

A Symbol of Peaceful Coexistence Umm ar-Raṣāṣ / Kastron Mefaa on the World Heritage List

On July 11th 2004 the national newspapers came out with the news that the ruins of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, located in the eastern steppe of Mādabā and historically identified with Kastron Mefaa, were inscribed on the World Heritage List by UNESCO at the 28th Session of the World Heritage Committee held between June 28 to July 7 in Suzhou, China.

This prestigious international acknowledgment rewarded the joint efforts of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the Franciscan Archaeological Institute on Mount Nebo that started archaeological excavations at the ruins, located 30km east of Mādabā¹.

This venture started in summer 1986 with the discovery of the amazing floor mosaic at the Church of Saint Stephen, dated to the eighth century or Umayyad period, with architectural representations of eight cities of Palestine, starting with a vignette of the Holy City of Jerusalem, nine cities of Jordan, including 'Ammān, Mādabā and Kastron Mefaa, and ten cities of Egypt starting with Alexandria.

The Greek inscriptions made it possible to identify the ruins of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ with the historical city of Kastron Mefaa². The name of the ancient town appears twice in the main inscription in the nave, and for a third time labeling the architectonic plan of the city itself, which is depicted among the cities of Transjordan. Later on, the name of Katrom Mefaa was found for a fourth time accompanying

a double vignette in the mosaic floor of the Church of the Lions.

The Moabite town of Mefaa, located on the high plateau of Moab, appears in the Bible where it is recorded along with Mādabā, Mā'in, Nebo, Ḥisbān, al-'Āl and many other localities on the road, which connected central Moab to the northern region. In the Roman period, Kastron Mefaa was a military camp for Arab auxiliary cavalry in the Roman army under the command of the *Dux Arabiae*³. In the Byzantine period, according to the results of the archaeological excavations which continued until summer 2006, the town reached the peak of its urban development with domestic houses built inside and outside the walls of the Roman camp and a dozen churches, beautifully paved with floor mosaics, which date to the time of Sergius, Bishop of Mādabā, i.e. the end of the sixth century AD.

Kastron Mefaa flourished as a Christian city under the new Islamic government of the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, as primarily evidenced by the Church of Saint Stephen which was built and decorated at the time of Bishop Sergios II of Mādabā in 718AD. In 756AD, the pavement in the presbytery of the church was renovated and a new mosaic floor made at a higher level by a local team of mosaicists guided by Staurachios, son of Zada from Ḥisbān, and his colleague Euremios. The building of the church at the time of Job, Bishop of Mādabā,

¹ For the texts relating to the history of the explorations at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Brünnow, R.E. and Domaszewski, A. 1904-1909. *Die Provincia Arabia*. Strassburg, II, 63-67; Saller, S. and Bagatti, B. 1949. *The Town of Nebo (Khirbet el-Mekhayyat)*. Jerusalem, 245-251; Piccirillo, M. 1989. *Chiese e Mosaici di Madaba*. Jerusalem, 269-308, 1992. *The Mosaics of Jordan*. Amman, 209-337; Piccirillo M. and Alliata, E. 1994. *Umm al-Rasas - Mayfa'ah I. Gli scavi del Complesso di Santo Stefano*. Jerusalem.

² Piccirillo, M. 1990. L'identificazione storica delle rovine di Umm al-Rasas-Kastron Mefaa in Giordania. *Biblica* 71: 527-541.

³ Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea on the Sea metropolis city of the Roman-Byzantine Province of Palaestina, knows a unit of the Roman army stationed on the edge of the desert at Mephaat (*Onomasticon* 128, 21), a locality which the historian identifies with the Levitical city of refuge of *Mepha'at* in the territory of the tribe of Reuben on the *mishor Moab* (Joshua 13, 21; 21, 37; Jeremiah 48, 21). The *Notitia Dignitatum* records that *equites promoti indigenae*, auxiliary troops of the Roman army, were stationed in the camp of *Mefaa* under the command of the *Dux Arabiae*.

was funded by several local benefactors, among them Kaïoum, Abbot of the Monastery of Moses at Mount Nebo. The church provides historical evidence for a flourishing urban Christian community on the steppe of Jordan during the eighth century: a period of peaceful co-existence between the Christian population and the Islamic authorities.

Kastron Mefaa was known as Mayfa'ah in Arabic. The town is mentioned in the *Sirat al-Rasūl*, the first biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, which has come down to us in its extant form from the hands of Abū Moḥammad Abd al-Malik bin Hishām (died 834AD), who edited materials originally assembled by Mohammad bin Ishāq (died 768AD)⁴. A section of the book tells the stories of four men who, just before the coming of Islam, broke with the polytheism of the Quraish in Mecca. They were representatives of the famous *ḥunayfa*, or pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists in the terminology of the Qur'an. Three of them became Christians, one of them Zayd bin Amr bin Nufayl, "stayed as he was: he accepted neither Judaism nor Christianity". As for the other three, Zayd bin Amr "had determined to leave Mecca to travel about in search of the *ḥanaḥfiyyah*, the religion of Abraham". After a long journey through the Persian Empire and Syria, in the Byzantine Empire "where he was questioning monks and rabbis" about the *ḥanaḥfiyyah*, he ar-

