In the winter of 1988, while surveying Wadi Shīreh in the Ḥismā (or Wadi Ramm) Desert of southern Jordan, the ‘Aqaba-Ma’an Archaeological and Epigraphic Survey, directed by the late William Jobling of the University of Sydney, discovered a rare early Islamic open-air mosque in association with several exceptional early Islamic (Kufic) inscriptions, one of which gives a date of 109 H (727/728 CE). While a number of scholars have since commented on the site’s interesting inscriptions, there has been little discussion of the mosque within its broader archaeological context or immediate landscape setting. This article evaluates the mosque, together with several associated buildings discovered in Shīreh, in relation to similar early Islamic open-air mosques and marginal desert settlements known from the southern Levant. Following a review and analysis of the site’s intriguing inscriptions, the authors then offer tentative conclusions regarding the site’s function as a desert waystation during the time of the Umayyads.

Location and history of research

The early Islamic mosque, settlement, and inscriptions presented here are found in Wadi Shīreh, a narrow and fairly insubstantial western tributary of the much broader and longer Wadi Rabigh canyon of southern Jordan that descends from the heights of the Ras en Naqab escarpment to the sandy plains and valleys of the Ḥismā Desert (Figure 1). The generally north-south oriented Shīreh tributary is surrounded by the high, rocky walls of Jabal Rabigh, the broad and flat-topped sandstone mesa (or inselberg) that comprises the western flank of Wadi Rabigh. Starting from a height of nearly 1050 m, the wadi initially flows from Jabal Rabigh as a series of natural cascade pools formed in the surrounding bedrock before quickly dropping in elevation to the relatively flat, boulder-strewn valley below (c. 930 m). The mosque site and most of the Kufic inscriptions are located in the southern part of Wadi Shīreh, along the west bank of the current wadi bed and a little less than 0.5 km from the wadi’s entrance at
Wadi Rabigh (Figure 2). Several dozen other structures are found scattered throughout the wadi, along with scores of Hismaic inscriptions and signed rock drawings dating to the Nabataean period (1st century BC/1st century AD). (For more on the region’s Nabataean and Hismaic inscriptions, see Corbett 2012).

Wadi Shīreh, like many of the wadis in the northern Ḥismā, benefits from the infrequent but powerful winter rains that fall along the escarpment and the broad, flat plateaus of the region’s inselbergs. During winter rain events, runoff waters flow from the gently eastward sloping Jabal Rabigh into the successive cascade pools that descend into Wadi Shīreh. The rain water that fills these natural pools, which vary greatly in size but are often quite large, can remain for several months and were clearly the primary reason the lower Shīreh valley became an attractive area for settlement across the millennia. Their importance is indicated not only by the numerous structures and carvings of various type and date found throughout the wadi, but also a well-worn path up the slopes of Jabal Rabigh that gives access to the largest and most accessible pools.

The mosque, a few adjacent structures, and a number of associated Kufic inscriptions were first recorded by the late William Jobling during the ‘Aqaba-Ma’an Archaeological and Epigraphic Survey (AMAES). Jobling identified the mosque during the survey’s eighth season (January–February 1988) and made preliminary notes and comments about the discovery in several published reports (Jobling 1989a; 1989b; 1993). Unfortunately, Jobling died before he was able to complete the survey’s final publication, but his preliminary reports generated additional scholarly interest in
An Umayyad Era Mosque and Desert Waystation from Wadi Shīreh, Southern Jordan

the early Islamic remains found in Wadi Shīreh. Alison McQuitty, former director of the British School at Amman, visited the site and photographed the dated Kufic inscription found on the hill to the west of the mosque (WS006, see below), a reading, translation, and analysis of which was later published by Robert Hoyland (1997). The site was again visited in 1999 by Jumaʿah Karīm of the University of Mutah, who published pictures, readings, and detailed commentaries of the two dated inscriptions (WS005 and WS006, see below) found in the mosque’s vicinity (Karīm 2002). In 2003–2004, author Firās al-Bqāʾīn, then a graduate student, visited Wadi Shīreh several times to record the mosque, its inscriptions, and adjacent structures as part of his University of Jordan master’s thesis (al-Bqāʾīn 2004). Shortly thereafter, the site and its inscriptions were discussed by Sulayman al-Farajat and Sāmī al-Nawafleh (2005) in a report on the Kufic inscriptions found in the Disa-Ramm region. The site was also briefly visited and photographed by author Glenn Corbett in March 2006 as part of the Wadi Ḥafir Petroglyph Survey (Corbett 2011), and then again by Corbett and al-Bqāʾīn in August 2012, when, unfortunately, significant damage to the site was first noted (see “Destroying Wadi Ramm’s Islamic Past,” pp. 120–121).

Given its early date and marginal setting, the Shīreh mosque has often been referenced in scholarly discussions of early Islamic settlement and religious architecture in the desert margins of the southern Levant (Avni 1994, 94; Genequand 2002, 587; Haiman 1995, 37; Hamarneh 2010, 99; Johns 1999, 81; Schick 1994, 142, 147; 1995, 142, 181), although there has as yet been no thorough discussion of the site and its historical and/or archaeological context.
Description of the mosque

The Shīreh mosque is rectangular in plan, measuring 12.50 m x 7.25 m, and oriented in a north-south direction (Figure 3). It is a simple, austere construction built of local sandstone boulders, presumably taken from the surrounding boulder fields that litter the wadi slopes. While a few of the stones show signs of having been roughly shaped (or specifically chosen for their shape), most are irregular field stones, ranging in size from 50–70 cm long and 20–50 cm wide. While the structure’s northern and western walls have been only partially preserved, the southern and eastern walls are largely intact and show a clear double-row construction, in which small field stones and rubble were used as constructional fill between two rows of larger stones that define the walls’ inner and outer faces (Figure 4, top). The walls show no sign of having been higher than a single course, which suggests the mosque’s interior may have been open, or that it may have been roofed with a cloth or tent-like covering (cf. Helms 1990, 76).

