

THE COMPLEX OF SAINT STEPHEN AT UMM ER-RASAS-KASTRON MAFAA

First Campaign, August 1986

by

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The Exploration of the Ruins

While camping in Ghor el-Mezra' on his way back from the unsuccessful journey to Petra, the German explorer Ulrich Seetzen was told by his guide, Bey Maijub, about the existence of an extraordinary ruin on the high plateau north of Wadi el-Mujib. Bey Maijub told the explorer:

“that these ruins are the most exciting - the ruins of Umm er-Rasas (which means the mother of lead). This ancient city is found a half-day walk southeast of Dhiban. It has only one gate - like that of Jerash - only more beautiful. He assured me - writes the explorer - that the whole city is still well preserved, thus it is still possible for one to see all the streets, the houses, and the temples. The greatest marvel of this site is the walls, built with large, black, square stones, which, instead of mortar, have a fine layer of lead. The Beduins would have taken this lead long ago if the well constructed, large stones would have allowed it”.¹

By the end of his journey, Seetzen was convinced that Umm er-Rasas enjoyed great fame among the Beduins as a “house of hidden treasures”. Because he couldn't reach the site himself, he hoped that some other traveler would have the good fortune to visit it in the future.

Burchardt had the same wish.² But, it was Bunningham - his party, arriving at Umm er-Rasas in the spring of 1816 - who made the wish a reality. However, the reality seemed more modest than what they had expected.

“(The area) is filled with ruined buildings, all, however, of a small size, and unadorned by architectural ornament of any kind, though constructed of very large stones... and the whole appearance of the buildings was small and unimportant, though the masonry was unusually solid for such works, and calculated for great duration”.³

Irby and Mangles shared the same impression when they reached the site in June 1818:

“At 3.00 p.m. we reached Umm er-Rasas. We found the ruins very extensive, and evidently Christian. There were the remains of a stone wall which enclosed the whole city; the cross is often to be met with, but there is no architectural remnant worthy of notice”.⁴

The reaction of the explorers of the second half of the century was more realistic.⁵ Palmer, attracted by the report of an inscription, reached Umm er-Rasas on his return from the Sinai in May 1870. He was motivated by the discovery of the Me-sha' Stone at Dhiban two years earlier. The

1. U.J. Seetzen, *Reisen durch Syrien, Palästina, Phönicien, die Transjordan-Länder...*, II, Berlin 1854, 352 f.
2. J.L. Burchardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*, London 1822, 361: “About eight hours S.S.E. (from el-Kahf) is the ruined city of Om el-Reszasz, i.e. the Mother of Lead, which, according to all accounts, is of great extent, and contains large buildings. In my present situation it was impossible for me to visit these two places. I hope that some future traveler will be more fortun-

ate”.

3. J.S. Buckingham, *Travels among the Arab Tribes inhabiting the Countries East of Syria and Palestine...*, London 1825, 104.
4. Ch.L. Irby - J. Mangles, *Travels in Egypt and Nubia, Syria...*, London 1823, 471.
5. The ruins were visited, among others, by G. Robinson (*Travels in Palestine and Syria*, II, London 1837, 187f.) and H. Layard (*Early Adventures in Persia...*, London 1887, 111).

inscription turned out to be a Nabataean text already known to the scholars, but Palmer had the opportunity to study the ruins of Umm er-Rasas with more accuracy:

“Umm er-Rasas is a large ruined town (of considerable extent) built on similar arches to those described in other ruins, and containing two churches. It is surrounded by a strong but-tressed wall, and is about 400 yards square... From the size and extent of the ruined city, and the two fine churches which it contains, it is evident that Umm er-Rasas must have been a town of considerable importance during the Christian occupation of the Holy Land.”⁶

The Canon Tristram, who camped with his expedition at Umm er-Rasas for a week in the middle of February in 1872, gave a more accurate description of the ruins:

“Umm er-Rasas a large, solidly built, square city, far more perfect than anything we have before seen. The walls of the old city are still entire and intact for a part of their height, and had an imposing appearance as we neared them from the west... Now all within these walls is utterly desolate...”⁷

Later Vailhé realized that the large square city enclosed by thick walls was a

Roman camp at the edge of the desert.⁸ When he arrived at the site in 1896, he found that the ruins north of the fort were inhabited by some families of the Salayta tribe.

At this time, several scholars attempted proposing a historical identification for Umm er-Rasas. In 1898, Clermont-Ganneau published the Nabataean inscription seen at Umm er-Rasas.⁹ The orientalist also tried to explain the origin and significance of the name of the ruins. Umm er-Rasas, which in the most simple terms, refers to lead, actually is related to the Arabic root *Rass*, *Rassas*, indicating the action of putting something on top of something else in perfect alignment. Thus, *mur-assas*, covered by lead, is only a derived name. Therefore Umm er-Rasas, or *mou-rassas* in the toponomastic of the region of Syria-Palestine, is a term which indicates a well-built wall, and for this reason it is a good indication of the antiquity of the locality.