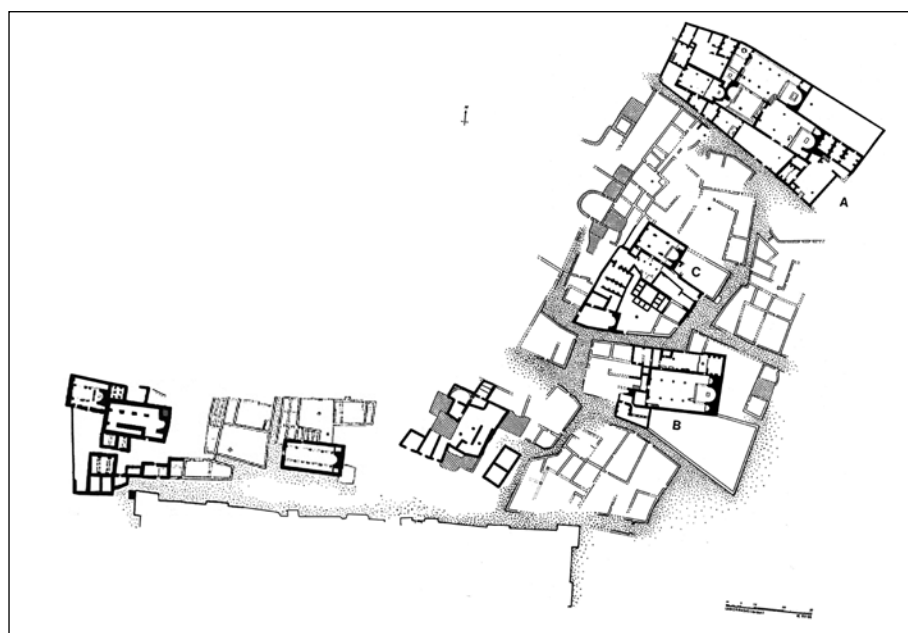
rived at Mayfa'ah in the land of al-Balqā' in the territory of Mādabā, where he received, as an answer, a monk's prophecy about the future mission of Muḥammad.

Between 1987 and 1998, a Swiss team from the Max Van Berchem Foundation of Geneva joined efforts with our team for investigation of the ruins inside the castrum⁵. Still working at the site are the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and the archaeologists of Mount Nebo, whose work is funded by the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Excavation of the Ruins 1986-2006

The Christian character of the Byzantine-Umayyad period ruins of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ / Kastron Mefaa is highlighted by the four large ecclesiastical complexes excavated by our mission, of the Franciscan Archaeological Institute, in the northern outer quarter of the city and the Twin Churches, excavated by the Swiss Max Van Berchem archeological mission near the eastern wall of the castrum (FIG. 1).

The sacred edifices so far identified and partially excavated include four in the castrum and 10 in the outer quarter. Recently, to the church at the base of the tall tower, we have had to add another small chapel identified in the fields south of a small two-floor building, with a fortified door closed by a



1. Umm ar-Raṣāṣ / Kastron Mefaa: the excavated part of the northern quarter (drawing by C. Pappalardo).

⁴ Griffith, S.H. 1994. Mayfa'ah: un sito dimenticato nella primitiva tradizione islamica. Pp. 51-54 in M. Piccirillo and E. Alliata (eds.), *Umm al-Rasas - Mayfa'ah I. Gli scavi del Complesso di Santo Stefano*. Jerusalem.

⁵ Bujard, J. 1992. Les églises géminées d'Umm er-Rasas. Fouilles de la mission archéologique suisse (Fondation Max Van Berchem). *ADAJ* 36: 291-306.

rolling stone, which has been excavated by the Department of Antiquities. We owe the identification of the Byzantine-Umayyad cemetery west of the castrum, between the wall and the modern asphalt road, to looters.

The five complexes which we have excavated in the outer quarter are — one after another in a north-south direction leading towards the northern wall of the castrum — the Saint Stephen Complex, the Saint Paul Complex, and the Church of the Lions Complex and — in a west-east direction along the wall of the castrum — the Tabula Ansata Complex and the Complex of the Reliquary Church, the latter being the last church excavated by the Department of Antiquities, which was completed by us. The dated mosaics range from the sixth to eighth centuries, providing us with an important opportunity to trace the historical development of liturgical furniture in the churches: the altar, ambo and offering table.

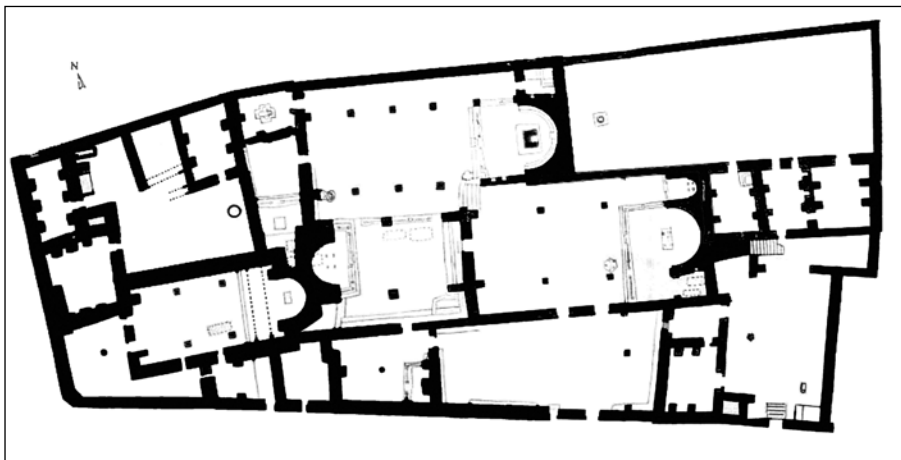
We are currently examining the so-called ‘Palace’ in front of the north gate of the castrum⁶.