The mosque’s most defining feature is its southern wall (measuring 7.25 m long and 0.90 m wide), in the center of which are three taller stones inscribed on their inner faces with Kufic inscriptions (and several older Hismaic inscriptions) (Figure 4, bottom). The stones, which together span 2.25 m and stand 0.60–0.70 m tall, appear to define the direction of prayer (qibla). The wall and the three stones at its center are oriented almost directly south (towards Mecca), indicating that this was understood to be the direction of prayer at the time.1 The stones’ inscriptions are described in detail below, but it is important to note here that two of the inscriptions (WS001 and WS003) clearly refer to the structure as a masjid.2

The mosque’s interior is divided into two areas separated by a poorly preserved east-west partition wall. The first and better preserved is the mosque’s roughly square prayer area (A), which measures 6.60 m by 7.25 m and was clearly focused on the three inscribed stones of the structure’s southern wall. While the northern partition wall has only been preserved to a length of 2.10 m, the room’s eastern, southern, and western walls are all easily discernible, although part of the western wall has been obscured due to a later animal pen construction. The second and less well preserved area is the mosque’s northern courtyard (B), which is evidenced by the northern continuation of the eastern wall for 5.40 m beyond the line of the partition wall. At the northern end of the structure, this wall begins to curve to the west, but unfortunately later constructions have completely demolished and/or obscured the entire western half of the courtyard, including any sign of the mosque’s entrance.

No formal excavations have been carried out in the Shīreh mosque or its vicinity, although Jobling noted that surface sherding around the site indicated “pottery

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1. In his initial publications (1989a, 21; 1989b, 254), Jobling mistakenly stated that the mosque and its qibla wall were oriented to the east.
2. The Aramaic word *mesgida* was already used by the Nabataeans to denote standing cultic stones or altars and, at least in one Nabataean inscription, a built sanctuary or structure (cf. Healey 2001, 78; Littmann 1914, 73; Texidor 1977, 85–86). It is possible, therefore, that early open-air mosques, where standing stones (*ansab*) rather than a traditional mihrab niche are used to indicate qibla (as at Shīreh), may represent a transitional form between the sacred spaces and concepts of pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia (Avni 2007, 133).
Figure 3. Photo (top) and plan (bottom) of the Wadi Shīreh mosque (SH01). The plan shows the mosque’s prayer hall (A) and courtyard (B), as well as the position of stones inscribed with Kufic inscriptions (shaded yellow). Plan by Jafar al-Bustanji, courtesy Firās al-Bqā‘īn.
Figure 4. The mosque’s east wall shows a well-built, double-row construction (top photo), while in the center of the mosque’s southern qibla wall are three upright stones inscribed with Kufic inscriptions (bottom photo), two of which identify the structure as a masjid.
from the Chalcolithic through to the Mameluk [sic] period” (Jobling 1993, 244). In the upcast from recent looting trenches dug in and around the site, no ceramics or material culture were noted and no stratified deposits were visible. In addition to the inscriptions identified on the mosque’s interior, there was also found a short Kufic inscription (WS004, discussed below) carved into one of the outward facing stones of the mosque’s eastern wall. Less than 10 m south of the mosque is an isolated boulder carved with several lines of Arabic text (WS005), and about 50 m away, on the boulder-covered slope west of the mosque, is the lengthy dated Kufic inscription (WS006) first published by Hoyland (1997).

Additional structures identified in Wadi Shīreh

In addition to the mosque, Wadi Shīreh features a number of buildings and enclosures. Among these is a series of circular stone enclosures found along the eastern bank of the wadi, built amid the boulders of a flat, relatively broad bend near the wadi’s northern end and the Shīreh cascades (Figure 5). There are carved numerous Hismaic inscriptions and drawings in and around these structures, and Jobling (1989, 254) also noted examples of various stone tools, including large grinding tables still visible on the surface. A well-worn Kufic inscription (WS008) was identified and photographed among one of these circles as well.

Along Wadi Shīreh’s western bank and in the general vicinity of the mosque building, however, are other structures that seem to be quite similar in construction to the mosque. Most notable is a rectangular, well-defined structure 100 m north of the
mosque (SH05) with walls built using a double-row construction technique (Figure 6). The east-west oriented building (measuring 6.90 m x 3.80 m) has a clearly defined and well-built doorway and threshold positioned just off center in its eastern wall. Though the walls are preserved only to a height of a single course, the outward facing rows (especially at the structure’s corners and entrance) were built with large stone blocks with flat faces, some of which may have been worked to produce their regular shape.

Figure 6. Photo (top) and plan (bottom) of a well-built rectilinear structure (SH05) located about 100 m north of the mosque. Plan by Jafar al-Bustanji, courtesy Firās al-Bqāʿīn.
Another smaller, roughly square structure (5.0 m x 4.50 m), again built with double-row construction, was identified about 20 m south of the mosque (SH06) (Figure 7). Although the building is poorly preserved, with nothing remaining of its western wall, its square plan is easily discernible, as are the large stones (many with flat faces) used in its construction. Located about 30 m to the north of the mosque is another poorly preserved structure of double-row construction (SH02), which appears to have been built with straight walls on the west (c. 6.0 m long) and south (c. 6.80 m long).
long) but a curved, S-shape wall to the east (c. 8.50 m long); no northern wall for the structure can be discerned (Figure 8). Given the building’s poor preservation and awkward shape, it’s possible that the eastern wall was modified or rebuilt at a later time. One short Kufic inscription (WS009) was carved on the inner face of a large stone located near the junction of the building’s southern and eastern walls.