The Brünnow-Domaszewski expedition arrived at Umm er-Rasas in April of 1897.¹⁰ In the third volume of their monumental study of the Provincia Arabia, they published eight beautiful photos of Umm er-Rasas and a general plan of the fort with the position of three churches inside the walls. On June 5, 1933 Glueck arrived at the site. He collected only Nabataean, Byzantine and Arabic sherds.¹¹ On April 1,

6. E.H. Palmer, *The Desert of the Exodus*, II, Cambridge 1871, 498-500.

7. H.B. Tristram, *The Land of Moab*, London 1874, 140-143.

8. S. Vailhé, “Dans les montagnes bleues”, *Echos de Notre-Dame de France*, 1986, 230: “Ce sont de beaucoup les ruines les plus considérables et les mieux conservées de la région. Elles se divisent en deux parties bien distinctes. Au Sud, un quadrilatère régulier de 150 mètres, enfermé dans d’épaisses murailles flanquées chacune de sept fortes tours. Trois chapelles orientées sont comprises dans cette partie. Au Nord, s’étendent les ruines de nombreuses maisons. Plusieurs sont encore debout avec leurs arceaux et leurs toitures en dalles comme les habitations du Hauran. Des rues coupent la ville et se reconnaissent encore. Cinq églises se trouvent dans cette partie

non fortifiée de la ville... La vue de ces ruines divisées si régulièrement fait penser à un camp romain, placé sur la lisière du desert...” Fr. J. Germer-Durand, who arrived to Umm er-Rasas with Fr. Vailhé, proposed to identify the ruins with Mefaat (“Frontières de l’Empire Romain en Arabie...”, *Echos de Notre-Dame de France*, 1897, 37 s.): “Oum er-Rasas a été identifié, par un certain nombre d’exégètes, avec l’ancienne Mephaat de l’Ecriture, ville sacerdotale de la tribu de Ruben. L’Onomasticon la signale comme ayant une garnison romaine.”

9. Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, “L’inscription de Oumm er-Rasas”, *RAO*, II, 185-188.

10. R.E. Brünnow - A. Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia*, II, Strassburg 1905, 63-72.

11. N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine*, I, *AASOR XIV*, 1934, 39 f.

1948, Fr. Bagatti tried to establish a schematic plan of the ruins to the north of the fort, focusing on the buildings with apses which he identified as churches: four inside and six outside the walls.¹²

In the last ten years members of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum have returned several times to Umm er-Rasas, to visit, to document and to test what had previously been written about the site. Since it was close to the base-camp at Mount Nebo, it was easy to visit, especially after 1978 when the government asphalted the road which led straight from Madaba to Umm er-Rasas. This also made it possible for the institute to consider future on-site research. The friendly collaboration of Dr. Adnan Hadidi, director of the Department of Antiquities, made it possible to begin the research this year. The first campaign has already proved to be significant for the history of Jordan.

On July 17, 1986, Dr. Hadidi, Mr. Taysir 'Attiyat, inspector of the Madaba region, Fr. Eugenio Alliata and Fr. Piccirillo visited the site. Here the choice of an area for excavation, the conditions of the collaboration between the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum and the Department, and the date for the beginning of the excavation were formalized. On July 26, Mr. 'Attiyat began the first soundings. For practical reasons, specifically, to facilitate the removal of a considerable amount of debris, the two edifices with apses on the north edge of the ruins were chosen. These were listed as numbers 1 and 2 in the plan of Fr. Bagatti. The first campaign, which included the enthusiastic participation and expertise of the archaeological team of Mount Nebo,¹³ lasted until September 6,

1986.

The Ruins of Umm er-Rasas

Umm er-Rasas is located 30 kilometres southeast of Madaba, north of Wadi el-Mujib, roughly half-way between the King's Highway and the Desert Road. It is possible to reach the site directly from Madaba by the road which goes to Nitl. From there the road, twisting south across Wadi Themed, passes the towers of Za'faran and Rumeil. Alternate routes are from the King's Highway, turning east at Dhiban, or the Desert Road turning west to the height of Khan ez-Zebib station.