The Saint Stephen Complex (FIG. 2)

In summer 1986, work started on the north-east edge of the ruins, where a large and interconnected liturgical complex composed of four churches, two chapels and a baptistery room, was identified and explored. It comprised the two mosaiced churches, the Bishop Sergius Church to the north and the Saint Stephen Church to the east, with a paved courtyard between them which was later converted into a church — the Church of the Courtyard — by

the addition of an apse on its western wall — and a fourth paved church in the south-west sector, the Church of the Niche. A funerary chapel and room with the baptistery basin were added on the west side of the Bishop Sergius Church. A small chapel, the Chapel of the Column or Chapel M, was built in the Umayyad period on the south side of the Church of the Courtyard. The complex was enclosed within a continuous wall⁷.

The main entrances to the complex were from the south. Through a double door, one could cross a stone-paved courtyard and enter the church of St. Stephen, or one could enter a second room on the west side and descend to the Courtyard church. A chancel screen separated this church from the Bishop Sergius Church. Through the main entrance of the Bishop Sergius Church, one entered a mosaiced room between the baptistery on the north side and a funeral chapel on the south. The cruciform basin of the baptistery, which was covered with a waterproof reddish plaster, was badly damaged during a secondary re-use of the room. The liturgical purpose of this new church, with its apse orientated to the west, can be explained by the two barrel-vault tombs of the funeral chapel which continued to the east under the presbytery of the Courtyard Church. This funereal character was emphasised by the finding of two multiple tombs below the floor slabs of the church itself. Several women were buried in the tombs, some wearing bracelets, rings and necklaces with bronze crosses. In the latest phase, the double door of the Courtyard Church was blocked and the adjoining room converted into a poor cha-



2. The Saint Stephen Complex with the four churches of Saint Stephen, Bishop Sergius (with the baptistery), the Courtyard Church and the Edicule Church.

⁶ Umm ar-Rasas 2005. Excavation Report, *Ricerca Storico-archeologica in Giordania*, XXV (2005). *LA* 55: 491-498; Umm ar-Rasas. The XIXth Archaeological Campaign 2006. *LA* 56: 568-572;

Pls 44-46.

⁷ Piccirillo, M. and Alliata, E. 1994. *Umm al-Rasas - Mayfa'ah I. Gli scavi del Complesso di Santo Stefano*. Jerusalem.

pel with reused materials (Chapel of the Column or Room M; see also above).

The Church of the Niche was slightly isolated from the other three churches and had its own entrance at the south-west corner of the complex. A courtyard with cistern, situated to the north of the Church of the Niche, was reached from inside the town through a tunnel which passed below the presbytery of the church. In a tomb excavated under the paved floor of the church, we found several metal, wood and glass objects in a straw basket, possibly the beauty case of a lady buried there.

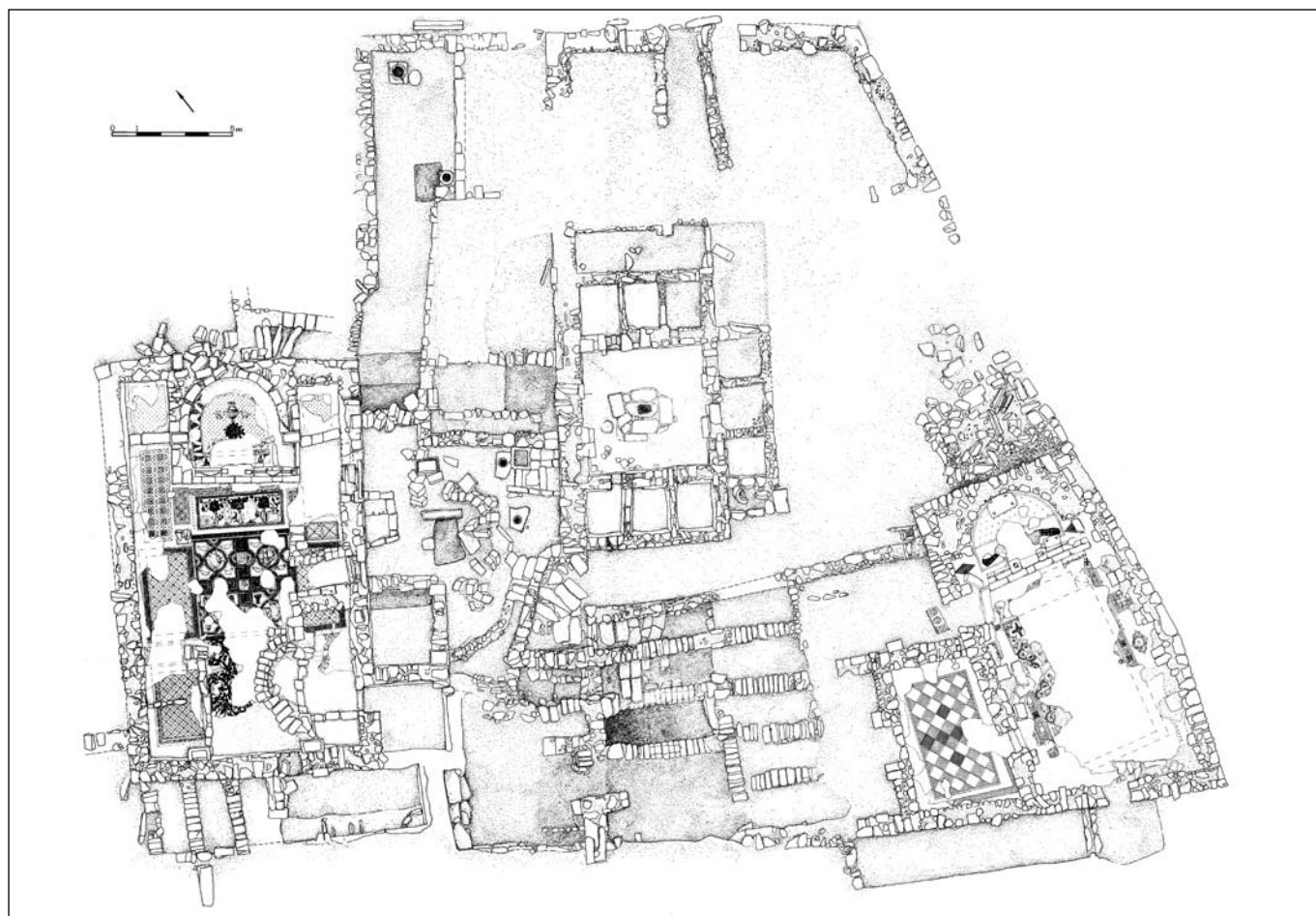
The main changes to this complex, which was built in the sixth century, took place during the Umayyad period. It was abandoned towards the ninth-tenth century, on the basis of the pottery found under the collapse of the main structures. One of the main results of these excavations was the realisation that the northern walls of the ecclesiastical complex were used as a defensive wall of the urban outer quarter, a detail of town planning highlight-

