

Tourism Impacts in the Site of Umm Qais: An Overview

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Abstract

This paper aims at shedding the light on the different impacts of tourism development in the site of Umm Qais (Gadara) in Jordan. Despite the economic benefits gained by tourism, deterioration has been witnessed in this site due to damage of archaeological features as well as the displacement of the local community. Implications were suggested to achieve a more sustainable tourism development in the site.

Keywords: Umm Qais (Gadara), Tourism impacts, Sustainable development, Local community of Umm Qais.

Introduction

The Site of Umm Qais (the Greco-Roman Decapolis town of Gadara) is 120 Km north of Amman, and 30 Km northwest of Irbid (both located in Jordan). The site is 518 meters above sea level and is overlooking both Lake Tiberias and the Golan Heights, which creates a great point to watch nearby lands across the borders (Teller, 2006) (Map 1). The city was mentioned in the New Testament as *χωρά τῶν Γαδαρηνῶν*, (*chōra tōn Gadareñōn*) or “country of the Gadarenes” (Matthew 8:28), it's the place where Jesus casted out the devil from two men into a herd of pigs (Matthew 8: 28-34), mentioned as well in the parallel passages as (Mark 5:1; Luke 8:26, Luke 8:37): *χωρά τῶν Γερασηνῶν*, *chōra tōn Gerasēnōn* “country of the Gerasenes.” (Bible Hub Website: <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/matthew/8-28.htm>).

Gadara was popular in ancient times for its cosmopolitan atmosphere, attracting artists, philosophers and poets (e.g. Menippus, of 3rd century B.C, a Cynic philosopher and satirist, also the 2nd century A.D. religious critic and nihilist, Oenomaus); it was frequently visited as a resort by Romans vacationing in the nearby al-Hemma hot springs (Weber & Khouri, 1989). The city is rich with fertile soil, abundant water, and a location astride a number of key trading routes connecting Asia and Europe. Such attractiveness continued to present where both domestic and international tourists are visiting the ancient city to enjoy its scenic and archaeological features. The city of Gadara is represented today by the ruins of Umm Qais on the heights south of el -Humeh - the hot springs in the Yarmuk Valley, about 7 km Southeast of the Sea of Galilee (Plate 1) (Teller, 2006).

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Map1: A map showing the location of Umm Qais in North of Jordan
(Source: Official Website of Jordan Tourism Board [JTB])

In 1806, the German traveller Ulrich Seetzen identified the ancient ruins of the city, after that, which the archaeological work of excavation and restoration took place, and proceeded slowly since that time (Weber & Khouri, 1989).

The Greeks built the city during the fourth century BC; Gadara was ruled by the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III in 218 BC. As other Greek cities of the area, Gadara was conquered by the Hasmonean King, Alexander Jannaeus (104/3-76 BC), many of its Greek inhabitants went into exile. When the Romans under Pompey conquered the East and formed the Decapolis in 63 BC, Gadara itself was rebuilt by Pompey at the special request of his freedman Demetrius of Gadara, who later moved to Rome where he financed some of Pompey's building projects, which were undertaken on a large scale. During the early part of Roman rule, the Nabataeans controlled the trade routes as far north as Damascus. In order to limit their control, Mark Antony sent King Herod the Great to weaken the Nabataeans, who finally gave up their northern interests in 31 BC. In appreciation for his efforts, Rome rewarded Herod with some areas and Gadara was one of them. The city remained under Herod's reign until his death, and then became a part of the Roman Province of Syria. By 325 AD, it was the seat of a bishopric; though, the Byzantine era witnessed the decline of Gadara into relative obscurity. By the beginning of the Islamic era Gadara had become just another village, it was largely destroyed by an earthquake around 747 AD and was abandoned. The town became known by the Arabic Umm Qais during the middle ages. In the 1890's, there was an occupation that took the form of a small Ottoman village, of which many cottages and small houses can be witnessed today among the Roman remains. A modern village after that started to appear and grow nearby, people also continued to occupy the Ottoman cottages till 1986, when 1500 inhabitants changed their settlements after accepting payments from the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, so that archaeological work can be continued in the city. During the 1990's, the ministry renovated a number of these Ottoman houses to include a rest house and a museum (Teller, 2006).

Since the time of developing the site of Umm Qais for tourism, some impacts took place and affected both the remains and the local community, this paper aims at shedding the light on these impacts based on field visits and previously published studies. It could be useful to start **with** a general background on the features and development of the site.

