

## House V12 in the Nabataean village of Dharih. First attempt to interpret the remains

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### Abstract

Two houses were excavated in the hamlet of Khirbet edh-Dharih (Central Jordan), dated to the Nabataean-Roman period. This paper focuses on the smallest housing complex, called V12, located at the southern end of the village. It includes two semi-detached houses, linked to each other by a common wall. Each house is composed of two rooms and a courtyard. The other complex house, V1, despite its being larger and much more lavish, shows the same general layout as V12. Through an analysis of the architecture and comparison with more recent examples of dwellings in the Near East, our aim is to explore possible interpretations regarding this layout which may reflect an ancient vernacular building tradition.

**Keywords:** Khirbet edh-Dharih, architecture, dwelling, building tradition.

### Introduction

Two houses were excavated in the ancient village of Dharih, dated to the Nabataean and Roman periods. The aim of this paper is to present the domestic complex V12 which is located at the southern end of the village (Fig. 1). Regarding both its size and facilities, this domestic complex is not so impressive, and it does not bear very remarkable features. Its study is nevertheless important for two reasons. On the one hand, it is, in some ways, one of the only excavated domestic complexes of the Nabataean-Early Roman period belonging to a hamlet and is therefore not in an urban context. On the other hand, it seems to have been built following a local, vernacular, building tradition (Kolb 2007), not much documented elsewhere.

After a brief presentation of the main features of Dharih, Domestic complex V12 will be described, and parallels will be sought in order to better assess its architectural value and suggest the way it was used.

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## The site

Dharih is located on the stepped slopes overlooking the King's Highway, on the southern bank of Wadi el-Hasa, in the broad Wadi el-Laaban valley, only 7 kilometers south of the Nabataean sanctuary of Khirbet et-Tannur. It consists of: a Nabataean sanctuary, with a temple preceded by several courtyards, which were uncovered between 1984 and 2008; a small village standing on the hill above the sanctuary; a necropolis. François Villeneuve and Zeidoun al-Muheisen found evidence of an occupation from as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium (Ancient Bronze Age), but the main period of development of the sanctuary and the village occurred at the beginning of the 1st c. AD and continued until the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Villeneuve and al-Muheisen 2008). The northern *temenos* and the temple were re-occupied between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. A small Christian community built a village within the ancient *temenos*, with a church inside the temple (Villeneuve 2011).

The ancient village stands on the hill above the sanctuary. Almost twelve structures were identified and four buildings were excavated in the 1980s and 1990s. Two are oil presses<sup>3</sup> and two are domestic complexes. The largest of the latter, called V1, is almost 900 square meters, and stands at the northern extremity of the hill, directly overlooking the sanctuary. It has been described as a stately house, having interesting and luxurious features.<sup>4</sup> During three seasons (1991-1993), Laïla Nehmé excavated the housing complex called V12, which was located at the other, southern, end of the village. It is the last building identified on this side (Fig. 2).

## House V12

Contrary to Housing complex V1, V12 appears as an ordinary building. It consists of two houses (1 and 2) adjoining one another and covering an area of around 420 square meters (Fig. 3). Two separate entrances led to two large courtyards, each one giving access to a couple of square rooms (A-B in house 1 and C-D in house 2) built along one side of the courtyard. Due to the slope, the circulation level of the northern house (no. 1) is almost 1 meter lower than the southern house (no. 2) (Fig. 4). Houses 1 and 2 can be associated because they share a wall and are isolated from the other buildings in the village.