ed in the representation of the town on the mosaic floor of the Church of the Lions.

The Saint Paul Complex (FIG. 3)

Having brought the greater part of the Saint Stephen Complex to light, excavations continued inwards towards the south within the urban area delimited by the Saint Stephen complex to the north and the perimeter wall of the castrum to the south. A survey of the emerging walls showed that the area had two ecclesiastical complexes at its centre.

The church of the second complex, buried under a thick layer of accumulated rubble but still predominant because of its raised position in the centre of the ruins, was easily identifiable from its apsed form. The name was taken from an invocation to the Apostle Paul incised on a roof tile recovered from the collapse deposit. The ecclesiastical complex comprising the Church of Saint Paul and Chapel of the Peacocks is part of a block of buildings surrounded on three sides by



3. The Saint Paul Complex with the Church of Saint Paul to the north, the Chapel of the Peacocks to the south and the wine press with cellars in the centre (B. Steri).

roads⁸. To the north, this block opens out on to a small street which runs along the edge of the Saint Stephen Complex and which seems to have been the natural line of communication between the two ecclesiastical complexes.

The plan of the church is that of a normal basilical church, with a raised apsed presbyterium. It had a double entrance on the south wall, shifted slightly to the east, which led to a covered portico supported by three arches, which rested on two columns and pilasters. A third door on the same wall, close to its south-west corner, led from the church into a service area which, externally, was a continuation of the portico yet distinct from it. The floor of the church was mosaiced in its entirety.

In the mosaic of the apsed presbyterium, two bulls facing each other across a fruit-laden tree were set on a geometric composition created by a grid of flowers. The central nave is divided into three separate panels. In the eastern rectangular panel the benefactors of the church, Sergis, Rabbus and his son Paul, were portrayed. Iconographically, the central panel is the most elaborate. It has the personification of the Earth placed at the centre of the composition, surrounded by the personifications of the four Rivers of Paradise accompanied by their names — Ghion, Phison, Tigris and Euphrates. In the western panel, four registers of vine scrolls show the usual vintage and pastoral scenes.

The Chapel of the Peacocks is built at a lower level than the road, which stretches along the south wall. On the evidence of the odd deviation of the south wall of the chapel in a north-westerly direction, it could be that the road pre-existed the chapel, which was built on the edge of the property in the south-west corner. The door in the facade opened onto the road. The internal level of the chapel was reached by a row of steps.

The chapel comprised a prayer hall with apse and a northern service room with its own door near the north-west corner of the chapel. A second door in the north wall connected the chapel with an inner paved courtyard to the north. In the apsed area, two items of liturgical furniture were still preserved: first, the base of the altar against the curve of the apse and, second, the base of the offering table, near the chancel screen on the south side of the entrance to the sanctuary. In the northern service room, we noticed

a small columnnet inserted in the mosaic floor near the east wall, possibly the base of a table.

Evidence for the reuse of the chapel as a dwelling before the collapse of the roof, included a *tābūn*-type oven built in the south-west corner of the chapel with sherds of a cooking pot of rough black ware, as already known from the Church of the Lions.

In the inner courtyard, between the two sacred edifices, a large winery was excavated. It comprised a wine press with a central roofed, square room surrounded by nine small wine rooms, with two underground storage cellars on the south side that were linked by a stone stairway. On the basis on the stratigraphy, the winery was constructed in the Umayyad period. The grapes may have been grown in the orchards visible around the city and in the terraced valley, which separates the urban settlement from the high tower to the north.

The Church of the Lions Complex (FIG. 4)