The ruins are situated at a high elevation of the plateau and are, therefore, visible from a distance of about 20 kilometers. As one can see in the aerial photograph provided by the National Geographic Centre (Pl. LXX), the ruins of Umm er-Rasas cover an area of at least 30 dunums, about 3 hectares. The ruins contain a walled area on the inside of a fortified camp that has high and strong wall buttresses which extend 150 meters in the east-west direction and 120 meters in the north-south direction. An open quarter of roughly the same dimensions extends outside the camp to the north. Also toward the north, about 1300 meters away, stands a tower. It is 15 meters high with ruined buildings on its eastern side, defended on the north side by a square building constructed near large pools hewn in the rock.¹⁴

As Bey Majjub had told Seetzen, the fortified camp has only one gateway on the north wall.¹⁵ On the inside there is a huge number of stones out of which arise several arches, lintels and small columns decorated with crosses. Among the buildings, there

12. S. Saller - B. Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, Jerusalem 1949, 245-244: "Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine and Arabic remains have been noted on this site, but in its present form it is essentially Byzantine and it is this period which would undoubtedly receive much new light if this place would ever be studied more thoroughly."

13. Participants in the excavation along with Mr. Taysir Attiyat, M. Piccirillo and Fr. Eugenio Alliata, include: Fr. John Abela,

Fr. Vincenzo Janniello, Br. Paschalis Kwoczata, Br. Nicodemus Gdyk, Piero Galimberti, Nelly Cabboi and many others.

14. Some restoration works were carried on in the area by the Department of Antiquities in the 1970's.

15. A second gate, closed in an unknown period, seems to be located on the eastern wall (S. Vailhé, *Echos ND*, 1896, 230: "Les portes se voient encore sur deux côtés...").

are four structures with apses, probably churches. At the south-east corner a deepening of the rubble probably indicates the presence of a large water reservoir. Because the city had no springs, several cisterns are to be seen in the area outside and inside the ruins.

The ruins of the northern quarter outside the walled area are less uniform because they were inhabited by the beduins in the first half of the century.¹⁶ By 1948, when Fr. Bagatti arrived, the ruins had already been abandoned once again. Fortunately, a modern village built by some families of Al-'Ajish of the Bene Sakhr, is developing outside the ruins along the asphalt road which joins Umm er-Rasas with Madaba.

The Excavation: Results of the first campaign, 1986 (Fig. 1)

The place where the archeological explorations began seems to be a large monastic complex enclosed by a wall (Pl. LXXI, 1, 2). It contains four areas with apses and courtyards on the western sides. The excavation was limited to three of these areas. The complex contained two churches next to each other, with an apsed courtyard (Pl. LXXII). The two churches, both containing mosaics, and the paved courtyard, which had been changed into a chapel, formed a large and interconnected liturgical room with three different levels (Fig. 1). Such a structure is unique in the region. The central church is connected with the courtyard through a door on the western facade. The courtyard is only separated from the northern church by a bench. The two churches are connected by a stairway of 5 steps. The walls of these buildings are still well-preserved to a height of 1

meter to 3 meters up to the cornice. Some of the pilasters which supported the transverse arches are preserved up to the capital.

The Church of Bishop Sergius

The mosaic pavement of the northern church, situated on the edge of the ruins, was done at the time of Bishop Sergius in 587. The building is an ordinary, one-apsed church with a sacristy on the north and the presbytery two steps higher than the nave (Pl. LXXIII). In the presbytery the base of the altar together with a bench for the clergy all around the apse is left. A rectangular panel in front of the altar is decorated with a medallion between two lambs and two trees loaded with fruit (Pl. LXXIV, 1). The dedicatory inscription within the medallion reads: "In the good times of our lord, the most holy and most blessed Bishop Sergius the whole work of this most holy church was mosaiced by the priest Procopius in the month of Gorpiaus on the 6th indiction of the year 482 of the Province Arabia" (this date corresponds to 587 A.D.).

Because of this inscription, it is possible to date the mosaic as well as the construction of the church. In the outline of the historical geography of the region, the inscription with the mention of Bishop Sergius of Madaba, confirms that the territory of the episcopal city reached Wadi el-Mujib, including Umm er-Rasas and Dhiban.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the excavation of the central nave of the church confirmed guarded expectations. In contrast to the discovery of the two miraculously intact lambs in the presbytery, all the figures of the church - the benefactors, animals,

16. According to Fr. Savignac, the beduins had exploited the tombs of the cemetery on the west side of the walled area (*RB* 1936; 243-245: "La vaste nécropole de la localité se développait dans la plaine à l'O. Depuis longtemps repérée par les bédouins, elle leur a livré périodiquement des trouvailles fructueuses. En l'une de nos visites, en 1912, nous avons pu constater la déprédation récente d'un nombre considérable de tom-

bés d'où l'on aurait extrait en particulier beaucoup de verres irisés".

17. At the time of Bishop Sergius in Madaba were built the following churches: the baptistry in the cathedral (574), the church of the Apostles (578), the crypt of Saint Elianus (595), together with the three nave basilica at Mount Nebo (597/8).

