

# A NEW DISCOVERY AT BAYT RĀS / CAPITOLIAS – IRBID\*

*Ahmad Jum'a al-Shami*

## Abstract

The Roman theater in Bayt Rās could be one of the most important discoveries because it adds a new theater to the Decapolis in northern Jordan.

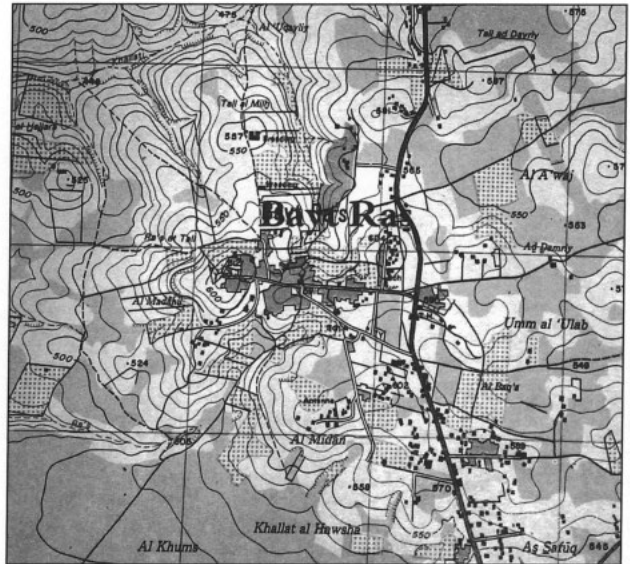
The remains of a large Roman theater of the second century AD were discovered built against a hillside commanding Wādī al-Khalla to the north. The remains of the theater include remnants of the backstage rooms (Scaena), of which the doorways were blocked in the late Roman period. Seven of the doorways are well preserved in the main façade. The backstage, measuring 57m in length and 3-5m in preserved height, was bordered at both ends by square towers as in defensive buildings, with a staircase at the side.

## Introduction

The modern town of Bayt Rās, named Capitolias during the Roman domination of Jordan, is located five kilometers north of modern Irbid (ancient Arbila), and 100 kilometers from 'Ammān, at an altitude of around 600m above sea level (Figs. 1 and 2).

Al-Bakri mentioned in his book *Mou'jam ma Istu'jam* which translates as "Bayt Ras is a fortress on a hilltop in Jordan" (al-Bakri 1983: 288).

Several explorers documented the site in the 19th century, such as Seetzen (1806), Buckingham (1816), Schumacher (1878-79), who visited the site and made a plan of it (Fig. 3) (Schumacher 1889: 155), and Merrill (1885). The site was also recorded by several archaeologists including Glueck (1951), Mittman (1970), and Lenzen and McQuitty (1983-85). Earlier treatments of the history of Bayt Rās / Capitolias were confined to the Greek and Latin sources. The Roman city was walled and flourished in the second and third centuries AD. The foundation of the city of Capitalias is not mentioned in any text, but according to the coins, the city was founded in 97-98AD. The new city was named after Jupiter Capitolinus, the deity



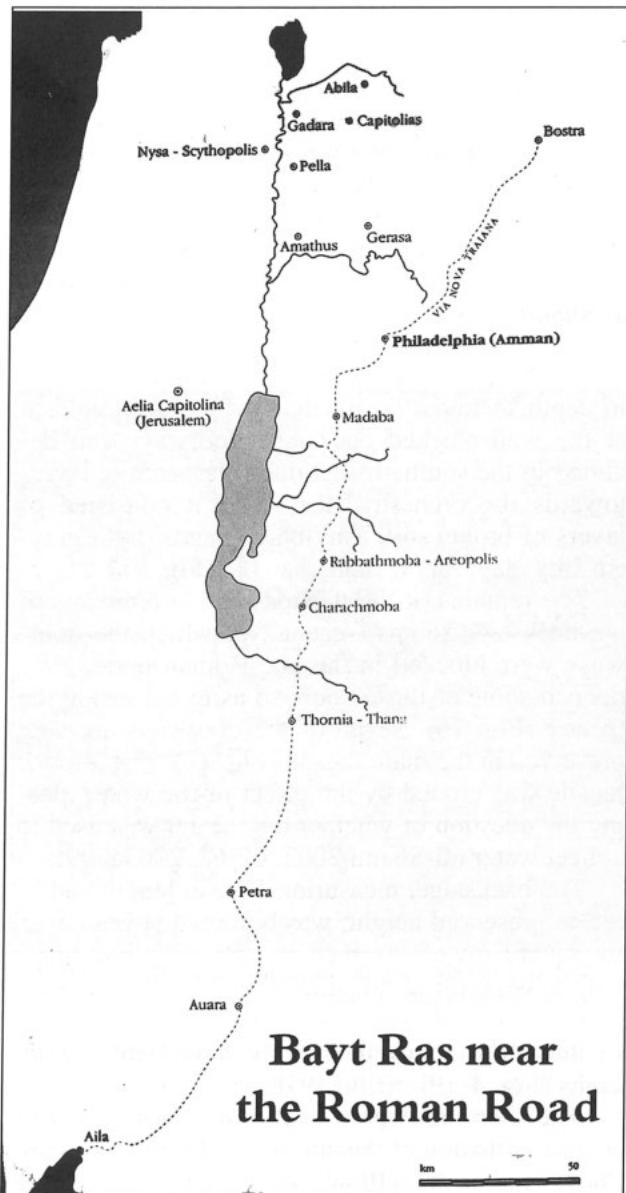
1. Map of Irbid showing the location of Bayt Rās / Capitolias in the Northern part of Jordan.