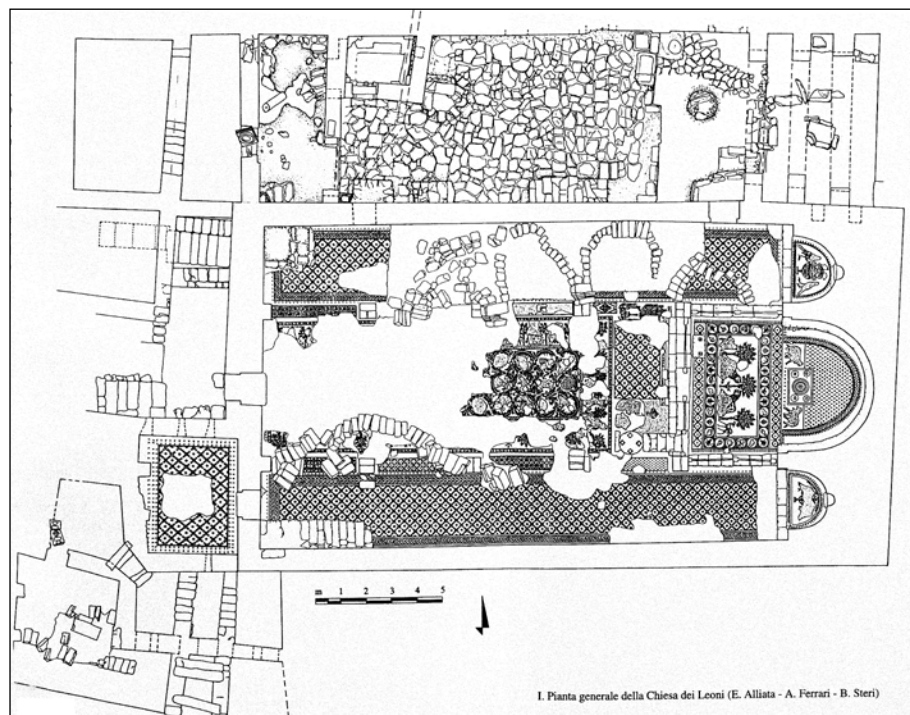
The third complex is that of the church, which we have called the Church of the Lions, inspired by the two superb animals depicted in the floor mosaic in front of the altar. This is only a detail within the rich and beautiful design of the floor, in which a second double vignette of Kastron Mefaa is depicted⁹. The Church of the Lions is the only example in the entire Mādabā region of a three-apsed church with a diakonikon room placed on the front facade.

The church, which was covered with a double series of arches in east-west direction, occupies the south-east sector of the ecclesiastical complex. The door in the central facade led to the vestibule and, up a flight of five steps, to the higher central courtyard of the complex, which was surrounded by several rooms. Two doors in the church's north wall led to a stone-paved yard at the centre of the north wing of the complex, which opened on to the inner road. A stone staircase, added to the south wall in the south-western corner, allowed access to the south yard and to the road that ran along the complex on this side.

A probe carried out in the vestibule area, both inside and outside the main door of the church, exposed several tombs of the Byzantine period and led us to conclude that the church was built in a funerary area. Two series of tombs, following one after the

⁸ Piccirillo, M. 2002. The Ecclesiastical Complex of Saint Paul at Umm al-Rasas - Kastron Mefaa. *ADAJ* 46: 535-559.

⁹ Piccirillo, M. 1992. La Chiesa dei Leoni a Umm al-Rasas - Kastron Mefaa. *Liber Annuus* 42: 199-225.



4. The Church of the Lions Complex (E. Alliata, B. Steri and A. Ferrari).

other in an east-west direction, were still in use with the church on the north-west corner of the vestibule.

The Tabula Ansata Church Complex (FIG. 5)

The small church, which we later called the Church of the Priest Wā'il, was among the first sacred Christian edifices identified by explorers amongst the ruins. The apsed building was, to a certain extent, isolated on the south-west edge of the area beyond the walls of the castrum. Upon closer examination of the visible remains, the church was found to form part of an ecclesiastical complex which included, to the south-east, a larger church which we called the Church of the Tabula Ansata after an inscription framed in a tabula incised on a gypsum slab in the paved floor of the presbytery¹⁰. The Tabula Ansata Complex developed during the sixth-seventh centuries in the vicinity of a two-storey tower constructed on the west edge of the ruins of the quarter outside the north-west corner of the castrum.

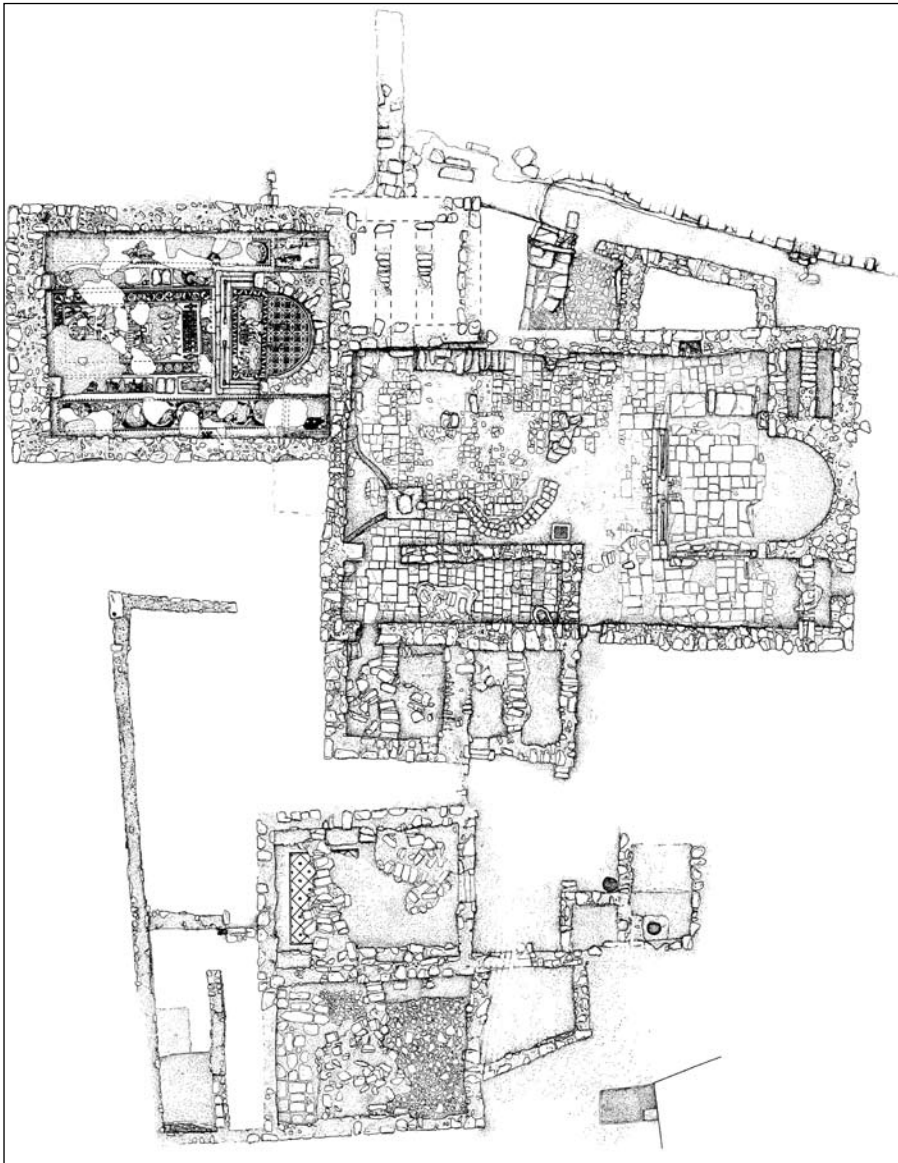
Originally, the Tabula Ansata Church was isolated in the centre of an open courtyard that was skirted to the south by a small road leading into the quarter. The rooms on the south wall were part of the church. Built in the sixth century, it was restored