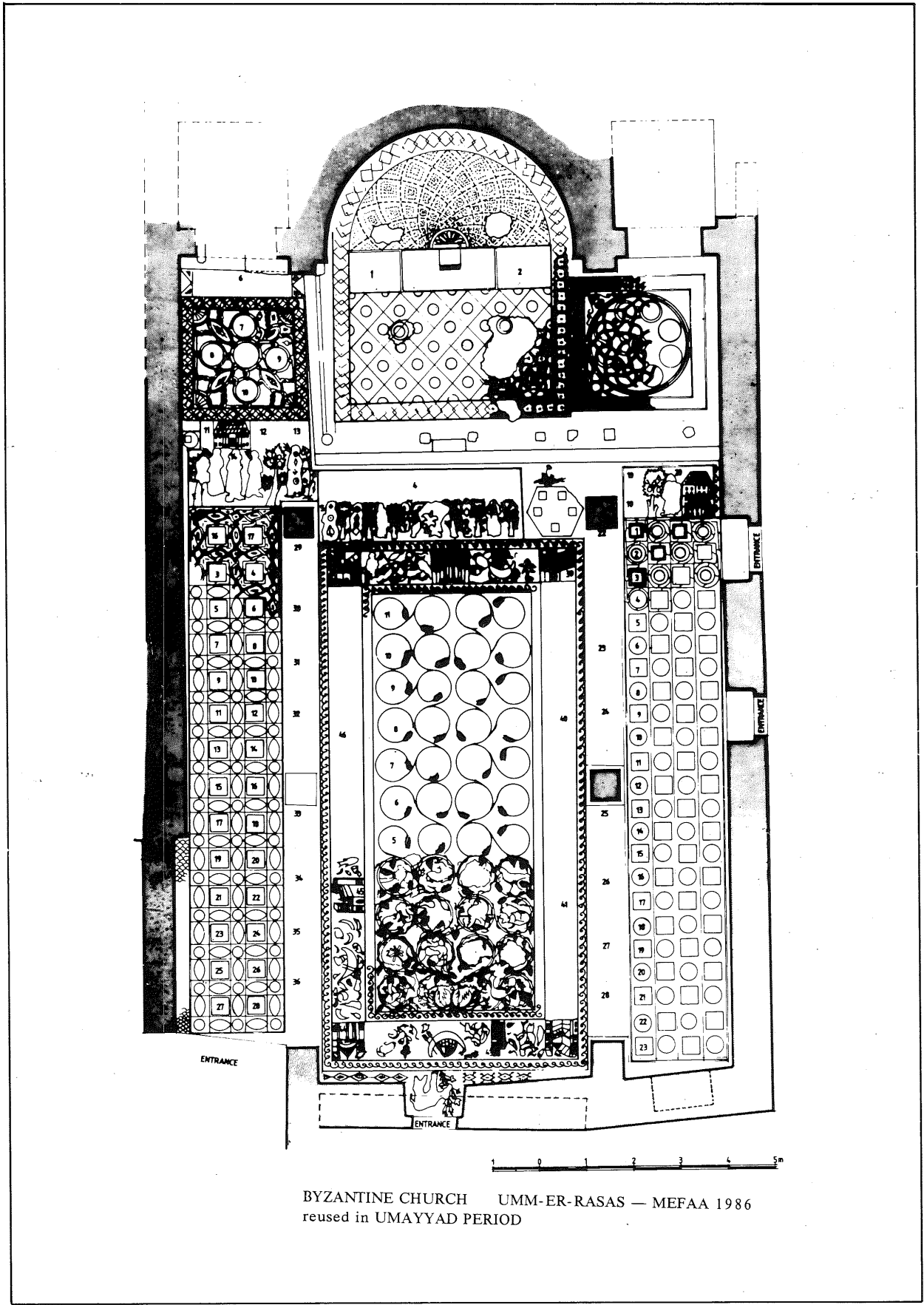


Fig. 1 : General Plan of the excavated area (drawing by Fr. Eugenio Alliata, Franciscan Archaeological Institute).

birds and fish - had been destroyed by the iconoclasts. The only remaining elements that are useful for interpreting the figurative motifs, are the Greek inscriptions and what is left of the figures which were badly patched up. The mosaicist preferred to place scenes of hunting, fishing and vintage in the acanthus scrolls of the frame. In the central carpet he placed portraits and life-scenes of the benefactors. He placed them between two classical personifications: toward the altar, the Abyss,¹⁸ the Sea; toward the main door, the Earth, depicted as a lady crowned with fruit and grain. In her hands she holds a cloth filled with fruit. In between, the mosaicist depicts the sons of John, and Ouadia with a censer in his right hand to the sides of a church.¹⁹ John (son) of Porphirius, Baricha and Zongon are depicted holding the ropes around a bull which is to be killed with an ax and a knife.²⁰ At the right are the sons of Sophia. A second John is depicted with a book in his hands. Next is a shepherd with his flock, followed by Soelos ploughing with a pair of oxen; then an anonymous benefactor with a boy on his shoulders who indicates a second church. John and Peter, on horse back, are accompanied by an archer and a foot soldier, followed by two oxen and two wild beasts. Three more benefactors are depicted among trees in front of the chancel screen. The name of one of them, Robab, remains on the left side. Two unusual scenes are shown in two scrolls: a phoenix bird with rays coming out of its head, and a man carrying a bed on his shoulder. (This typology was used in ancient Christian art to depict the paralytic healed by Jesus.)

