinding stones, loom weights, large storage vessels, and many cooking pot sherds was discovered. The relationship with the sanctuary is still unclear,

although one could imagine a residential building close to a place of worship.

A Place of Worship

Based on the discoveries so far, Tell Damiyah seems to have been an interregional cultic center in the Jordan Valley during the Iron Age II, until its destruction in the early seventh century B.C.E. ceased all religious activities. The absence of multiple residential

buildings and the frequent occurrence of horse figurines, sometimes with rider, reflect the significant role of this place for traders and travelers and the importance of cavalry. Every person crossing the ford of the Jordan River had to pass this small site. The figurines in the construction fill of the Iron Age IIC phase suggest that Tell Damiyah had a longer history of cultic use. Questions on the character of those earlier sanctuaries and on which deity or deities were worshipped at the site then remain to be answered in the future.

Is Tell Damiyah the historical site of Adama? The topographical indications of the city of Adama seem to fit Tell Damiyah, and some scholars have even suggested a similar consonantal form of the name. But if this identification is correct, then both the writers of the OT as well as pharaoh Shoshenq I have misinterpreted the character of the site, since the occupied area is too small for a larger conglomerate of houses, let alone a royal city. Rather, the site appears to be a regional and interregional cultic place of gathering.

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Figure 19 (above). Front and back of a clay bulla with a cuneiform inscription. Photograph by Lucas Petit.

Figure 20 (below). Two female figurines from a layer below the Iron Age IIC sanctuary. Photograph by Yousef al-Zu’bi.



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