Main Features of the City

What makes the city of Gadara distinguished is being built mostly of the black basalt stone (Roman Part), and lime stone as well in some buildings (Byzantine & Ottoman Structures). The town reached its peak of architectural prosperity in the first and second centuries AD.

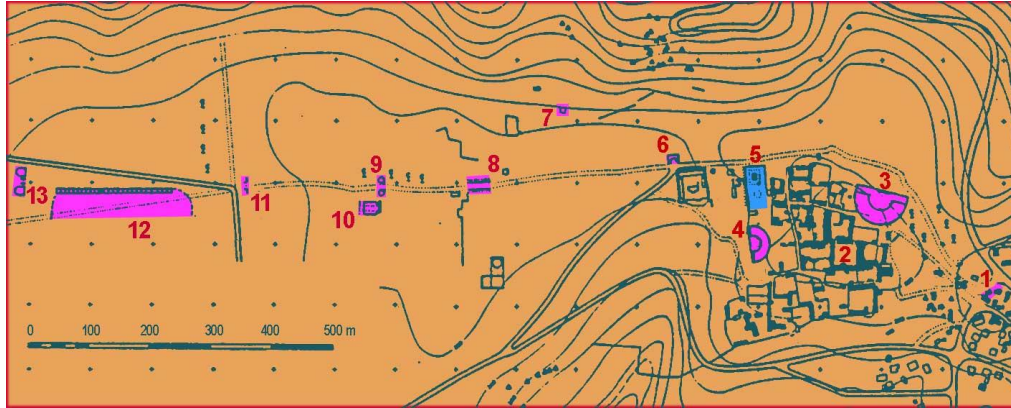
The city is intersected with a paved street (Decumanus Maximus) running east-west, stretching for nearly two kilometers, with a double colonnade, which is still visible with ruts worn in the pavement by the Roman chariot wheels. This street is lined with vaulted shops dated to the Byzantine period, supporting the basilica terrace which was cut in the bedrock, some Roman basalt doorways of tombs can also be traced in some areas. A distinguished feature is Roman Basilica which is the site of a square Byzantine church dated back to the fifth or sixth century AD. The ground was cut into the hill to make a flat surface; there is a small narthex that opens into an outer circular passageway paved with colourful geometric tiles, it comes within an octagonal central area surrounded by basalt columns that most probably supported a dome. To the west of the terrace stands the nymphaeum, close to the baths complex on the opposite side. Going along the colonnaded street toward the west, after less than 500m, the western gate of the city is found, leading then to the hippodrome built to impress the visitors of Gadara approaching from the Jordan Valley. There were two theatres in the city; one is the Western Theatre, which was entirely built of basalt, with a capacity of 3000 spectators, including also the free-standing high-backed stone chairs of the VIPs of the city during the Roman Period. The other theatre is known as the Northern Theatre, which is mostly damaged since most of its stones were taken and used by the occupants of the city to build the Ottoman cottages (Hennessy & Homes-Fredericq, 1989; Weber & Khouri, 1989). The Ottoman governor house was transformed into the Museum (Beit er-Rusan) (beit in Arabic means: house), it is of two storeys with a portico and a courtyard surrounded with rooms. The museum includes a collection of statues such as the headless statue of Tyche, mosaics from around the city, capitals and sarcophagi, as well as other archaeological finds and households dated back to 19th and 20th centuries AD. Some other significant Ottoman buildings are the House of Malkawi (Beit el-Malkawi) and the House of Hesbani (Beit el-Hesbani), and an Ottoman mosque, which are all located in the south-eastern parts of the present identified city (Teller, 2006).



Plate 1: An overview of the Lake of Tiberias from the city of Umm Qais



Plate 2: The Nymphaeum and the part of the Decumanus Maximus



Map 2: A plan showing some of the main archaeological remains in the city of Gadara, added by the author are some tourism facilities existing in the site
 (<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/sbf/escurs/Giord/02GiordEn.html>, accessed 16 July 2006)

1. The "Germani" and Modestus' tombs
2. Beit er- Rusan (Museum)
3. North Theater
4. West Theater
5. Basilica
6. Nymphaeum
7. Northern mausoleum
8. Colonnaded Decumanus
9. Gate of Tiberias
10. Underground mausoleum
11. West gate
12. Stadium
13. Monumental arch