in the first half of the seventh century. The floor mosaic in the presbytery, the oldest so far found amongst the ruins, had been covered and replaced with slabbed flooring. In a continuation of this work, the entire church was paved using gypseous stone, during which the mosaic surface, that seems not to have extended beyond the second series of pilasters in the nave, was meticulously removed.

In 586AD, accepting the date of the mosaic as a point of reference, the Church of the Priest Wā'il was added. This second church was partly set against the facade of the Tabula Ansata Church and partly against the corresponding wall of the tower. The figurative parts of the church's mosaic floor were seriously damaged during the iconophobic intervention. Three oxen were pictured in the presbytery panel, two on the right and one on the left, which faced each other across a spectacular tuft of acanthus from which sprouted vine shoots with leaves and bunches of grapes. In the central carpet, despite the mutilations, one can distinguish four scenes set at different levels. At the top and in association with the last line of the inscription ("This is the priest and his servant") there is a person in a tunic and cloak, with raised hands, set in a central position who is receiving or giving a twig to

¹⁰ Piccirillo, M. 2003. La chiesa della Tabula Ansata a Umm al-Rasas - Kastron Mefaa. *LA* 53: 285-324; Tavv. 1-24, 1993. La Chiesa del Prete Wa'il a Umm al-Rasas - Kastron Mefaa in Giordania.

Pp. 313-334 in F. Manns and E. Alliata (eds.), *Early Christianity in Context. Monuments and Documents*. Jerusalem.



5. The Complex of the Tabula Ansata Church with the Church of Priest Wa'il (B. Steri and S. De Ruvo).

another character on the right, who is riding a deer of which the branched antlers remain visible. This is probably a portrait of the Priest Wa'il rendered using unusual iconography. On the left the outlines of two characters, both having a raised hand holding a wand, can be seen.

A carriage covered with a red awning, pulled by a horse moving among long stemmed flowers, follows. It is thought to represent the arrival of relics at the city¹¹. On one of the intercolumnar panels were depictions of the busts of the Seasons, divided

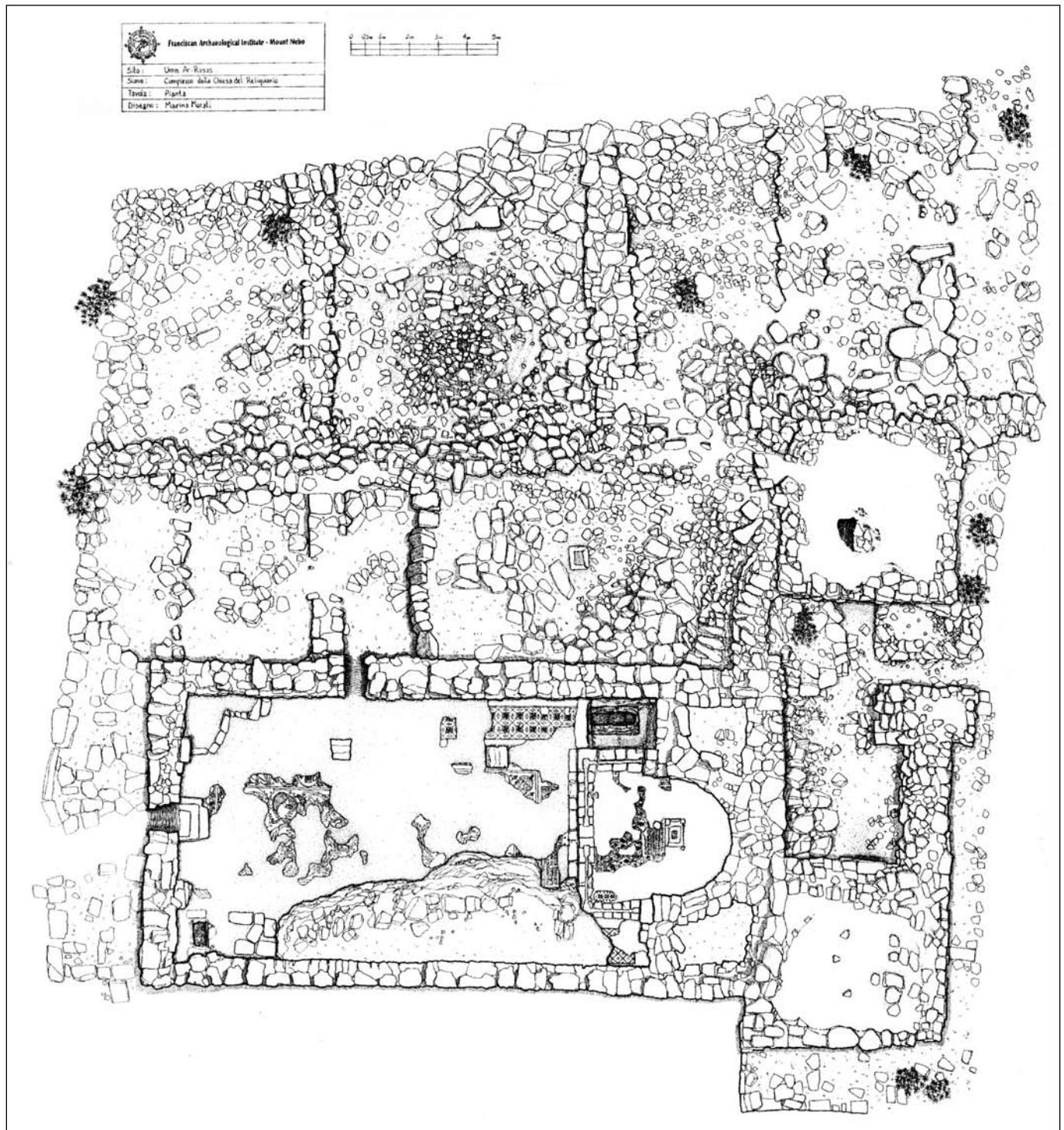
by architectonic motifs.