While only systematic archaeological excavation will be able to confirm the association and dating of these rectilinear structures, their overall similarity in plan and construction technique, together with the fact that they are quite different from the more common and roughly built stone circles and enclosures found in the wadi, suggests they are contemporary and most likely part of a small, purpose-built settlement focused on the mosque. What is more, these structures tend to be oriented towards or relative to the cardinal points of the compass, a common feature of Umayyad-era buildings and settlements.3

3. The authors would like to thank one of the article’s reviewers for bringing our attention to this interesting aspect of Umayyad-era architecture.
The Shirere mosque and settlement in context

As many have already noted (Avni 1994, 94; Haiman 1995, 37; Johns 1999, 81), the Shirere mosque building itself is best understood in the context of the now quite widely attested phenomenon of early Islamic desert mosques (sometimes alternatively interpreted as muṣalla, or simple places of prayer; see Genequand 2002, 587–588; Hamarneh 2010, 99; Schick 1995, 142), rather broadly dated to the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods (7th–8th centuries AD). The most widely cited cases of such early desert mosques were identified in the central and southern Negev (Avni 1994), although such features have also been discovered in the southern Wadi Arabah (Israel 2009; Sharon et al. 1996) and in Jordan’s eastern desert near the sites of ar-Risha (Helms 1990, 73–82) and Wadi Salma (al-Jbour 2001, 673). While there is considerable variability in the details of mosque construction and design, most are generally simple, austere structures that are square, rectilinear, or ovoid in plan. Their walls, usually no more than a single course high, are most often built using two rows of rough field stones filled with stone and earth rubble, leading most to conclude that the mosques were unroofed and, therefore, either open to the sky (Avni 1994, 83–84; 2007) or partially tented (Helms 1990, 76). The structures typically feature a south facing qibla wall and have either a curved mihrab niche or, more rarely, like the Shirere mosque, one or more standing stones that indicate the direction of prayer. Although a few show evidence of internal partition walls, most are devoid of specific features or adornments, excepting the Kufic inscriptions that are attested at select sites, specifically Shirere, Wadi Salma (al-Jbour 2001), and Sede Boqer (Avni 2007, 132). Given their desert location and simple design and construction, such mosques are almost always attributed to the nomadic and semi-nomadic populations who inhabited the desert fringes and trade corridors of the southern Levant.

Moving beyond this basic categorization of the Shirere mosque, however, the following discussion seeks to place not just the mosque itself but the entire Shirere settlement—presumed to be contemporary with the mosque—in its broader historical, archaeological, and geographic context.

The Ḥismā and Southern Jordan

According to Arab tradition, the Ḥismā was home to the Arabian tribe of Judham at the eve of Islam. Medieval geographers like Yaqut, Hamdani, Bakri, and Idrisi record that Judham’s territory originally ranged from Tabuk in the south to the Ma’an plateau (Udhruh) in the north and was centered on the mountainous desert areas of the Ḥismā and Iram (Ramm) east of Ayla (al-Wohaibi 1978, 50; Gil 1984, 213; Hasson 1995, 11–13; cf. Musil 1926, 71, 316). During the Byzantine period, while clients of the Ghassanids, the Judham gained notoriety as tax collectors who patrolled the major routes between the Hejaz and southern Palestine (Shahid 2010, 41–42), a strategic

4. It should be noted that generally larger and more formalized early mosque structures have been identified within or adjacent to several of the Umayyad era desert palaces (qusūr), including al-Hallabat (Bisheh 1980, 73–75), al-Qaṣtal (Addison 2000), Umm al-Walid (Haldimann 1992, 307–311), al-Ḥumayma (Foote 2007, 463), Qusayr Amra (Genequand 2002), and Qasr Mshatta (Creswell 1979, 83–84), though in most cases these structures appear to be somewhat different from the simpler desert mosques discussed here.
position the tribe may have further exploited during and after the time of the Islamic conquest (Hasson 1995, 19). Perhaps because of their strategic position, the tribe’s influence increased dramatically during the time of the Umayyads, and its leading members were eventually given de facto control over the administrative districts of both Palestine and Jordan (Gil 1984, 214; Hasson 1995, 19–20).

Despite Judham’s prominence during the earliest years of Islam, however, little archaeological or epigraphic evidence from the Ḥismā can clearly be associated with this tribe. Indeed, clear early Islamic remains of any kind are generally lacking throughout the Ḥismā and, as such, there is little immediate archaeological context for understanding the early Muslim community the Shīreh mosque and its associated structures were intended to serve. The region’s only major early Islamic site, Ḫumayma (c. 30 km northwest of Wadi Rabigh), was the residence and agricultural estate for several generations of the Abbasid family before they launched the revolution of 749/750 AD that overthrew the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus (Schick 2007). While it is certainly notable that the Shīreh mosque was presumably in use at the same time the Abbasids were in residence at Ḫumayma, neither archaeological nor epigraphic evidence suggests a clear connection between the residents of Ḫumayma and the tribes and families who occupied other parts of the Ḥismā. The same can be said for nearby ʿAqaba/Ayla (c. 65 km southwest of Rabigh), which, although a major port and new urban foundation (misr) of the early Islamic period with a significant industrial hinterland (Damgaard 2009; Whitcomb 1997), shows no clear relationship to the Ḥismā other than geographic proximity.

A notable bright spot in this otherwise bleak archaeological picture are the scores of undated Kufic inscriptions that have been recorded along the boulder-covered slopes and valleys of the Ḥismā. Broadly dated based on paleographic grounds to the 7th–9th centuries CE (1st–2nd centuries H), these texts typically give the names of early Muslims who, in their prayers to God, profess their allegiance to the faith, describe and name God’s many attributes, and even quote brief passages from the Quran (Hoyland 1997). While such inscriptions have been found in Wadi Ramm, Wadi Abu Rumman, Jabal Umm Ishrin, and Jabal Khaz Ali (al-Maʿānī and Karīm 2000; al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh 2005) and therefore provide clear evidence of early Muslim presence in the region, of particular relevance here are the more than two dozen Kufic inscriptions recorded in Wadi Ḥafīr, located at a distance of only 5 km from the Shīreh mosque and just a short climb over Jabal Rabigh (Corbett 2011, 238). Though still unpublished, nearly all of the Ḥafīr’s Kufic inscriptions are found in the northern reaches of the wadi where ascent to the Jabal Rabigh plateau on the east is much more gradual. Given this distribution, it seems likely, as Jobling suggested in his unpublished field notes, that there was a well-traveled route across Jabal Rabigh that connected Wadi Shīreh with the northern Ḥafīr and thus another potential route up the Ras en Naqab escarpment and on to the plateau.