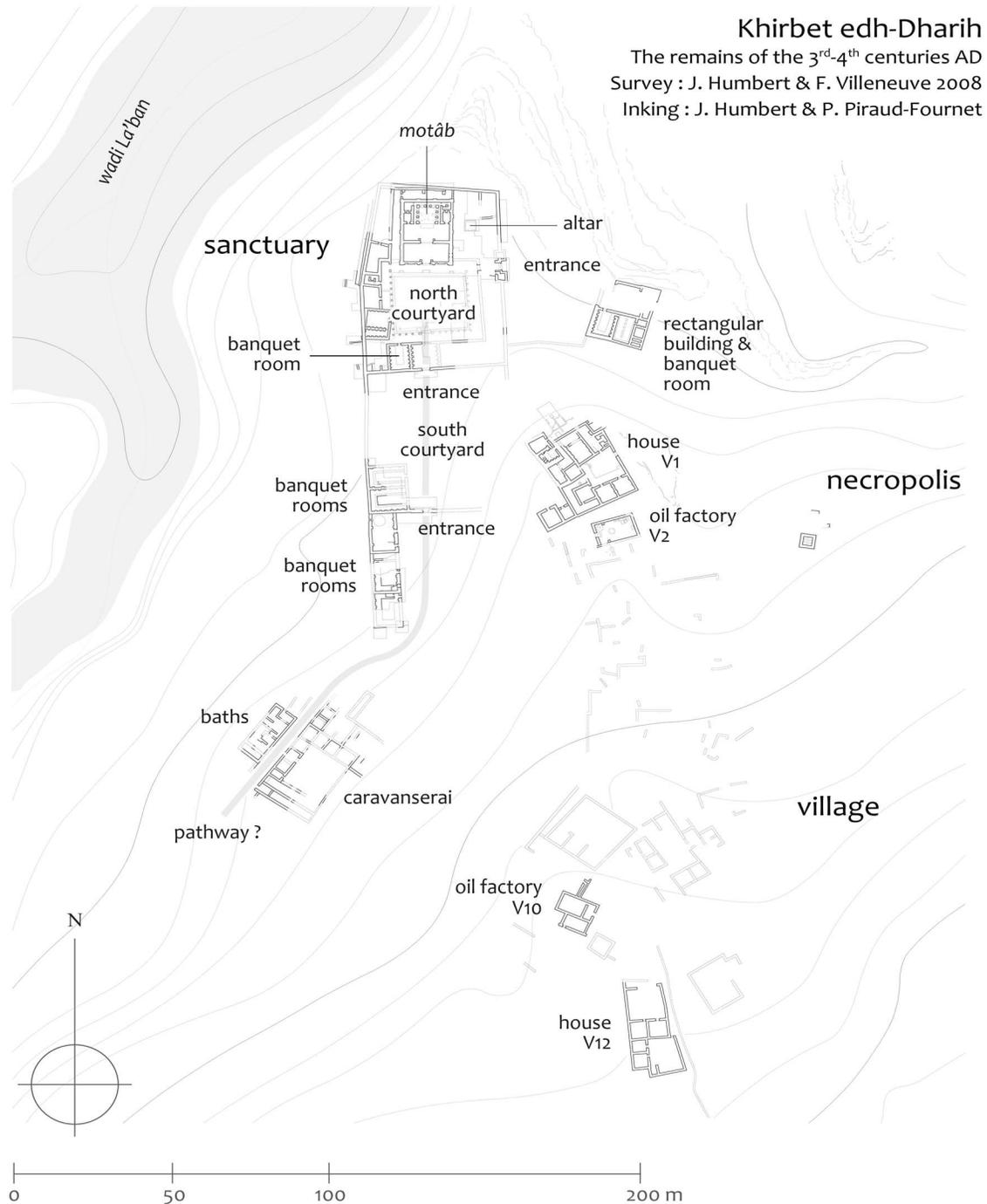
Based on the survey of the walls and the observation of their construction techniques, it appears that Room A (30 m<sup>2</sup>) was built first. Room B (30 m<sup>2</sup>), and the

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<sup>3</sup> Oil press V10 was excavated in 1985 by F. Villeneuve (Villeneuve 1988 and Villeneuve 1990). Oil press V2 was uncovered in 1996 by the University of Yarmouk. P. Piraud-Fournet completed the plan of the structures and presented their architecture and their operating mode during ISHAJ 2013. This study is still unpublished.