of the main temple in the city represented on the coins (Fig. 4) (Piccirillo 1978: 96-107).

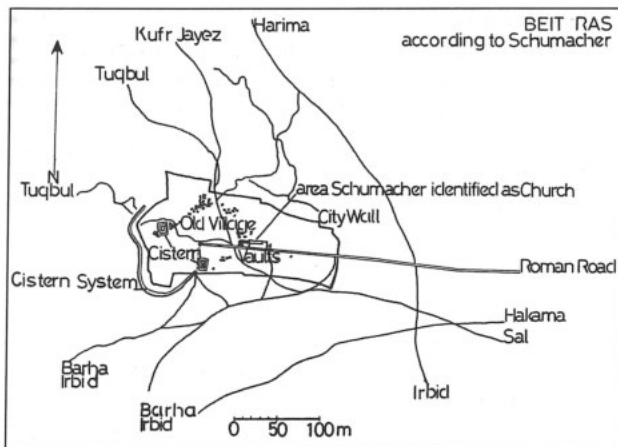
The Semitic-Arabic name matches the geographic situation of the site perfectly: Bayt Rās, the "house on/ of the hilltop". This name is not attested before the middle of the sixth century AD, but it is inconceivable that the site had no name prior to the foundation of Capitolias.

The establishment of Capitolias as a Greek/ Roman "polis" demonstrates the importance of the settlement before 97/ 98AD. Bayt Rās was part of the Decapolis region by the mid-second century AD, however, it seems that the Decapolis had ceased to be an administrative district or some sort of political organization. With the establishment of Provincia Arabia in 106AD, the most eastern cities of the Decapolis, e.g. Philadelphia, Gerasa and Bostra, were included in Arabia. The cities to the west-Pella, Gadara, Abila and Capitolias, were included in Palaestina Secunda (Lenzen and Knauf 1987: 26). The first Arabic reference to Bayt Rās

\* This Project has been named: Bayt Rās – Irbid Archaeological Project (B.R.I.A.P 2002).



2. Map of Bayt Rās showing the proximity of the Roman Road.



3. Plan of Bayt Rās according to Schumacher during his visit in 1889.



4. The Temple of Bayt Rās / Capitolias represented in the Roman coins.

comes from a line by an-Nābigha adh-Dhubyāni that reads:

Namayna al-Qulālata min Bayti Ra'sin  
ilā Luqmāna fī Suqin Muqāmi

It means “We lifted amphoras of it from Bayt Rās to Luqmān in an elevated market”. The first Arabic references to Bayt Rās can therefore be dated before 569AD and probably between 554 and 563AD (adh-Dhubyāni 1991: 85). The special quality of the Bayt Rās wine was well-known in al-Madina. The poet laureate, Ḥassān bin Thābit wrote:

Ka'anna Sabi'atan min Bayti Ra'sin  
Yakūnu Mizājuha 'Asalun wa Mā'u

(Shariḥ Diwān Ḥassān bin Thābit 1981: 56)

It means “As if the special reserve from Bayt Rās were a mixture of honey with water”. Obviously, it was not honey with water, but rather known for its strength and probably smoothness. This attested is more clearly in another line by the same poet:

Shujjat bi Ṣahbā'a lahā Sawratun  
min Bayt Ra'sin 'Uttiqtat fil Khiyāmi

It means “Mixed with rose that has strength, from Bayt Rās, matured in the tents”. It is known that wine merchants from the Bayt Rās region went to the northern Ḥijāz (Lenzen and Knauf 1987: 35).