There are three more inscriptions on the outside of the main motifs. Near the step of the presbytery, in three lines, there

is a quotation from Psalm 87,2 : "The Lord loves the gates of Zion more than the other tents of Jacob".²¹ In a *tabula ansata* in the first intercolumnar space on the north is beautifully written: "O Lord, have mercy on all who toiled on this mosaic. Their names are known to you. (It was done) in the times of Soelos, of Casiseos, of Abdallos, of Obedos, and of Elias your faithful (ones)".

A third inscription is found in a medallion near the door: "For the salvation of ... (son) of Isaac and of Martirius (son) of Sabinus, and of Theodorus his brother, and of Marinus". Later, near the first step of the stairway between the two churches, an unskilled workman copied an inscription from the upper church.

Geometric motifs decorate the north nave. The southern nave is, for the most part, paved in red stone from Bethlehem. To the right of the main door is the opening of a water cistern. Nearby a stand for amphoras is built reusing an ancient capital.

An un-expected surprise was the discovery of an intact figure under the pulpit. The figure depicts a Season and is located on the south-east corner of the frame (Pl. LXXIV, 2). This figure and the two lambs of the presbytery are the only examples left to indicate the artistic quality of the figures which were destroyed during the iconoclastic crisis.

The Church of Saint Stephen

The church of Saint Stephen lies one meter higher than the church of Bishop Sergius. The two churches are structurally parallel. Both have an apse and an elevated presbytery, two steps higher than the nave. Access to the church of Saint Stephen was also possible from two doors along the south wall (Pl. LXXV, 1).

18. The Abyss had a ram as a standard in his left hand, like the Sea in the Apostles' church at Madaba (Lux, *ZDPV*, 1968, Taf. 29). For a parallel to the Earth, for the first time portrayed in full figure in the mosaics of the region, except for the bare bust, see the imperial diptych in the Louvre museum (A. Grabar, *L'Iconoclasme Byzantin*, 1957, photo 73).

19. As Theodor in the church of Saints Cosmas and Damianos at Jerash (Kraeling, *Gerasha*, Pl. LXXIII)

20. The same motif is in the mosaic of the church of Saint George at Kh. el-Mukhayyat (Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, Pl. 23, 3).

21. Like in the church of the acropolis of Ma'in (*LA*, 1985, 344).

The richness of the inscriptions and the quality of the motifs of the mosaic pavement make this church one of the most important archaeological monuments in Jordan. It is paralleled only by the discovery of the Madaba map in 1897.

From a historical viewpoint the greatest surprise was the dedicatory inscription, located along the step of the presbytery (Pl. LXXV, 2):

“At the time of the most holy Bishop Sergius the mosaic of the holy and illustrious proto-deacon and proto-martyr Stephen²² was completed by the care of John son of Isaac, most beloved of God, *lexou*²³ and deacon and leader of Mefaa, *conom*, and by the care of all the people of *Kastron Mefaa* who love Christ, in the month of October, the 2nd indiction, of the year of the province of Arabia 680 in memory and for the repose of *Fidonus* (son) of *Aeias*, lover of Christ”.

It was a triple historical surprise.

1. The inscription mentions the old name of *Umm er-Rasas*, *Mefaa*, *Kastron Mefaa*, two times.
2. The date of the mosaic floor, October 785²⁴, extends for almost a century the history of mosaic art in Jordan.
3. The inscription provides evidence of the existence of an organized Christian community at the end of the VIIIth century. That community included a bishop, a deacon, and the local clergy.

Any incredulity or critical skepticism²⁵ was cleared away by a second inscription written near the altar in the presbytery decorated mainly with geometric motifs.

“By the grace of Christ, the mosaic of this holy bema was decorated at the

time of our most pious father Bishop Job... in the month of March, the 9th indiction of the year 650 (756 A.D.). Remember O Lord, your servant *Staurachios*, the mosaicist of *Hesban*²⁶, the son of *Zada* and *Euremios* his companion²⁷. Lord, remember your servant *Elia* (son) of *Samuel lexou*, of *Constantine*, of *Germanus*, of *Abdela*, together with *Mary*”.