<sup>4</sup> It was excavated by Zeidoun al-Muheisen and the students of the University of Yarmouk between 1992 and 1996 (Villeneuve and al-Muheisen 2000). P. Piraud-Fournet completed the survey of the building in 2007 and presented the study of its architecture and a proposition of reconstruction (al-Muheisen and Piraud-Fournet 2013). In May 2013, she carried out excavations and the results of this study are forthcoming in the next SHAJ (2022).

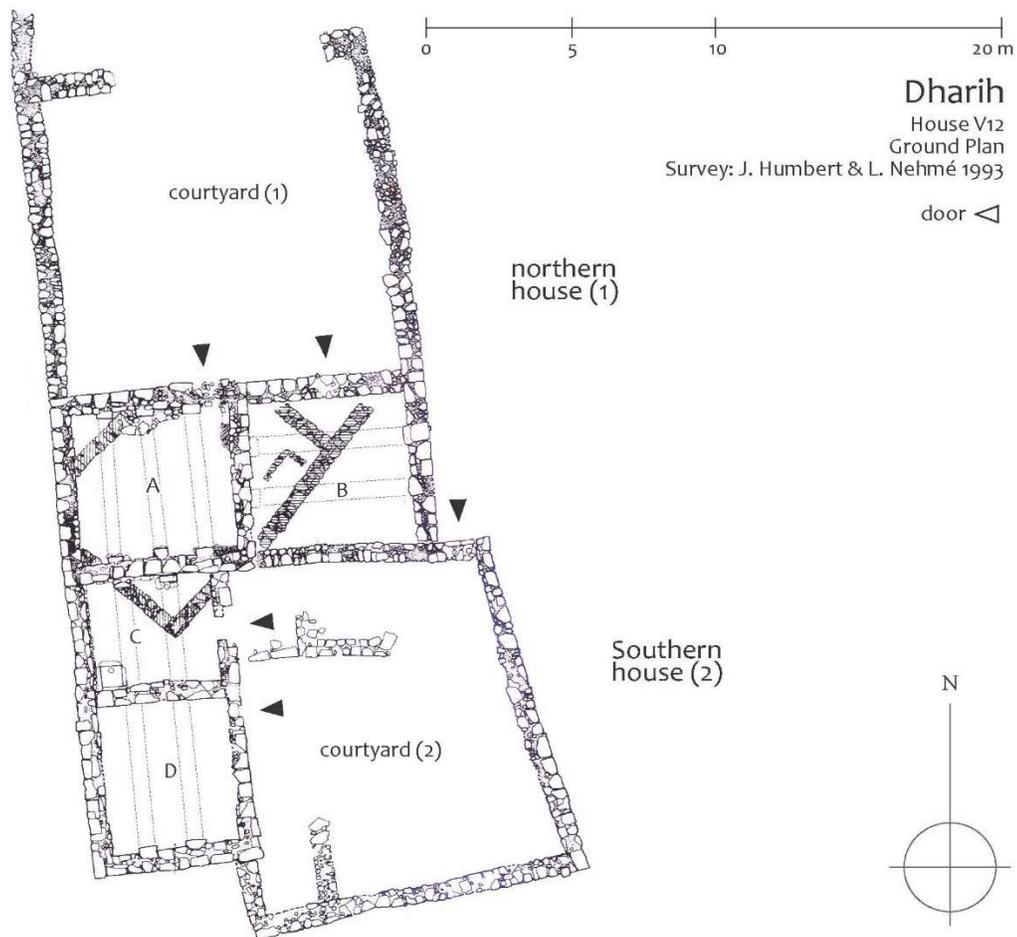
wall of the enclosure of the northern courtyard abut the walls of Room A. Similarly, the walls of Room C (17 m<sup>2</sup>) were also built Against Room A. The wall of the southern courtyard abuts the wall of Room D (24 m<sup>2</sup>). Thanks to these observations and to the position of the entrance of the courtyard of house 2, we can assume that the construction of the southern house 2 is more recent than house 1.