Unlike traditional archaeological interpretations that have emphasized the lack of settlement across the greater part of the southern Jordanian plateau during the early Islamic period (MacDonald 2013; Schick 1994), there is growing evidence that the area extending from Wadi Hasa in the north to Ras en Naqab in the south continued
to be settled and exploited under Umayyad rule. This seems to have particularly been the case for the important regional centers of Udhruh and Maʿan, both of which are not only attested in historical and literary sources pertaining to the earliest years of Islamic expansion into Transjordan (Schick 1994, 148–149), but also show archaeological evidence of having been well-planned, extensive, and wealthy agricultural settlements of the Umayyad period (Genequand 2002; Killick 1983, 125; Abu Danah et al. 2010, 48). Similarly, survey and excavation have identified several substantial early Islamic settlement sites in and around the Petra/Wadi Musa region (ʿAmr et al. 2000, 241; ʿAmr and al-Momani 2001, 273), including continued use of the church and monastic complex at Jabal Harun (Gerber 2008; Silvonen 2013, 141–143), while refinements in ceramic chronologies are confirming that Byzantine settlements like Khirbet Dharih (Waliszewski 2001) and Gharandal (Walmsley and Grey 2001, 162–163) to the north continued to be occupied well into the Islamic period.

Unique among early Islamic sites in the Ḥismā and southern Jordan, the Wadi Shīreh settlement—built at the foot of one of the most accessible routes up the escarpment—therefore appears to have functioned primarily to facilitate movement between the desert regions of North Arabia and the more heavily settled agricultural areas of the plateau, particularly the important early Islamic towns of Maʿan and Udhruh. Before drawing firm conclusions, however, we first need to examine comparative examples of early Islamic desert settlements and mosques identified in neighboring regions.

**The Central and Southern Negev**

Additional insight into the nature of the Wadi Shīreh mosque and settlement can be gleaned from a number of early Islamic village and settlement sites discovered in the central and southern Negev. Across the Negev, archaeological survey and excavations have produced abundant evidence of substantial early Islamic settlement, ranging from large-scale farmsteads with sophisticated agricultural terracing and irrigation systems to smaller, semi-nomadic settlements located in more marginal areas (Avner 2008; Avner and Magness 1998; Avni 1994; Haiman 1995). Interestingly, many of these sites include both rectilinear (or “modular”) buildings and open-air mosques remarkably similar in layout and construction to those found in Shīreh.

Several early Islamic sites with open-air mosques, dated to the late 7th–8th centuries AD and identified as seasonal nomadic settlements, have been recorded in the Negev highlands south of the Makhtesh Ramon crater (Avni 1994; cf. Haiman 1995). The mosques share many features with the Shīreh mosque, including their modest size and design, double-row wall construction, and the use of upright stone slabs (either alone or within concave mihrabs) to indicate the direction of qibla (Avni 1994, 86). A particularly close parallel, for example, is the mosque discovered at the site of Nahal Oded, which features double-row wall construction, a roughly rectangular plan (5 x 8 m) with evidence of an internal partition, and an upright stone slab placed in the southern wall that was used (instead of a curved mihrab) to indicate the direction of prayer. Almost all of the mosques of the southern Negev highlands were perched on hills in close proximity to small-to-medium-sized seasonal settlements made up of oval, circular, and rectangular structures (Avni 1994, 92).
Such temporary settlements, as Haiman and others have argued (Haiman 1995, 34–44; Magness 2003, 137), were likely set up by seasonal nomads who occupied the marginal desert peripheries of the larger agricultural farms that flourished in the northern and central Negev during the late Byzantine and early Islamic periods. The Negev farms, which are made up of a series of residential blocks of fairly uniform “nucleus” or “modular” square buildings (built with double-row field stone construction), are typically accompanied by extensive agricultural terracing, diversions walls, cisterns, threshing floors, and silos (Haiman 1995, 35; Magness 2003, 133). Haiman argues that such intensive investment in the settlement and agricultural production of the Negev must have been initiated by the Umayyad authorities, while Jodi Magness believes the farms (and related temporary settlements) are the culmination of a longer trend toward sedentarization that had actually begun centuries earlier.

A similar intensification of settlement during the early Islamic period has been identified in the southern Negev, particularly in the southern Wadi Arabah and the resource-rich valleys running to the Gulf of ʿAqaba. Excavations and surveys have revealed at least six early Islamic villages located within the immediate hinterland of Ayla and dating to the 8th–9th centuries AD (R. Avner 1996; U. Avner 2008, 1709; U. Avner and Magness 1998). Though varying in size, the six villages show clear similarities in plan and construction, with a particular emphasis on square, “modular” rooms of recurring size and proportion (usually measuring 3–5 m) positioned side-by-side and often leading to an open courtyard (Avner and Magness 1998, 40; Magness 2004, 17–19). Like the Negev farmsteads, the villages have been associated with the sedentarization of local pastoral-nomads, perhaps at the behest of state authorities (Avner 1996, 125; Avner and Magness 1998, 40). In addition, the southern Arabah region witnessed intensive exploitation of local copper mines during the early Islamic period (as evidenced particularly at the Nahal Amram mine and Beʾer Ora smelting site) as well as flourishing agricultural estates, such as those discovered at Yotvata and Evrona, which were supported by extensive qanat irrigation systems (Avner and Magness 1998; Walmsley 2007, 351). Although no early mosques were identified among the village sites, several small open-air mosques dated to the 7th–9th centuries have been excavated in the vicinity of Beʾer Ora, often in association with the same “modular” rooms and courtyards characteristic of the village settlements (Israel 2009; Sharon et al. 1996; Yisrael 2002).

The Early Islamic inscriptions from Wadi Shīreh

The nine early Islamic inscriptions presented here were found carved on stones that are part of or within the immediate vicinity of the Wadi Shīreh mosque discussed above. Although several of these inscriptions have been individually studied and discussed by other scholars (Jobling 1989a; 1989b; 1993; Hoyland 1997, 97–100; Karim 2002; al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh 2005), they have never been treated or published as a group or, more important, presented within the archaeological and landscape context.