There is some difficulty reading the inscription due to the abbreviations used by the mosaicist. However it contains some historical data of great interest. First of all, the date confirms the reading of the preceding inscription. Second, the name of a new bishop, *Job*, along with *Sergius II*, can be added to the list of names of the bishops of Madaba. Third, the name of the mosaicist, *Staurachios* of *Hesban*, makes him the first artist of the mosaicists of the region whose place of origin is known to us. In addition, the two dates confirm each other, leading to the conclusion that the mosaic floor of the church is a later restoration²⁸ done by a team of mosaicists who wished to remain anonymous, as indicated in an inscription from the southern nave: “O Lord, remember your servants the mosaicists, whose names you know.”

The portraits of the benefactors, who were giving offerings or wearing the emblems of their public and ecclesiastical standing, had been placed among trees loaded with fruit. Since these portraits and the scenes of hunting, agriculture and pastoral life of the central carpet were disfigured and made unintelligible, the major interest of this mosaic is focused on the double geographical frame and on the toponyms which accompany the city plans (Pl. LXXVI, 1).

22. A church dedicated to Saint Stephen was found in the village of *Rihab* (*Piccirillo, Chiese e Mosaici della Giordania Settentrionale*, Jerusalem 1981, 73).

23. The Greek word *lexou* can be seen as a personal name.

24. The year fits in with the ninth indiction and not with the second indiction given in the inscription.

25. From a careful examination, the inscription was damaged and restored just in the area of the dating.

26. The Greek text reads: *Ezbontinou*.

27. The Greek has *eterou autou*.

28. The same conclusion can be reached from the height of the first step and of the base of the pulpit.

The mosaicist used a motif already known from the mosaic of the church on the acropolis of Ma'in dating to 719/20²⁹. Between the intercolumnar spaces he has inserted a double series of the cities of the area. On the north, there are eight cities of Palestine divided into two groups of four: The Holy City of Jerusalem, Neapolis-Nabulus, Sebastis-Sebastia, Cesarea (Pl. LXXVI, 2), Diospolis-Lidda, Eleutheropolis-Beit Gibrin, Askalon, Gaza (Pl. LXXVI, 3)³⁰. To the south, there are seven cities of Jordan: the first double space was given to Kastron Mefaa, followed by Philadelphia-Amman, Madaba (Pl. LXXVII, 1), Esbounta-Hesban, Belemounta-Ma'in, Areopolis-Rabba, Charachmoba-el-Kerak (Pl. LXXVII, 2)³¹. Another two toponyms of the Jordan area, Limbon and Diblaton, have been added in two panels, along with the portraits of the benefactors on the eastern top of the two side naves. Another toponym without illustration is the inscription which mentions the superior of the monastery on Mount Nebo (called Pisgah in

the Bible): "O Lord, remember your servant Kayoum, monk and priest of Phisga".

The inner geographical frame of the carpet is decorated as a river stream with fish, birds, and water flowers (Pl. LXXVIII, 1). Floating among them are boats and boys fishing or hunting. The continuous scene is interrupted by ten city plans whose toponyms refer to the Nile Delta³²: Alexandria, To Kasin, Thenesos, Tamiathis, Panau, Pilousin, Anticiaou, To Eraklion, Kynopolis, and Pseudostomon³³.

As far as historical identification is concerned, all the toponyms of Palestine and Jordan are well known, with the exception of Limbon. There is a possibility that Limbon could be identified with the actual village of Libb, 10 km south of Madaba on the Kings' Highway³⁴. Diblaton, which is known in the Bible as Diblataim, and as Beit-Diblataim on the Mesha' stele, line 30, has not yet been identified with a ruin in the area. It might to be found north of Dhiban.

29. Piccirillo, *LA*, 1985, 345-349, Pianta I, A-B.

30. Askalon, Gaza and Eleutheropolis (?), are depicted in the mosaic of Ma'in (*LA*, 1985, Pianta I, B). All, but Sebastis, are to be seen in the Madaba Map (M. Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba Map*, Jerusalem 1954).

31. Esbounta, Belemounta, Areopolis and (Charach M)ouba, are depicted in the mosaic of Ma'in (*LA*, 1985, Pianta I, B).

32. Nilotic motifs were found at Jerash in the church of Saint John (C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, Pls. LXVII-LXIX) and in the church of Saints Peter and Paul (*ibid*, Pls. LXXV); in the church of Zay (Piccirillo, *Studia Hierosolymitana*, III, 359-378); in the church of Saints Lot and Procopius at Kh. el-Moukhayyat (Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, Pls. 20-21); in the church of St. John at Khirbet es-Samra (*LA*, 1982, tav. 122); at Umm el-Manabi' on Jebel 'Aj-lun (Piccirillo, *Chiese e Mosaici*, I, 21 f.). For a recent discussion on the subject, see J. Balty, "Thèmes Nilotiques dans la mosaïque tardive du Proche-Orient", in *Alessandria e il Mondo Ellenistico-Romano*, Roma 1984, 827-834, tavv. CXXX-CXXXIII.