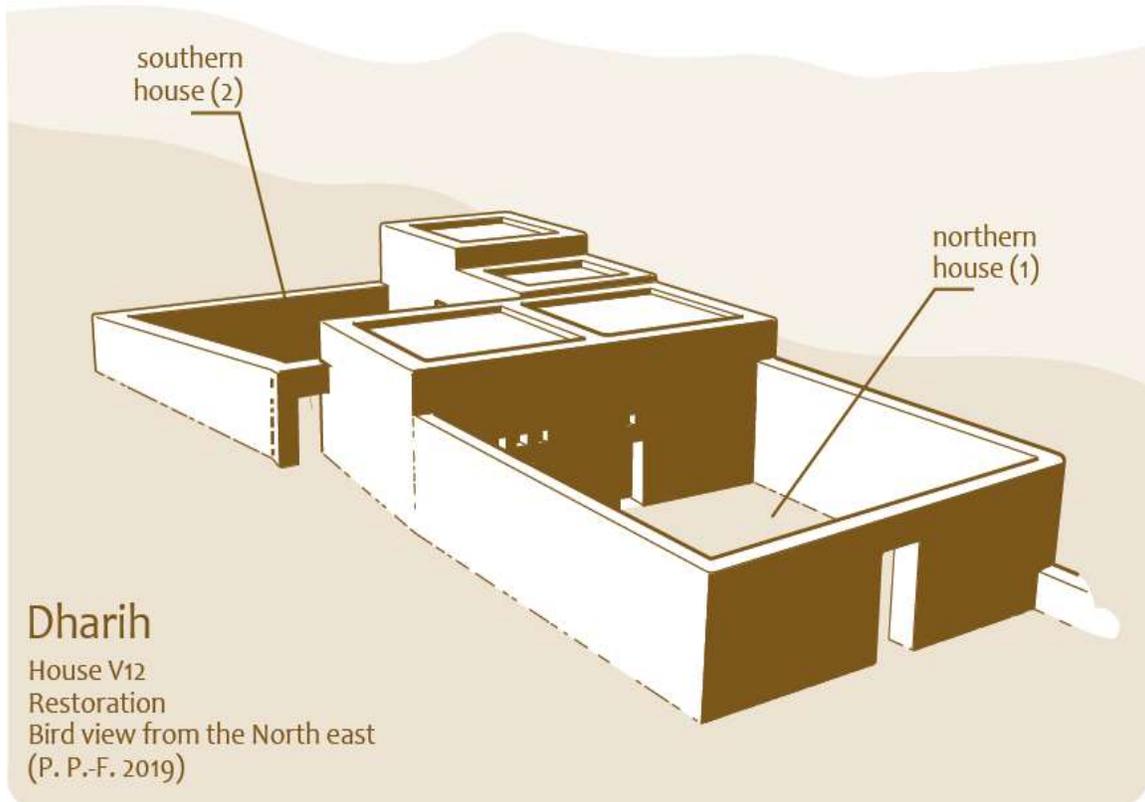
**Figure 1. Plan of the ancient site of Dharikh (Survey: F. Villeneuve & J. Humbert 2004).**



**Figure 2. View from the south of the village. In the foreground, the remains of Housing Complex V12 (Photo: P. Piraud-Fournet 2017).**



**Figure 3. Plan of Housing Complex V12 (Survey: J. Humbert & L. Nehmé 1993).**



**Figure 4. Housing Complex V12. Reconstruction proposal (Drawing: P. Piraud-Fournet 2019).**

The whole housing complex was built over the remains of an older building the function of which was not identified. The pottery uncovered in its foundation trench dates back to the Iron Age.

All the walls are uniformly built of limestone ashlar and are double-faced (Fig. 5). The blocks are roughly dressed and the height of the courses is more or less regular. The external face of the walls is more carefully built than the internal face. The presence between the blocks of numerous stone flakes is very characteristic of the construction of both the south and north houses of this building. As far as the floors are concerned, the remains do not show evidence of a pavement. The floor of the rooms and of the courtyards was probably made of earth.