Tourism Development in Umm Qais

The site of Umm Qais is provided with a visitor centre (which houses interpretational material on site features & history), parking area, tickets office, police post, toilets, museum and a rest-house. There are also a small unclassified hotel (Umm Qais Hotel) and a restaurant on the main street. Unfortunately, the only statistics available on the site of Umm Qais is of visitors numbers (Table 1). As for tourism services and the numbers of their workers, these are embedded within the statistics of Irbid Governorate to which the site belongs. According to the Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities, the admission fees for the domestic visitor is of 0.25 JD and 5 JD for international visitors; so it can be roughly estimated that the site gained 96,115 JD during the year 2017 as admission fees (1 JD = 1.41 US \$)

Table 1: Numbers of tourists who visited the site of Umm Qais during the year 2017 (Source: Jordanian Ministry of Tourism & Antiquities)

| Month | Visitor Numbers | | |
|--------------|-----------------|----------------|---------------|
| | Total | Jordanian | Foreign |
| January | 3,073 | 1,911 | 1,162 |
| February | 4,134 | 3,110 | 1,024 |
| March | 43,049 | 41,270 | 1,779 |
| April | 62,208 | 59,202 | 3,006 |
| May | 20,446 | 18,397 | 2,049 |
| June | 1,246 | 276 | 970 |
| July | 4,725 | 3,675 | 1,050 |
| August | 3,849 | 2,282 | 1,567 |
| September | 3,962 | 2,177 | 1,785 |
| October | 5,219 | 1,941 | 3,278 |
| November | 3,319 | 1,134 | 2,185 |
| December | 2,403 | 846 | 1,557 |
| Total | 157,633 | 136,221 | 21,412 |

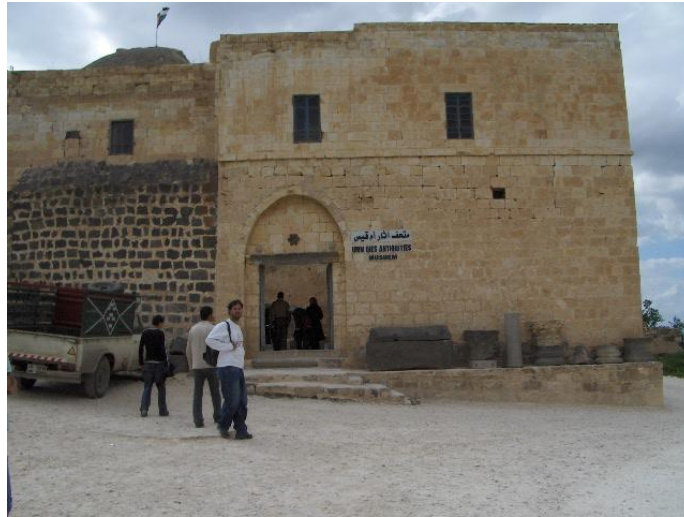


Plate 3: The Museum (House of er-Rusan)

Tourism & Local Community in Umm Qais

In 1967, the Department of Antiquities of Jordan prepared plans to excavate more of Roman Umm Qais and demolish the Ottoman village, a special Legal Order was issued to expropriate the villagers' houses and lands, and the Government started the expropriation of the houses and had plans to demolish the village to give priority to archaeological excavations of Classical Roman and Byzantine Periods at the expense of Ottoman. Such procedure was abolished after pressure from Jordanian and German architects and anthropologists, though, the displacement of the villagers continued, the confiscated land amounted to about 460 donoms (e.g. a donom equals 1000 sq.m.) of farm land. Government sold villagers new housing units, after which keeping animals, farming and cultivating olive trees all declined as a source of income. Most locals were forced to look for other jobs in nearby urban centres such as Irbid, later some investors offered huge accommodation projects to take place in the Ottoman village; these were not executed since they would negatively influence the authenticity and architecture of the site (Traditional Mediterranean Architecture [TMA], 2001).

Daher (2006) presented the case of Umm Qais (Gadara) as an example where rural villages neighbouring heritage sites were evacuated from locals who were relocated in new villages, became marginalized and worked in low paid jobs, he stated that such development approach of heritage tourism gave privilege to past with compromising these local communities due to excessive governmentalization of social life seen in planning ordinances. According to Boumedine (2008), this caused the impoverishment of most of the rural areas, the extensive migrations to urban areas, and destroying the ancestral equilibrium of those populations. The new lifestyles and modes of consumption made them drift to towns and leave original places of living to into isolated areas. Despite the existence of national development plans (such as the Five Year Plan for Economic and Social Development (1981-1985) by the National Planning Council of Jordan (1981), a plan that aimed at protecting and promoting heritage sites); the delay in implementation for the plans made the site deteriorate since it was neglected for a long period of time (el-Khalili, 2012).