33. For Alexandria, Kasin, Thenesos, Pilousin, Kynopolis, see H. Donner, "Das Nildelta

auf der Mosaikkarte von Madaba", in *Fon-tes atque Pontes*, (Agypten und Alten Testament, Band 5) Wiesbaden 1983, 75-89, Taf. 3; *Idem*, "Transjordan and Egypt in the mosaic map of Madaba", *ADAJ*, 1984, 249-257. Tamiathis, modern Dimyat, was a bishopric city in the Byzantine epoch (George of Cyprus, no. 758). The Pilgrim from Piacenza going from Memphis to Alexandria, passed through the city of Antinuo-Antino (Antonini *Itinerarium*, 43, 4). Eraklion is to be identified with Heracleopolis parva-Sethroites, west of Pelusion, mentioned in the Tabula Peutingeriana (K. Miller, *Itineraria Romana*, p. 858, 870). Strabo writes that at Mendes "they (the Egyptians) worship Pan and, among animals, a he-goat" (*Geography*, XVII, I, 19). The same author writes: "there are also others in among these (main mouths), psuedo-mouths (*pseudostomata*) as it were, which are rather insignificant" (*Geography*, XVII, I, 18).

34. Libb-Limbon, for dissimulation. Among the 14 cities promised by Hyrcanus to the King of the Nabataeans, Josephus lists *Libyas*, which can be the locality mentioned in the mosaic (*Antiquities*, XIV, I, 4, Ed. Dindorfius). At Libona, was stationed the "Ala secunda Constantiniana" (*Notitia Dignitatum*, I, 81, n. 27, ed. Seek).

Because of the repair the Egyptian toponyms are difficult to read. The name is Antisiaou or possibly Antiniaou. Most of them are known from historical sources, with some variations in the spelling. Some of them, such as Kasin, Thenesos, Pilousin, and Kynopolis are found in the Madaba Map. The iconography could either be conventional, more or less developed schematic depictions, or simplified realistic representations³⁵. Limited knowledge about the monuments found in the depicted cities limits the possible answers. But at least in one case, namely the toponym of Kastron Mefaa, it seems fairly certain that the mosaicist was inspired by reality and gave actual details.

Another example might be the toponym of the Holy City, where it is possible to identify the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre according to iconography attributed to it in the Byzantine epoch (Pl. LXXVIII, 2). A third example is the toponym of Neapolis. Here the mosaicist preferred to use the facade of a temple to represent the city. This temple might possibly be the temple on the top of Mount Gerizim, which is found on the city-coins struck at Neapolis in the Roman period³⁶. The monotonous repetition of a city-plan with its walls, its towers, its gates, and one or two internal edifices, certainly supports the opinion that the toponyms of the cities of Jordan are very conventional. Only in the case of Belemounta-Ma'in does the toponym make reference to a large un-walled village (*Onom.* 44, 21).

From an artistic point of view, the illustrations of the Palestinian cities are notable for their freedom of composition and for the variety of color-tones which defer to the pre-existent cartoons in the workshop of the mosaicist.

The Onomastics

The historical importance of the three dedicatory inscriptions and the wealth of written texts which accompany the geometric and figurative motifs of the mosaics in the two churches have already been noted. But it is important to emphasize another conclusion which resulted from reading the inscriptions.

A majority of the benefactors have names whose origins are Arabic or of generic Semitic origin. One starts from the common names like Abdallos, Obedos, Naoum, Elias and continues to the more rare names like Abesobeos, Uaias, Alafa, Gomela, etc. In one case there is a very specific name: Petron Arabbous, i.e. Peter the Arab. Furthermore, it is recorded that Abesobeos is the father of Ouaias, that John is the son of John, that Theodore is the son of Goumela and so on. Meanwhile at Mount Nebo there are inscriptions asking that all the members of the family be remembered, the father, the mother, the sons, and the daughters. The inscriptions at Umm er-Rasas do not contain any women's names. One possible observation about this phenomenon might explain it. It is found in the Arab military nature of the city in the Roman, Byzantine, Arabic and possibly even in the Nabataean epochs³⁷. In the *Onomasticon* (128, 21), written in the first half of the IVth century, Eusebius of Caesarea writes that there was a unit of the Roman army stationed on the edge of the desert at Mefaat³⁸. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, an imperial document of the IVth century, records that local soldiers who had been promoted to the cavalry, that is auxiliary troops of the Roman army, were stationed in the camp of Mefaa³⁹. The military nature of the locality is underlined by the name Kastron Mefaa, that is Camp of

35. See N. Duval, "L'iconografia architettonica nei mosaici di Giordania", in M. Piccirillo, *I Mosaici di Giordania*, Roma 1986, 151-156; and F.M. Biebel, 'The Walled Cities of the Gerasa Mosaics', in Kraeling, *Gerasa*, 341-351.