In the walls of the four rooms are the remains of buttresses. These were the support of the arches which supported the roofing system, many voussoirs of which were found in the destruction levels inside the rooms. We also can assign to the roofing system the numerous stone slabs uncovered during the excavation, and restore a flat stone ceiling. The span between the arches is narrow. It ranges mostly from 0.80 m to 1.30 m, and may reach 1.80 m. The stone slabs were supported by the arches. The best preserved slabs found in the destruction levels reached at least 1.36 m in length (Fig. 6).

Unlike the ordinary ashlar of the walls, all the elements which belonged to the arches, as well as the stones forming the doorframes, were carefully finished.

In Rooms B, C and D, the arches are parallel to the entrance wall. In Room A, they are perpendicular to this front wall (Fig. 3). This difference can be explained if we assume that when Room A was built, the builders had already in mind the building of Room C of House 2 south of it. The arches of Room A could have been intended to take the lateral thrust of the arches of Room C which abuts Room A. In any case, the similarity between the building methods used in both houses suggests that their construction was more or less contemporary.

One special facility only was identified: a basin which stands in the southwest corner of Room C. Because of the *cupula* at the bottom to collect the waste, it is tempting to interpret it as a water installation (Fig. 7). However, there is no evidence of a water discharge hole and it was discovered full of pottery material. Its last use was perhaps as a cupboard for tableware. This basin is built of five slabs carefully cut and well arranged: one for the bottom and four lying on their edge to form the walls. The northern slab appeared at the time of excavation higher than the others, but the other walls could have also been higher, making the basin the bottom of a kind of cupboard. The rooms probably had windows placed high up to provide ventilation while preserving the privacy of the inhabitants. The chronology of its construction, occupation, and destruction is provided by the pottery study. This material corresponds to common dishes, intended for everyday use, which confirms the domestic function of these buildings. The pottery found in the construction and occupation levels dates to the first century AD while the pottery associated with the destruction levels is dated to the third or early fourth century AD (Durand in this volume).



**Figure 5. Housing Complex V12. Southern House (2), external faces of Rooms C and D, from the East (Photo: P. Piraud-Fournet 2017).**



**Figure 6. Housing Complex V12. Roof slabs (Photo: P. Piraud-Fournet 2017).**



**Fig. 7. Housing Complex V12. Southern House (2), the basin in Room C (Photo: L. Nehmé 1992).**

### **Attempt of interpretation**

The study of V12 could provide an opportunity to address several fields of research regarding domestic architecture and building techniques. It would for instance be interesting to compare the building methods used in the different buildings of the village, such as the two oil presses V2 and V10, and the northern house V1. This would probably give us some chronological information and the possibility of highlighting improvements. Besides, since the small Christian community which built a new village in the courtyard of the sanctuary settled there from the 6th to the 9th centuries (Villeneuve 2011), it is possible to undertake a comparison between the features and construction methods used in the ancient hamlet occupied during the 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries and those used in the Byzantine and Early Islamic hamlet built in the ancient *temenos*. This, however, is not the aim of this paper.

The issue we would like to address here concerns the interpretation of the layout of the ancient houses in Dharih, as well as the social or practical aspects which linked Houses 1 and 2.

Two housing complexes, V1 and V12, were excavated. According to the pottery material uncovered, their construction and occupation look contemporary. Even if the description of the facilities shows a big difference of status between the two, the similarity of their general pattern is striking. Indeed, the lavish housing complex V1 (Fig. 8) was, very much like the ordinary V12 one, a combination of two adjoining houses, each one provided with rooms opening onto one courtyard. Their construction was based on the same pattern: two independent parts (north and south) each including rooms and one courtyard, that are attached and

associated with each other by a common wall. The south part of V1 is similar to the smaller complex V12, since it presents – among others – two main rooms along one side of a courtyard. This layout defines a basic and vernacular module which can be adapted according to the prestige of the house. In both complexes, V1 and V12, the rooms were built on the southern and western sides of the courtyard, and they opened on the north or on the east. There is no evidence of porticoes,<sup>5</sup> but the location of the rooms provided shadow to the courtyard during most of the day.