The Complex of the Reliquary Church (FIG. 6)

Of this large complex, so far only the Church has been explored, in summer 2004¹². A Greek inscription in the floor mosaic, west of the altar, has preserved the names of the main benefactors of the church, all citizens of Kastron Mefaa already known from inscriptions in other churches excavated in the town. In the main inscription in the nave of the church, the name of Sergios Bishop

¹¹ A horse drawn carriage is depicted in the Michaelion at Huarte in Syria clearly referred to the transportation of relics (P. and M. T. Canivet, Huarte. Sanctuaire chrétien d'Apamène (IVe - VIe s.), Paris 1987, I, 216-220; II, Pl. CXX.). I owe this reference to my friend P.-L. Gatier.

¹² Piccirillo, M. 2006. La Chiesa del Reliquiario a Umm al-Rasas. *LA 56*: 375-388; Pappalardo, P. 2006. Ceramica e piccoli oggetti dallo scavo della chiesa del Reliquiario a Umm al-Rasas. *LA 56*: 389-398.



6. The Complex of the Reliquary Church (M. Marina).

of Mādabā and the year 586AD could be read, together the names of benefactors, such as Wā'il son of Amriliōs and Abosobeos, members of the Arab community of the town.

From the few remains which survived destruction after the abandonment of the church, it is pos-

sible to reconstruct the general design of the mosaic floor, which follows the designs of other churches built in the town during the same period: the Church of Bishop Sergios dated 587AD, the Church of Saint Sergios inside the walls and the Church of Priest Wā'il, both built in the same year, 481 of the

Provincia Arabia, i.e. 586AD. It is another example of the splendid artistic achievements attained in the territory of Mādabā during the second half of the sixth century.

The Two Vignettes of Kastron Mefaa and the Urban Setting of Kastron Mefaa

Archaeological excavations have shed light on the development of the town from the Moabite Iron Age II period to the Umayyad-Abbasid period.

Evidence of the Moabite settlement of the seventh and sixth century BC is restricted to a few sherds found under the paved floor of the Chapel of the Column, a basalt base found reused in the Church of Bishop Sergius and a scaraboid found in a tomb along the facade of the Church of the Lions.

The excavations of the Max van Berchem Foundation team inside the walled castrum, (which extends 158m. by 139m., with a wall 2m. thick with 18 buttresses, five each on the north and south sides, and four each on the east and west sides) have clarified the military nature of the castrum built at the end of the third century. It had a gate between two towers in the middle of the eastern wall, with two more gates on the north and east walls respectively¹³.

A Latin inscription found on the east side of the Church of Saint Stephen, along with Thamudic graffiti, bear witness to the presence of the Roman Army and its Arab auxiliaries (*equites promoti indigenae* of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, possibly a detachment of the *Legio IV Martia* based at al-Lajjūn 35km. to the south-west).

To this period also belong several milestones of Diocletian's era, reused in the walls of the Tabula Ansata Church Complex. They are the first clear evidence of the so called *via militaris* hypothesised by some scholars working in the area.

The main urban development of Kastron Mefaa, which gradually became a town, or fortified village, inhabited by Arab families after it was abandoned by the Army, can be divided into two periods. This parallels developments at other castra in the region such as Khirbat as-Samrā, al-Ḥumayma, Umm al-Jimāl, Zīzyā and Umm al-Quṭṭayn¹⁴. The first period should be dated from first half of the

fifth century, when the army left, to the first half of the sixth century. It can be seen as a transitional period of occupation within the existing structures by a semi-nomadic population.

The second period of building activity started in the second half of the sixth century, when the first churches were built, mostly at the time of Bishop Sergius of Mādabā who was in seat from 574 to 603AD. The inscriptions of the mosaic floors bear witness to a settled Christian population of Arab origin, as evidenced by their names, with their clergy and civil officials drawn from the territory of the Episcopal city of Mādabā.

The building activity inside and outside the castrum gave rise to the town, which reached its maximum extent in the Umayyad Period. As at other sites, the main characteristic of the settlement was the occupation of the public space inside the castrum and the expansion of the quarter to the north with ecclesiastical complexes and houses mainly composed of one or two rooms with flat stone roofs, supported by arches flanking the side of an inner courtyard. Rainwater was collected in private cisterns and a public water reservoir.