36. G.F. Hill, *Greek Coins of Palestine*, (BMC), pl. V, 15-16.

37. According to the Nabataean inscription

found at Um er-Rasas (*CIS*, 195), a strategos stationed at the site.

38. "Mefaath... sed et alia est trans Iordanem in qua praesidium Romanorum militum sedet propter vicinam solitudinem".

39. 'Sub dispositione viri spectabilis ducis Arabiae: Mefa, Equites promoti indigenae' (*Notitia Dignitatum*, I, 81, n.19, ed. Seek).

Mefaa, which is recorded twice in the dedicatory inscription and once among the city-plans.

A Locality Mentioned in the Bible

The toponym Mefaa clearly refers to *Mayfa'ah* recorded by the Arabic historian el-Bakry as a village of the Belqa' of Syria.⁴⁰ In the Old Testament, *Mefa'at* is listed among the localities of the high plateau of Moab, along with Madaba, Nebo, Ma'in, Dhiban, Bet Gamul etc. (Joshua 13,18; 21,37; Jeremiah 48,21). Several names of the localities have been preserved by the Beduins of the area. The inscription in the church of Saint Stephen identifies the ruins of Umm er-Rasas with the name *Mefa'at*. Until now, however, no trace of human occupation prior to the Nabataean epoch has been found among the ruins. Future research on the site will ascertain if the ruins of the Byzantine Arabic Umm er-Rasas cover the Iron Age village of the VIIIth-VIth Centuries B.C.

The Tower of Umm er-Rasas

The double plan of Kastron Mefaa in the series of Jordanian cities, might be a clue to the purpose of the tower north of the ruins. Most of the explorers considered it to be a military watchtower, either guarding against the danger of Beduin raids from the desert, or protecting the water cisterns hewn out of the rock.⁴¹ Others have thought it may have served as a platform for Stylite monks.

The mosaicist added a second plan related to Mefaa outside of the camp proper. He depicted a church. On the inside of the church three burning lamps hang from the arches. The church is connected to a closed courtyard, enclosed by a series of rooms on

the sides. In the courtyard, on a white background, stands a solitary column. On the top of the column there is a kind of parapet with the line of black tesserae at its centre. The column may represent the tower of Mefaa and explains its purpose in a religious sense. Perhaps it was a Stylite tower at the pilgrimage sanctuary of Kastron Mefaa.

This hypothesis needs to be clarified by further excavations at the foot of the tower⁴². What is certain is that by including the tower the mosaicist wished to depict the outstanding monument of Kastron Mefaa.

Conclusions

Even though it is only the first campaign, the excavation at Umm er-Rasas has yielded noteworthy historical results:

1. The identification of the ruins with Kastron Mefaa.
2. The clarification that the bishopric of Madaba extended as far as Wadi el-Mujib; and the discovery of the names of two bishops of that city.
3. The late dating of the mosaics in the church of Saint Stephen opens what was a closed chapter in the history of Jordan relative to civil, religious and artistic interests. The dating shows that at the end of the VIIIth Century an urban community still existed on the site. That community was religiously and administratively organized, and exhibited an unexpected artistic vitality.
4. The excavation of Umm er-Rasas reopens the historical problem of iconoclasm. If the figures of the churches of Umm er-Rasas were destroyed after 785, the possibility exists for an iconoclastic movement in Jordan that was both contemporaneous and parallel to

40. 'Abdallah ben 'Abdel 'Aziz al-Bakri, *Mu'jam ma ista'jam*, ed. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen 1877, II, 569, *Mayfa'ah*.

41. Saller-Bagatti, *The Town of Nebo*, 250 (opinion of Palmer and Wilson, *PEQSt*, 1899, 316). For Stylites see, I. Pena, P. Castellana, R. Fernandez, *Les Stylites Syriens*, 1975 and *Les Reclus Syriens*, 1980.

42. The church seen by the explorers near the tower, is only the second large tower excavated and partly restored by the Department of Antiquities. A chapel can be seen, possibly, south-east of the tower: "Une église fort modique, actuellement très ruinée, se trouvait à quelques pas à l'Est de l'élégant campanile qui se dresse dans le voisinage" (Savignac, *RB*, 1936, 244).

the iconoclastic movement of the Byzantine Empire. That movement would seem to exhibit its own local character and radical nature which did not even spare the figures of animals and fish.

These are only the first important discoveries. Umm er-Rasas-Mefaa must still

be excavated. What this first campaign illustrates is that the monotonous stretch of fallen stones covers a chapter of Jordanian history yet to be explored.

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