Regarding the meaning of the association of two houses in one housing complex, different hypotheses are suggested by more recent examples of dwellings. Near Eastern Late Antique and Early Medieval houses provide examples of semi-detached houses surrounding one shared courtyard. These apartments can include only one room, or one large room associated with smaller rooms. Such a layout is for instance recognizable in the Hellenistic and Roman periods of the urban houses of Dura-Europos (Saliou 1997), in the Byzantine “Maison des chapiteaux à consoles” in Apamea (Syria) (Balty *et al.* forthcoming), and in House XVIII at Umm el-Jimal (Jordan) (De Vries 1998, fig. 139). For the palaces of the Umayyad period (7-8th centuries), these apartments are called *bayt* (Genequand 2012). A scroll (*P. Dura* 19) shows that in some examples at least, ancient houses at Dura Europos were owned by groups of brothers (Saliou 1997). A. Northedge assumed that the same could be true for the Umayyad period. Each *bayt* could have belonged to one part of an extended family, although the hypothesis that these apartments belonged to different families sharing the same courtyard must not be excluded (Northedge 2000). This theory is supported by ethno-archaeological studies made in Syria, Jordan, and Petra (Francfort and Aurenche 2012, Francfort and Aurenche 2012, Braemer *et al.* 1999, Ohannessian-Charpin 1986, Bienkowski 1985 and 1989). They show that in modern times, a housing complex can be shared by the members of an extended family (Ajluni 1985), such as a group of brothers (and wives and children), or a father’s family and one of his sons’ family etc (Fig. 9).

In V12, House 1 and House 2 share a wall, and both their dimensions and layout are quite similar. We can therefore suggest that they were owned by two groups of persons with a more or less social equal status, probably connected by blood ties. In an urban setting, where there was not enough space, families shared a single courtyard. In a rural setting such as Dharih, it was normal that each family had its own courtyard, but some connected families linked their houses in order to share household and economic activities.

Furthermore, according to ethno-archaeological studies, it appears that Eastern houses have two main functions: housing the family and sheltering its goods (Fig. 10). Therefore, when a house has only two rooms, one is for the family (and the reception of guests), and the other is for the cattle, food, agricultural tools etc.

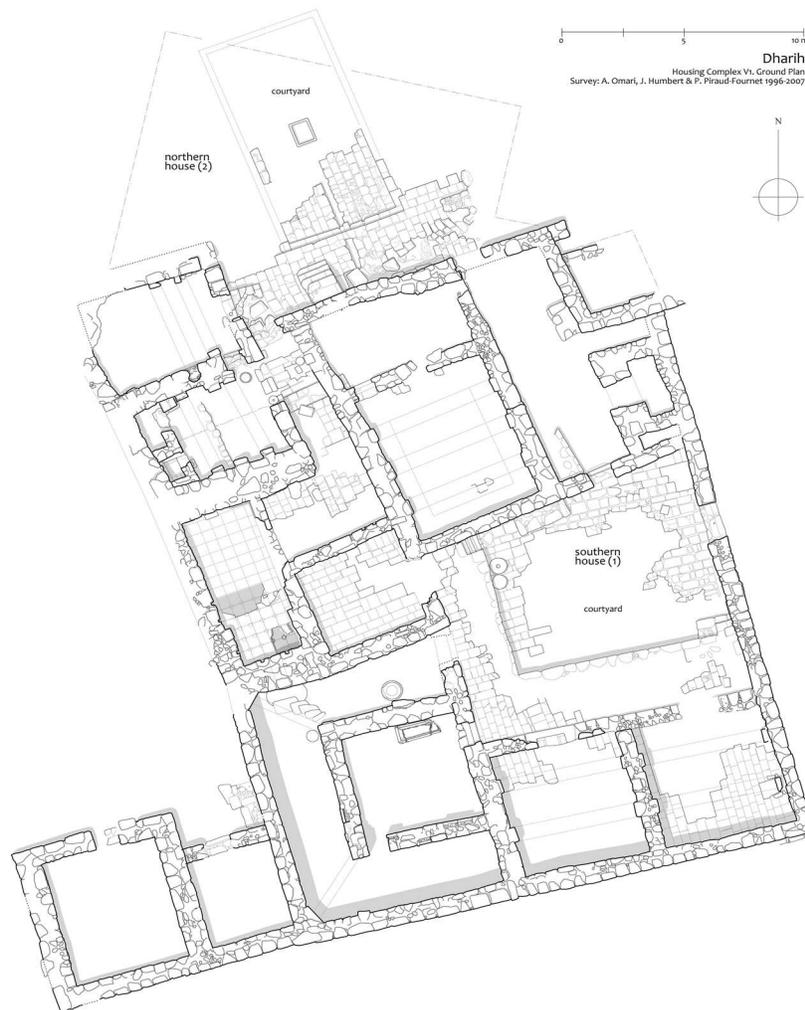
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<sup>5</sup> Actually, there are some remains of one portico, in V1. It consists of some blocks (small drums, base and capital) no longer in their original place. We do not yet know where this portico could have been.