During the Byzantine period, the city grew in importance and was represented at the Councils of Nicea (325) and Chalcedonia (451). Capitolias had several churches, as did most of the cities of this period.

The city flourished during the Umayyad period as attested by some Arabic literary references, and as late as 724AD, the Umayyad caliph Yazīd II lived in Bayt Rās with his favorite wife Ḥabbāba and had a palace there. It is less well-known that

Yazid died in Irbid (Lenzen 1992: 300; Hennessy and Homés 1989: 195; Lenzen and Knauf 1987: 39-40). Bayt Rās was not suddenly deserted after 750AD. 'Abdallah Ibn Khurdadbeh, who mentioned Bayt Rās in his book *al-Masālik wal Mamālik*, lists the Qura of Bayt Rās among the Qura of al-Urdunn, in the following sequence: Beisan-Fahil-Jarash-Bayt Rās-Jadar-Susiah. According to its function in the list from Ibn Khurdadbeh, Bayt Rās was still a town, if not a city, meaning an administrative and economic center. In the 12th century, Bayt Rās was a village within a feudal system. When the Ottoman Turks took over from the Mamluks in 1516AD, they erected an efficient administration that survived in parts well into the nineteenth century. According to Ottoman tax registers from the sixteenth century, Bayt Rās was a village that belonged, together with Irbid, to the *Nāhiyat Banī Jahma* within the *Qadhā' Ḥawrān* (Lenzen and Knauf 1987: 42-43).

### Archaeological Survey and Previous Excavations

The archaeological evidence for the Roman occupation in the Rās area include a stone altar found on the western slope that suggests this may have been the area of the temple that appears on the Capitoliās coins (Fig. 4), as well as a large cistern. As there are no natural springs in the immediate vicinity, agriculture was dependent on an irrigation system and the urban dwellers were dependent on a cistern system for their needs. The 1985 excavation at the eastern end of the village uncovered a nine-vaulted structure, located near the modern mosque and provided some data concerning the period of occupation between the mid-first and ninth centuries AD (Lenzen and Knauf 1987: 28-30).

### The New Archaeological Excavations

The excavations at Bayt Rās have been carried out by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan from 1999 to the present. The excavated area covers approximately six thousand square meters of an olive grove (al-Shami 2003b: 9) (Fig. 5).

The site was covered with dump levels of 3-13m depth, which made excavation in squares according to the grid difficult. Initially, we did open an area of excavation within 5 x 5m "squares" without balks (Fig. 6), depending on the southern section for recording the stratigraphy. This method exposed architectural remains that were deeply buried and offered safer working conditions (al-Shami 2002: 62-63).

After a certain amount of architectural exposure we worked in archaeological terraces (Fig. 7), by

excavating down to a certain depth in one square then moving on to a further depth in an adjoining square and so on. This was for safety reasons in order to avoid very deep areas, but it proved to be slow in the uncovering of architectural features at depths of over 9m at the northern edge of the site (al-Shami 2002: 62-63, 2004: 8).

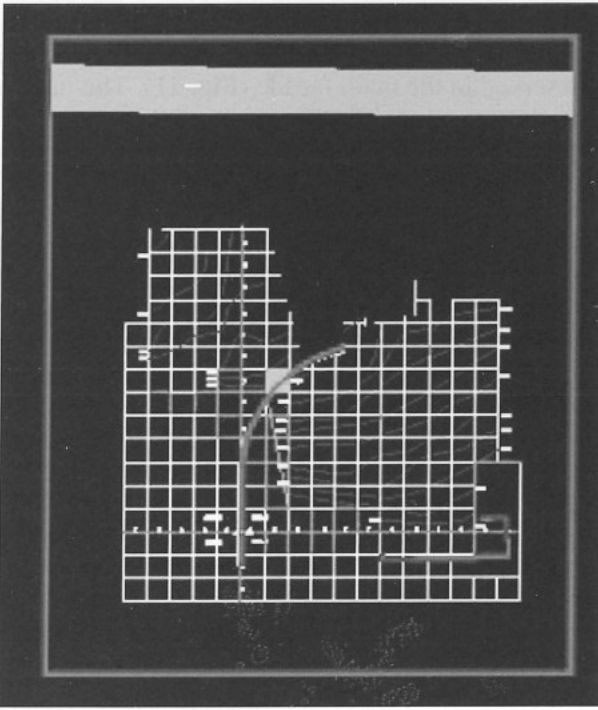
The main discovery was the remains of a large Roman theater of the second century AD built against a hillside commanding *Wādī al-Khalla* to the north (Fig. 8). During excavation in Areas A and C, the deposits inside the theater were 3-13m in depth. Alluvial sedimentation was accumulated at the well-blocked backstage doorways and declined in the southern section in descending layers towards the orchestra (the east). It consisted of layers of brown soil, ashy-black bands, light grayish silty clay, rubble, and charcoal (Fig. 9).