After a long period of marginalization and displacement, the role of locals has been improving after developing plans for tourism and visitors' management, moreover, therapeutic tourism sites of Himmeh and Mukhaibat witnessed a recent expansion of local rest-houses along the spring water sources. The area faces a major challenge in the quality of services with a lack of regulatory frameworks, more than 30 rest-houses operating at the moment with minimal technical capacities and almost no environmental, health and safety safeguards (Clearing House Mechanism of Biodiversity in Jordan [CHM], 2016). One of the activities that helped in supporting local community was running the event of "Umm Qais Touristic Days" where local bands performed singing and dancing, also exhibitions were held for traditional handicrafts and cuisine.

The local community was being targeted by projects as BARAKA (Supported by Local Enterprise Support Project/USAID [LESP], 2018) for the development of four locally managed sustainable tourism products, a Bed and Breakfast accommodation was opened to visitors in 2017, where its guests (who reached over 700 till present) have the chance not only to enjoy the archaeological site of Umm Qais, but also to interact with locals who are actively involved in providing tourists with a unique experience, they were employed in 38 direct and indirect job opportunities where camping, biking, climbing, and making straw baskets are all offered through them as small enterprises. Despite such benefits, the problem of child labor is taking place at the site, children working as vendors (selling floral necklaces) and as horse guides keep following the tourists, and keep asking to buy from them (Plate 4). Moreover, the illicit excavations by locals are witnessed in different spots of the site.



Plate 4: Kids working as vendors and horse guides in the site of Umm Qais

Umm Qais and Environmental Issues

Despite the economic benefits gained by tourism in the site of Umm Qais, some threats are witnessed in its natural and cultural environment; the Roman part experienced excessive excavations with some a limited restoration that concentrated on the principle monuments (e.g. the western theatre), of which most were basically reconstruction and do not fit proper principles of conservation (el-Khalili, 2012).

According to al-Obeidat (2016), littering and graffiti left by visitors is a serious issue, also the structures of the buildings are negatively affected by growing plants and weeds, the Antiquities Directorate used herbicides to kill weeds at the site, which influenced the native plants at the site, locals knew that these plants were an important source of food for their animals and increased milk production, several families who kept livestock suggested to the Tourism Directorate to let the animals graze to control weeds instead of using herbicides, Tourism Directorate agreed with the suggestion, but some other locals were disagreed since Umm Qais site was supposed to be an animal-free zone to create the respectable atmosphere; on the other hand, these animals sometimes ate plastic bags left by tourists.



Plate 5: Plants growing on the architectural stones of the site

Another problem is air pollution; in a study by Abu al-Labban & el-Khalili (2012), air quality was assessed in Umm Qais, air pollutants that were measured included carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and ground ozone.

Most detected air pollutants were below their maximum corresponding national limits, though, ground ozone was found to exceed limits set by World Health Organization. Such high rates would expedite erosion and deterioration rates of rocks at Umm Qais.

Through field visits by authors, it was noticed that the site is mostly clean except for the areas of caves and tombs where some trash is accumulated, animal dung can be seen in some spots within the site, most probably these are left by cow herds grazing on the outskirts of the site where some local settlements are located. The site is provided with a signage system which unfortunately is not for all features of the site, moreover, no behavioural interpretation is provided, which is a common problem in most of Jordanian touristic sites. The random movement of tourists is another threat to the site, the excessive visitation makes stepping on neglected mosaic floors and stone tiles inside ancient buildings a serious problem. School trips frequently cause impacts of littering, noise and random climbing.



Plate 6: The Narthex in the Basilica



Plate 7: Stepping on mosaic floors of the site by a tourist

One of the authors (Balaawi, 2016, with Abo Naser) carried out a detailed monitoring survey (unpublished) where a detailed temperature and relative humidity data in Umm Qais were collected. The survey was for six months, it came out with a result that the temperature range of these records is between 5.5 °C and 23.7 °C (with an average of 13.7 °C), while the relative humidity range is between 24.7 % RH and 96.7 % RH, (with an average of 79.6 %RH). The spot readings of relative humidity and temperature were recorded every 10 minutes (Figures 1 & 2). The evaluation of the microclimate condition at Umm Qais strongly demonstrates the importance of the microclimate monitoring. As seen from the data logger readings, it is clear that all the readings varied from one day to another, also varied during the same day. The daily fluctuation in Temperature and Relative Humidity cause a serious damage to the built environment since it cause destruction such as flaking and breaking out of building stones.