Once again, this principle may be applied to V12. In each part, one room may have housed the family while the other sheltered goods and cattle.

The position of the door in each wall is another clue for interpretation. A door located on the side of a room provides the occupants with more privacy than a door located in the centre. A room with a central access would therefore be more appropriate for reception or storage. Each of the two houses has one room served by a door in the centre of the wall (possibly dedicated to the service), and one room served by an off-centre door (dedicated to housing the inhabitants).

This study is still ongoing. It will focus in the future on a comparison between the lavish housing complex V1 and the unpretentious housing complex V12, and between the architectural characteristics of the Dharih housing and the dwelling features of other Nabataean-Roman sites.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 8. Plan of Housing Complex V1 (Survey: A. Omari & J. Humbert 1996, P. Piraud-Fournet 2007)**

<sup>6</sup> This will be exposed in the proceedings of the last SHAJ (Piraud-Fournet forthcoming).

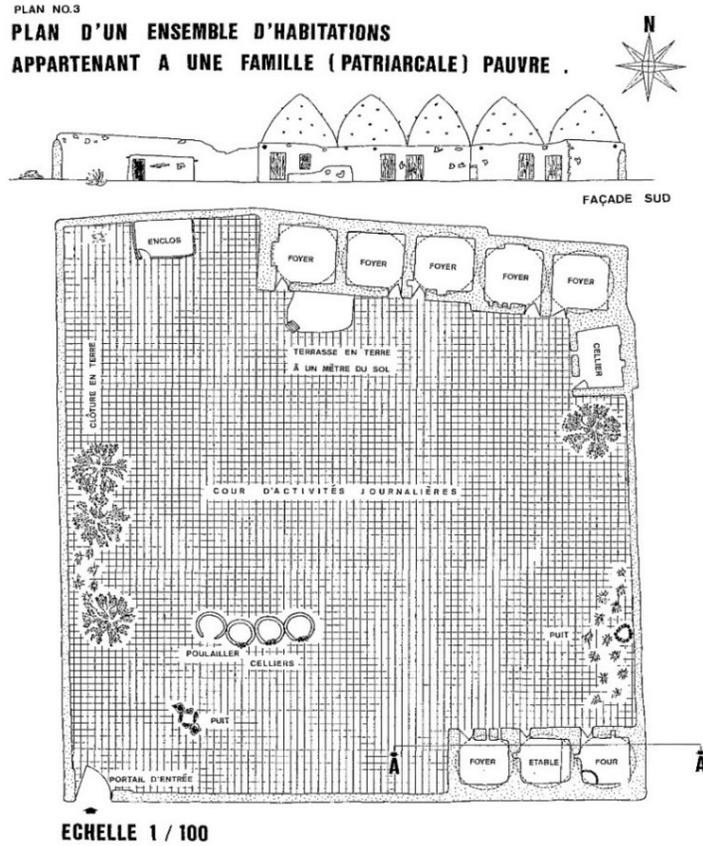


Figure 9. Twentieth century house in northern Syria  
 (From Ajluni 1985, p. 41, plan 3).