5. Interestingly, Kennedy (2014) has recently identified from the air a number of quite similar “nomad villages” in the steppe regions of northern Jordan, while Whitcomb (2006) discusses other examples in northern Syria.
of the Wadi Shīreh mosque. As such, we provide here a standardized numbering for the texts, with the siglum WS (Wadi Shīreh) followed by a number (001–009). For each text, a reading, transcription, and English translation are given, followed by a brief commentary on the inscription’s script, orthography, grammar, and general range of content. The section then concludes with a brief discussion of the dating of the texts, some of their unique features, as well as how they compare with the broader corpus of Kufic inscriptions known from the southern Levant and northern Arabia.

6. A notable exception is the unpublished master’s thesis of present author Firās al-Bqāʾīn (2004), which discussed and sought to interpret the site’s archaeological and epigraphic remains together.
Inscription WS001 (Figure 9)
This eight-line Kufic inscription is carved on an unworked sandstone slab (measuring 0.75 m high x 0.50 m wide) that, along with two other large inscribed stones (WS002 and WS003), was placed in the center of the inner face of the mosque’s southern wall to indicate qibla, the direction of prayer. The stone features a pronounced natural horizontal break/ledge near its center, effectively dividing the inscribed surface into two sections, a wider upper section that includes four lines of text and a narrower lower section (also interrupted by a natural break on the left) with five lines. The inscription was first read and translated by Jobling (1989b, 255) and further analyzed and discussed by al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh (2005, 31).

The inscription is finely engraved in the nice, elegant Kufic script typical of the late 1st/early 2nd century H (late 7th/early 8th century CE). Particularly characteristic of this period is the shape of the letters ‘ʾalīf, yāʾ and rāʾ. In addition, the hastea of the vertical letters ʾalīf and lām extends upward in a perpendicular manner, while several horizontal letters, such as hāʾ, ḥāʾ and sād, are elongated. Both are typical features of the angular elegance evidenced in the square Kufic script of the Umayyad period. All of the inscription’s letters are written clearly and correctly and there are no obvious grammatical or spelling mistakes, therefore providing a clear reading and interpretation of the text. Finally, as is common to early Arabic rock inscriptions, including the other examples presented here, the author chose to divide a word between two lines when he found he was running out of space on the initial line (see al-raḥīm in lines 2 and 3).

The inscription opens with the standard bismillāh formula (lines 1–3), followed by the explicit identification of the structure as a masjid (lines 3–4) and its attribution to one Salāmah ibn Rawḥ (lines 5–6). The text ends with a blessing upon all those who have come to pray in the mosque (lines 7–8). Given the inscription’s elegant script and the explicit identification and attribution of the structure, it is likely that this represents a foundation or dedicatory inscription carved when the masjid was first built, presumably by and/or in the name of Salāmah ibn Rawḥ. For further discussion of the possible identification of this individual, see pp. 118–119 below.

Inscription WS002 (Figure 10)
Carved on the middle of the three stones marking qibla in the mosque’s south wall are at least two lines of a poorly preserved Kufic inscription. Although many of the inscription’s characters are obscured by areas of heavy weathering, the inscription can clearly be read and understood as a standard bismillāh formula, with what follows after al-raḥīm too weathered to read. The stone also features several earlier Hismaic inscriptions, including at least one name (likely qrs or perhaps qrn, preceded by the introductory lām) as well as two other Hismaic inscriptions that were purposefully erased/damaged in antiquity. While this stone (measuring 1.12 m high x 0.60 m wide)
was preserved in situ until at least 2006, it has since been completely undercut by illicit
digging activity and is now toppled over and resting inside the looter’s pit (Figure 18).

**Inscription WS003** (Figure 11)

This eight-line Kufic inscription, previously published by al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh
(2005, 32), is written on a rough stone (measuring 0.60 m high x 0.50 m wide) in the
mosque’s south wall that was used, along with WS001 and WS002, to mark the direc-
tion of prayer. Unlike the elegant script used in inscription WS001, the writing of this
text is rather clumsy and poor, and the author has also made some spelling mistakes,
most notably forgetting to write the ʾyāʾ in *sharīka*. As such, beyond the straightforward reading of the first three lines, which give the standard *bismillāh* introductory formula, the reading of the inscription is somewhat problematic, although there is still much that can be said with certainty.

After addressing God at the end of line 3 (*Allāhumma*), the author declares in lines 4 and 5 *lā sharīka fī mā laka* (“There is no associate in that which belongs to you”). The last word in line 5 can be read as *hallā* (“he stayed/visited”) and therefore likely begins a new thought that continues in lines 6–7. While the first word of lines 6–7 is unfortunately completely unreadable, it is followed by the clear expression *fī*
hadhā l-masjid (“in this mosque”). As the last word in line 7 is heavily weathered and obscured, the end of the inscription (in lines 7–8) could be read as either a statement of devotion given by the author (ʾāḥmad Allāh = “I praise God”) or a personal name (ʾAbd-Allāh), perhaps that of the author.

Despite the problematic reading and syntax, the inscription nonetheless provides interesting insights into the background of the author and his possible motivations for writing. First, the use of the verb ḥalla (“stayed/visited”) in line 5 may indicate the author was simply passing by the mosque while travelling through the area; in other words, its use would suggest he was not living in a village or settlement at or near
the site and instead had come to the site from somewhere else. Second, the explicit address to God in lines 3–5 (“O God, there is no associate in that which belongs to you”) suggests the author may have been writing in response to inscription WS001, which ascribes the mosque to Salāmah ibn Rawḥ. No doubt aware of the Quranic command that mosques be associated with God alone (Q: 72.18, 9.17–18), the author may have intended his inscription to be a not-so-subtle rebuke of those who would ascribe their own name to a mosque.

Inscription WS004 (Figure 12)
This short, three-line Kufic inscription is carved on the outer face of a rough boulder (measuring 0.60 m wide x 0.50 m wide) set at the southeast corner of the mosque and therefore carved outside (and out of view) of the main prayer space (as opposed to WS001–WS003, all of which were clearly viewable inside the mosque). Although the last line is somewhat faded, the inscription gives the standard bismilläh formula, though without the expected al-raḥīm that concludes the introductory formula found in the rest of the inscriptions at the site.