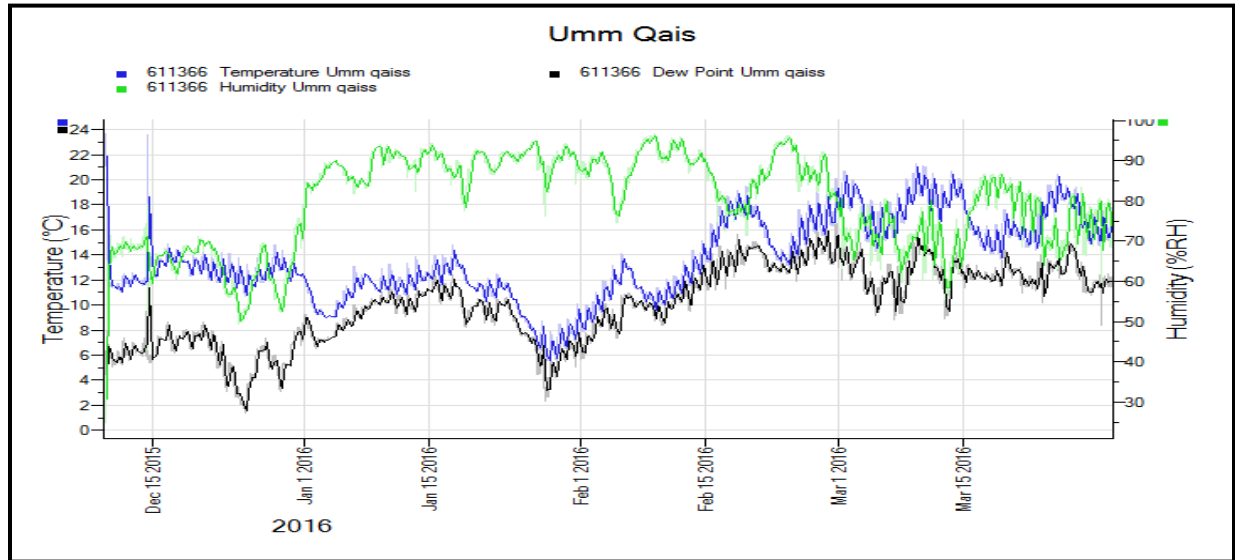


Figure 2: Temperature and Relative Humidity Readings at Umm Qais site (Bala'awi & Abo Naser 2016).

Discussion & Conclusion

It becomes clear that site's management efforts should be directed to control the level and nature of site consumption, also different impacts caused by visitation. Effective visitor management techniques should be considered and improved as well; whether hard visitor management (such as zoning, personnel, resources hardening, and regulations); or soft visitor management (as interpretation and landscaping).

To reduce the problems of random climbing and stepping, littering, and graffiti, the following actions can be taken: informing potential visitors about the disadvantages of their behaviors, conducting awareness programs by visitor center for both tourists and locals about appropriate behaviors and respect for site's resources, involving guides in making tourists aware of tourism ethics, and strengthening the site by having trails and viewing platforms all through the site (Pedersen, 2002; Nature Conservancy, 2004). Fencing caves and sensitive areas (as mosaic floors) and allocating special spots for taking photographs would help in preventing tourists from random stepping and climbing. Reducing pollution of air caused by traffic congestion and use of chemicals for removing herbs and agricultural purposes is another potential issue to decrease levels of harmful dioxides and ground level ozone resulting from the interactions of emissions of volatile organic compounds and nitrogen oxides. Mitigation plans should be developed to protect the site from different environmental problems caused by both pollution and visitation negative behaviors.

Establishing common goals between conservation of resources and the development needs of local people is an essential part of understanding sustainable protected areas management (Dolisca et al 2007). The local community should be more involved in tourism activities and in protection of the site; this could be achieved through training escorts and monitors from local community to work at the site, also supporting more small local projects that aim at providing unique experiences to tourists and handicraft production. Considering the needs of local community in Umm Qais is necessary to create a better tourist experience; none of the previously developed management plans for this site put locals attitudes and perceptions toward tourism in first place, especially those who were replaced in alternative settlement and got their agricultural and herding activities negatively influenced, which makes then negative attitudes toward tourism development and investments from outside by the local community justified.

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