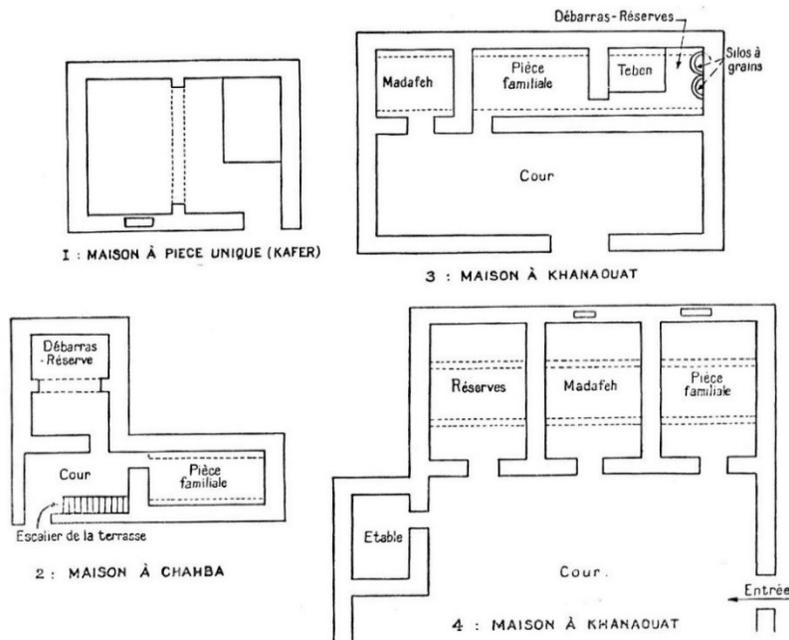


FIG. 3. — Le plan de la maison druze

Figure 10. Modern houses in southern Syria  
 (From Dufourg 1951, p. 416, fig. 3).

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## **Contributors**

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PhD in archaeology and an architect, specializing in ancient architecture and settlement structures in the Near East and focusing on architectural analysis, building archaeology, reconstruction and ancient dwellings, sanctuaries, burial architecture and oil presses. From 2006 to 2012, she worked for the scientific archaeology department of Ifpo in Damascus, then in Amman. After one year at ACOR (Jordan) as a Temple of the Winged Lions Publication Fellow, she is now in Paris as a Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions Research Fellow.

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## المنزل رقم (V12) في قرية خربة الذريح النبطية تفسيرٌ أوليٌّ للقي الأثرية

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### ملخص

تُقب في موقع خربة الذريح (وسط الأردن) منزلان أُرخا إلى الفترة النبطية – الرومانية. وبناءً عليه، تركّز هذه الدراسة على المُجمّع السكني الأصغر الذي يحمل الرمز V12، الذي يقع في طرف القرية الجنوبي. ويتضمّن منزلين شبه منفصلين يرتبطان مع بعضهما بجدار مشترك، ويتألف كلٌّ منهما من غرفتين وفناء، أمّا المُجمّع السكني الآخر (V1)، وعلى الرّغم من أنه أكبر وأكثر فخامة، فإنّ مخطّطه العام نفس مخطط V12. ومن خلال تحليل العمارة والمقارنة مع أمثلة على المساكن من فترات أحدث في الشرق الأوسط، فإنّ هدفنا يتمثّل في الحصول على تفسيرات محتملة متعلّقة بمخطّط المنازل، الذي من الممكن أنه يمثل تقليدًا أو طرازًا معماريًا قديمًا خاصًا بالمنطقة.

الكلمات الدالة: خربة الذريح، العمارة، مسكن، طراز معماري.

1 مركز ابحاث ماري سكلودوفسكا كوري، باريس، فرنسا؛ 2 المركز الوطني الفرنسي للابحاث العلمية ، ابحاث الشرق الاوسط ، باريس ، فرنسا.

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