Inscription WS005 (Figure 13)
This eight-line inscription, previously published by both Karīm (2002) and al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh (2005, 31), is written on a low, oddly shaped boulder (measuring 1.50 m high x 1.20 m wide) located about 10 m south of the mosque. The inscription, whose lines and words meander somewhat across the stone’s irregular and uneven surfaces, was written by a poor and seemingly inexperienced hand who appears to have given little thought to the planning or execution of his text. He also made mistakes throughout, particularly as regards his use of long vowels. In line 5, for example, there is the unnecessary addition of a final wāw in laḥū, while li- waladayh lacks an ’ālīf after the wāw, thereby giving the incorrect meaning “his children” rather than the expected and correct “his parents” (li-w[ā]lidayhi). Likewise, in line 6 the author added an extra and unnecessary ’ālīf before the lām in wa-al-jamīʿ (instead of the expected and correct wa-li-jamīʿ).

The first three lines of the inscription, carved on the stone’s widest and most even surface, are quite clear and give the introductory bismilläh formula (line 1) followed by a request for God to “bless our master Muḥammad and his family” (lines 2–3). It is also noteworthy that the author has written Muḥammad’s name with a certain decorative flare, with the initial mīm written above a large, exaggerated ḥaʾ that then connects with a smaller mīm and extended dal carved to the lower right and lower left, respectively. The end of the third and beginning of the fourth line give the name

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8. It is of course tempting to see the phrase lā sharika fī mā laka as a variant of the far more common expression lā sharika lahu (“He [God] has no associate”), which features regularly in Umayyad-era inscriptions (both formal and informal) and coins as a clear assertion of God’s oneness/unity (Hoyland 1997, 83; Sharon 1999, 207, 215; Goussous 2004, 92–93). Given the uniqueness of the inscription’s phrasing (which is not among the standard ways of expressing God’s oneness), however, together with its positioning within the mosque, we think it more probable the author is writing in response to the ascription of the mosque to Salāmah ibn Rawḥ in WS001.
of the author who wrote the inscription, which can be read as Farrāj ibn ʿAlīm. Lines 4–6, which meander across multiple faces of the stone, ask God to “forgive him and his parents and all Muslims.”

Unfortunately, the last two lines of the inscription are quite weathered and exceedingly difficult to read, although certain features indicate the presence of a dating formula, as already noted by Karīm (2002). We tentatively read the verb kataba (“he wrote”) in line 7, followed by the date, which can be read in a variety of ways: sanat sabaʿ [wa] māyah (107 H); sanat sab [īn] [wa] māyah (170 H); or sanat sabaʿ māyah (700 H). Despite the uncertainty in reading the date, several factors suggest the latter date (700 H/1332 CE) is to be preferred, although other readings are also possible. First, the script and letter forms, written in a more casual and less elegant cursive, indicate the inscription was carved significantly later than the others presented here. The ʿalīf, for example, lacks the short horizontal extension at the base of the letter

9. While the name could possibly be read as Farrāḥ, an unpublished inscription by the same author was photographed in the nearby Wadi Ḥafir by Jobling and in that case the name is clearly Farrāj. Both Karīm (2002, 260) and al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh (2002, 31) also read the name as Farrāj, although they read the patronym as ʿAlī and ʿAltham, respectively.
that is characteristic of the earlier Kufic script, while the shapes of the letters ʿayn (in li-jamī) and mīm (in l-Muslimīn) suggest a post-12th century date, when the angular Kufic script was broadly replaced by the more rounded cursive script adopted by Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din (Blair 2006, 600–601; Tabbaa 1994, 129–132, 137–140). Second, the exceptional expressions found in the inscription—“may God bless our master Muḥammad and his family” and “may God forgive him and his parents and all Muslims”—are unprecedented among the hundreds of Kufic inscriptions found along the Darb al-Hajj during the Umayyad era and, instead, feature much more regularly in dated Islamic inscriptions of the Ayyubid/Mamluk era (Barāmkī 1964, 343–344, see especially nos. 98, 100, and 101).
Inscription WS006 (Figure 14)

This 11-line Kufic inscription is skillfully carved on the broad, flat and roughly square face (measuring 1.10 m high x 1.20 m wide) of a large boulder located on a rock-cov-

1) In the name of  
Bismi

2) God, the gracious,  
llāh l-raḥmān

3) the merciful. O God,  
l-raḥīm llāhumma

4) accept from ’Abd  
taqabbal min ‘Abd il-’Al’a
al-‘Alā bin Saʿīd  
ibn Sa‘īd

5) his prayers and his  
ṣalātahu wa-ṣawmahu wa-
fasting and keep him  
[ḥfaẓhu]

6) among his family, and  
fīʾahlihi wa-aḥlifhu fī
support him in his  
[naṣrihi]/[safarihi]
[victory or travel]

7) and make him  
wa-ʾaṣliḥhu ‘innaka ‘al[a]
virtuous, for you are  
[kulli shay ‘ qadīr]
[capable of all things].

8) May God bless him and  
ṣall[a] llāh ‘alayhi wa-sallām
grant him peace and  
wa-ʾaslam ‘alayh
peace be upon

9) him and the mercy of  
wa-(raḥmat llāh
God and his blessings.  
wa-barakātuh wa-

10) He wrote in Ramaḍān,  
kataba fī Ramaḍān
year nine and one  
sanat tisaʿ wa-māyah
hundred.

Figure 14. Inscription WS006.
ered hillside about 50 m west of the mosque. Not only is the inscription extremely well fitted to the stone surface (suggesting the author specifically selected the stone for the text he planned to carve), but many of the letterforms show the elegant vertical and horizontal extensions that are so characteristic of the refined Kufic script of the late first/early 2nd century H. The stone surface features several drawings as well, including the presumably earlier scene of an ibex being chased by two dogs (lower right) that the author of the inscription had to avoid, and a later drawing of a horse and rider (armed with a lance/spear) that interrupts and obscures portions of lines 5–8. The inscription was first documented and partially described by Jobling (1993), although fuller readings and analyses were published by Hoyland (1997, 97–100), Karim (2002), and al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh (2005, 30–31). This inscription is particularly noteworthy for the clear dating formula that appears in line 11 (Ramaḍān sinah tisaʿ wa māyah [Ramaḍān 109 H, or December 727/January 728 CE]),10 which presumably gives something of a terminus ante quem for the date of the mosque as well.