The orchards and fields on the outskirts of the village, together with the large wine press we excavated in the courtyard of the Saint Paul Complex, constitute historical evidence for the economy of the population, which was based mainly on sheep and goat herding and agriculture. In this agricultural context, two structures of particular interest are preserved in the fields. The first is situated on the eastern slope of the valley to the north of the inhabited area, while the second, better preserved and comprising a two-storey house with a nearby chapel, is found to the south-east of the tall tower, situated as usual on the rocky slope which emerges towards the bottom of the valley.

The evidence for the late occupation of the churches after their abandonment is archaeologically important. The coarse black (or Bedouin) ware found in the rooms built within the churches date this occupation to the ninth-tenth century.

In the Church of Saint Paul, the newcomers entered the abandoned sacred edifice through the western door on the south wall. Inside the church, they built a rectangular room between the two

¹³ Bujard, J. 1995. La fortification de Kastron Mayfa'ah/Umm al-Rasas. *SHAJ* V: 241-249. Amman.

¹⁴ Hamarneh, B. 2003. Topografia cristiana ed insediamenti rurali

nel territorio dell'odierna Giordania nelle epoche bizantina ed Islamica, V-IX sec, Roma: 56-58.

southern pillars and a wall with a central door on the north wall. A long stone lintel decorated with crosses in relief was reused in the foundations of the east wall of the room. A small corridor divided this room from a second eastern room, constructed in the aisle between the south side of the presbyterium, apse and south wall of the church. A third, smaller room was built outside the church with an entrance from the east, and an oven was used inside the church in its north-west corner. The collapsed remains of the church covered these later structures¹⁵.

In the Tabula Ansata Church, the newcomers occupied the abandoned church by building a new room along the south wall with access to the cistern in the centre of the church. Two ovens were used, one in the south-west corner of the church, the second near the steps leading to the Church of the Priest Wā'il to the west. A stone basin and plaster basin were recovered from this house¹⁶.

In light of this historical development of the ruins at Umm ar-Raṣāṣ / Kastron Mefaa, one could go further in studying the vignette of Kastron Mefaa and attribute to the mosaicist the intention of describing the urban setting of the town and the churches that existed at that time within the castrum (the double church of the Saint Sergius complex) and in the northern quarter (the Saint Stephen complex).

The vignette of Kastron Mefaa was depicted in the mosaic floor of the Church of the Lions (end of the sixth century) and in the mosaic floor of the nave of the Church of Saint Stephen (first half of the eighth century); both are double vignettes.

In the Church of the Lions the likelihood is that the vignette was part of a scene, possibly a hunting scene, which unfolded along the step up to the level of the ambo but that it was later disfigured during the iconophobic crisis.

In the upper vignette, we have a polygonal plan of a city surrounded by high walls and towers with battlements. Steps precede an arched entrance. Black lines separated by yellow ones serve to identify the various storeys of the towers, which have a double window in each storey. Two churches with red sloping roofs, both viewed frontally, can be

seen within the walls. These are joined by a colonnade with balcony and a possible hint of stairs at the front. A schematic building with doors or windows between two side-shutters abuts the south church.

The second vignette is also surrounded by walls and towers with battlements, which are kept low and adjoin the previous vignette. Several arched doors, depicted frontally, can be seen amongst the towers along all the circuit. Along the internal perimeter of the walls at least three churches are represented, with red sloping roofs. Two adjacent churches are in the foreground and another two are isolated on the sides. The isolated church to the left has two additional doors in the side wall as well as the door in the central facade. The church in the foreground is depicted with three levels of windows on its side wall. A column on a three-stepped base rises at the centre of an otherwise empty vignette, rendered with white tesserae. The column is crowned with a capital and a cross.

The vignette, with its descriptive naturalistic character refers to the bi-partite urban plan of Kastron Mefaa made up of the Roman castrum and the neighbourhood that developed to the north beyond its walls. It clarifies the much more schematic vignette found in the mosaic in the Church of Saint Stephen, where a church inside the walled castrum is clearly visible, the outer quarter being exemplified with the church of Saint Stephen.

The iconographic meaning of the column remains unclear. In both of the Kastron Mefaa vignettes, the column is placed at the centre of the quarter outside the walls. One might suspect a Christianised memorial of the castrum's military past borrowed from the vignettes we find in the codices of the *Notitia Dignitatum*. It is also a feature found in the vignette of the Holy City of Jerusalem in the Mādabā mosaic map, and in the mosaic floor of the Church of the Martyrs at Taybat al-Imam, north of Hama, where a column on a base is depicted near the vignette of a high building.

These historical and artistic discoveries are worthy of the honor bestowed by UNESCO on the ruins of Umm ar-Raṣāṣ / Kastron Mefaa, which remains a symbol of peaceful co-existence between people.

¹⁵ Piccirillo, M. 1997. La Chiesa di San Paolo a Umm al-Rasas - Kastron Mefaa. *Liber Annuus* 47: 375-394; Sanmori, C. and Pappalardo, C. 1997. Ceramica dalla Chiesa di San Paolo e dalla Cappella dei Pavoni - Umm al-Rasas. *Liber Annuus* 47: 395-428.

¹⁶ Abela, J. and Pappalardo, C. 1999. Umm al-Rasas. Campagna 1999. Chiesa della Tabula Ansata. *Liber Annuus* 49: 479ss; Piccirillo, M. 2003. La chiesa della Tabula Ansata a Umm al-Rasas - Kastron Mefaa. *LA* 53: 285-324; Tavv. 1-24.