As this text has already been thoroughly published, we limit our discussion here to a few specific points. In his Arabic reading of the text, Hoyland did not read the last part of the sixth line (obscured by the horse/rider drawing), but he suggested in the English translation (in his comments), “keep him among his family,” which he considered to be a unique expression among the early Kufic inscriptions. For his part, Karim read the Arabic as wa-akhlifhu fī ahlīhi, presumably following Hoyland’s interpretation. However, a close inspection of the word read by Karim and Hoyland as ahlīhi shows that it has neither of the two long vertical letters alīf and lām necessary for the reading. As such, we suggest either the reading wa-aḥlifhu fī naṣrih (“and support him in his victory”) or wa-aḥlifhu fī safarīhi (“and support him in his travel”).

Interestingly, the second half of the seventh line, which is again partially obscured by the later horse and rider figure, includes the common address to God, ʿalā kulli shayqādir (“you are capable of all things”), a statement which appears several times in the Quran (see, for example, Q: 30.50, 42.9, 57.2, and 67.1). In asking for God’s blessing in line 8, the author forgot to include the word ʿalayhi (“upon/to him”) in his request and, upon realizing his mistake, inserted the word in the space between lines 7–8. We also see in line 8 two interesting omissions: the word ʿṣallā was written without the ʾalīf maṣūrah, while the expected al-sallām is missing the lām of the definite article. Finally, it is interesting to note that this inscription includes two words (al-raḥīm, line 3; Saʿīd, line 4) in which two dots have been added below the letter yā.11

10. In his initial publications, Jobling read the date as 107 (1989a, 21; 1989b, 255) or 107 or 109 H (Jobling 1993, 244). Hoyland (1997, 100) showed, however, that the date must be read as 109, since the first character of the initial number can only be read as a tāʾ (thus tisaʿ) and not a sīn (as in sabaʿ). Karim (2002, 260) and al-Farajat and al-Nawafleh (2005, 30) also concur with Hoyland’s reading.

11. Diacritical marks are extremely rare in early Kufic script, appearing for the first time, but still only selectively, during the reign of Abd al-Malik b. Marwan (r. 685–705 AD). Diacritics can be found in the long mosaic inscription that adorns the octagonal ambulatory of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (Grabar 1996, 56–59, 62, figs. 42–49), as well as on Abd al-Malik’s milestones discovered in Palestine (Bittar 2003, 19).
1) In the name of God, the gracious, the merciful.

2) O God, blessing be upon [...]
Inscription WS007 (Figure 15)

This short, two-line Kufic inscription was carved on a small boulder (measuring 0.63 m high x 0.70 m wide) just down the hill from WS006. Like several others presented here, the text gives only the standard bismillāh formula.

Inscription WS008 (Figure 16)

This extremely faded and heavily weathered Kufic inscription was carved on a small boulder (measuring 0.30 m high x 0.36 m wide) located adjacent to a built stone circle on the east bank of Wadi Shīreh (the only Kufic text identified in this part of the wadi). Despite the stone’s abraded surface, most of the text’s first two lines can be discerned, including the introductory bismillāh formula, followed in line 2 by a request for God’s blessing, after which the text becomes unreadable.

Inscription WS009 (Figure 17)

This simple, three-line Kufic inscription is carved on a small boulder (measuring 0.28 m high x 0.60 m wide) positioned at the eastern end of structure SH02. The text, which faces towards the interior of the structure, gives the standard bismillāh formula.
The dating, content, and context of the Wadi Shīreh Inscriptions

Excepting the problematic and exceptional date that likely concludes WS005, the Kufic inscriptions presented here would appear to date, based on their script and overall similarity to one another, to the late 1st/early 2nd century H (first half of the 8th century CE) (Schneider 1986). The date of Ramaḍān 109 H given at the end of WS006, the longest and finest inscription of the collection, provides further confirmation of this dating. The presence of inscription WS005, however, if dated to 700 H as suggested by its script and content, would perhaps indicate that the Shīreh mosque continued to be visited—or at least known—for many centuries thereafter.

All of the texts were written as invocations and prayers by early Muslims. While the shorter texts (WS002, WS007, WS009) feature only the introductory bismillāh formula—the opening common to Islamic invocations—the longer inscriptions also include direct or indirect references to the Quran (WS003, WS006) and explicit requests for God’s blessing (WS001, WS005, WS006, WS008), forgiveness (WS005), and mercy (WS006).

Given their date and content, the Shīreh inscriptions can be considered as part of the much larger corpus of early Islamic inscriptions located along the desert routes leading from the Hejaz and North Arabia to the northern cities of Bilād al-Shām. These texts, which are carved in similar script and share much of the same content, are generally dated to the early 2nd century H (first half of the 8th century CE), although a few of them may date a little earlier (late 1st century H) or a little later (3rd century H) (al-Rāshid 1995). They are, therefore, generally thought to be a phenomenon of the Umayyad period, when there were active and regularly maintained trade, administrative, and nascent pilgrimage routes linking the Hejaz with Bilād al-Shām. The inscriptions, typically carved on boulders and rock faces, attest the widespread literacy of the Arabian tribesmen who travelled on and lived alongside these corridors during the Umayyad era, as well as the clear continuity of the “epigraphic habit” that had been prevalent among the populations of North Arabia and the southern Levant since at least the mid-first millennium BC.

Finally, one last comment should be made regarding WS001, which ascribes the foundation of the mosque to one Salāmah ibn Rawḥ. While it is perhaps unwarranted to place too much significance on the occurrence of a single name and patronym, it is worth considering the possibility that this name may reference Salāmah b. Rawḥ, one of several attested sons of Rawḥ b. Zinba of the tribe of Judham, the dominant tribe of the Ḥismā (see above). Although little is known of Salāmah, his father Rawḥ was a significant tribal leader of the late Sufyani/early Marwanid period, while his grandfather Zinba was remembered as a tax collector who worked under the Ghassanids (Hasson 1993, 99–100). Beginning his career during the reign of Yazid I (r. 680–683 AD) as a young upstart who challenged Judham’s perceived Qahtan/Yamani descent, Rawḥ became an ardent supporter of Marwan (r. 683–685 AD) and later a trusted advisor and secretary to Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705 AD), who eventually appointed him deputy governor of Palestine (for a summary of Rawḥ b. Zinba’s career, see Crone 2003, 99–101; 12. It is thought that the change of the capital of the caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad under the Abbasids may have negatively influenced the use of the Syrian route in favor of the Baghdadi route (Darb Zubaydah), which the Abbasids took great care in organizing and supplying (al-Rāshid 1980).
An Umayyad Era Mosque and Desert Waystation from Wadi Shīreh, Southern Jordan

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Hasson 1993). Upon Rawḥ’s death in 703 AD, his sons seem to have retained some influence and prestige within the Umayyad regime, most notably Ḍabʿ an and Saʿīd who, after leading an unsuccessful uprising against Yazid III in 744 AD, were given authority over Palestine and Jordan (Gil 1992, 84). Though only known to Muslim chroniclers as a transmitter of family traditions (i.e., al-ʿAṣbahānī, Maʿ arīfat, 1239; al-ʿAsqalānī, al-ʿIṣābah, 4: 83), Salāmah may have nonetheless been a well known tribal figure, particularly within the Judham’s territorial heartland of the Ḥismā. If so, the Shīreh mosque could represent a foundation built by or in honor of this prominent local figure and family.

Interpretations and conclusions

Precisely because of the relative isolation and uniqueness of the Wadi Shīreh mosque and settlement within the barren wilderness of the Ḥismā, little definitive can be said about the site’s social or historical context until more thorough archaeological investigations are undertaken. The preceding discussion of the environmental, archaeological, and epigraphic context of the site’s visible remains, however, allows us to draw some tentative conclusions regarding the settlement’s function, the people it served, and those who may have established it.

First, the settlement appears to have functioned most likely as a small seasonal waystation, perhaps serving small numbers of early Muslim travelers who were journeying through the Ḥismā on their way to or from the southern Jordanian plateau, which, as discussed above, was heavily settled during the Umayyad period. Indeed, the much larger Wadi Rabigh, in which the Shīreh mosque and settlement are located, as well as the adjacent and easily accessible Wadi Ḥafir, would have provided travelers with a relatively gradual ascent across the heights of the Ras en Naqb escarpment and, from there, set them on an almost direct, 40 km path north to the relatively large Umayyad-era agricultural settlement of Maʿ an or, by traveling slightly to the northwest, towards the towns of Udhruh and Petra. Likewise, the Wadi Shīreh mosque and settlement, as described above, is situated within easy walking distance of large cascading natural pools that retain winter runoff for several months out of the year, while the main wadi bed itself supports lines of acacia trees (a favorite source of food for camels) and relatively lush patches of vegetation and pasture. In addition, Wadi Shīreh is somewhat removed and set back from the main line of Wadi Rabigh and, as such, would have provided a secluded and secure stopping point for passing travelers. Further support that the Shīreh mosque and settlement were visited primarily by travelers is provided by the associated Kufic inscriptions, several of which make explicit reference to traveling to or having “visited” the mosque, presumably during their journey through the area (cf. Hoyland 1997, 98–100).

Second, the mosque’s rectilinear, double-wall construction and similarity with surrounding structures, all oriented to or aligned according to the cardinal directions, suggests a small but planned, purpose-built settlement, perhaps commissioned by local or regional authorities during the Umayyad period to facilitate travel through the region. As discussed above, planned settlements of simple, rectilinear buildings (usually with double-row wall construction) are quite typical of the early Islamic period (8th–9th centuries AD)—especially in the nearby regions of the Negev and

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southern Wadi Arabah—and are usually interpreted as small agricultural villages or industrial sites established by the Umayyad authorities as attempts to settle desert nomads and expand the productivity of southern Palestine’s more marginal arid zones. While the Shīreh site lacks the size and complexity of many of these early Islamic settlements, it nonetheless shares common features—including rectilinear building plan, wall construction, and presence of a simple, open-air mosque—that may similarly indicate that this desert waystation was established at the behest of the Umayyads or their local representatives. We cautiously suggest, based on the ascription of the building of the mosque to Salāmah ibn Rawḥ in WS001, that the settlement was established by the leaders of Judham, the powerful tribe hailing from the Ḥismā whose members (especially Salāmah’s presumed father, Rawḥ b. Zinba) had risen to prominence during the time of the Umayyads. The Shīreh waystation would have served the needs of early Muslim travelers transiting through the Ḥismā, while allowing the Judham to monitor (and perhaps tax, as they had traditionally done) traffic along an important desert route from North Arabia and the Hejaz.

Destroying Wadi Ramm’s Islamic past

Unfortunately, the Wadi Shīreh mosque, tucked away in a remote corner of Wadi Ramm, far removed from the region’s main roads, tourist camps, and industrial

Figure 18. Some of the illicit excavation holes that have partially destroyed the Shīreh mosque’s south qibla wall and prayer area.
farms, has been the target of illicit and destructive digging in recent years. The excavations, which began at some point after March 2006 when the mosque was last photographed intact, have pockmarked the structure’s interior with several deep holes, including one that completely undercut the central inscribed stone (WS002) of the southern qibla wall (Figure 18). The upcast from the holes, some of which are over a meter deep, is now piled atop the structure’s east and south walls, obscuring building details (like the double-row wall construction) that were formerly clear.

In addition, a nearly 15 m long and several meter deep trench, presumably made with earthmoving equipment between 2006 and 2009 (the latter the year when the trench can first be identified on Google Earth imagery), was dug about 20 m north of the mosque (Figure 19). Although the trench does not appear to have impacted the mosque directly, it did create two large upcast heaps that now cover area’s adjacent to the site. While it is possible that this trench could have been dug with the intent to capture water or pile up soil for damming or runoff diversion from the nearby wadi bed (Kersel, pers. comm), a separate hole dug into the bottom of the trench suggests the purpose was more likely illicit digging.

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