The remains of the theater include remnants of the backstage rooms (*scaena*), of which the doorways were blocked in the late Roman period. We opened some of these doors so as to get inside the theater (Fig. 10). Seven of the doorways are well preserved in the main façade (Fig. 11). The interior façade was eroded by the effect of the water, posing the question of whether the theater was used to collect water (al-Shami 2002: 67-68, 2003a: 99).

The backstage, measuring 57m in length and 3-5m in preserved height, was bordered at both ends by square towers as seen in defensive buildings, with a staircase at the side (Fig. 12). Several successive blocked vaults, separated from each other by platforms, appeared in the excavated curved eastern and western sectors of the theatre (Fig. 13), but some the upper part of the vaults in the western sectors were found collapsed. (Fig. 14) (al-Shami 2004: 8). The eastern sector still has many vaults in different levels, the second vault was blocked, and a paved room was constructed with an entrance from the other side (the western side), and these were used later during the Umayyad period for dwelling. The original Roman floor of the vault had been removed at an earlier period. The entrance of the third-level vault of the eastern wall was also blocked by well-dressed limestone; parts of these blocks were collapsed later. During the Umayyad period the vault was rebuilt, by using basalt blocks and lime mortar.

### Finds and Objects

Many of pottery body sherds had been collected from the site of different layers belonging to different periods. Mainly, these were from the early and late Romans, as well as Byzantine and Umayyad (Fig. 15). Moreover intact objects had been found



5. General View of the Theater Area planted with olives trees.

such as pottery lamps (Fig. 16), bronze coins (Fig. 17) and architectural elements such as stone and marble from animal figurines as parts of corinches (Fig. 18).

### Conclusions

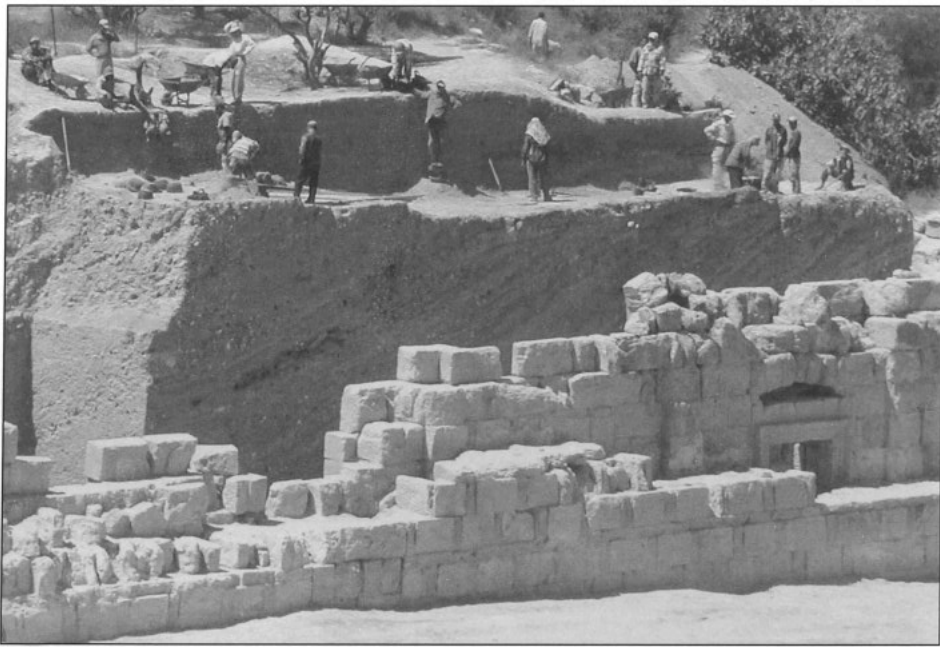
The Roman theater in Bayt Rās could be one of the most important discoveries because it adds a new theater to the Decapolis in northern Jordan.

The architecture of the back stage (Northern

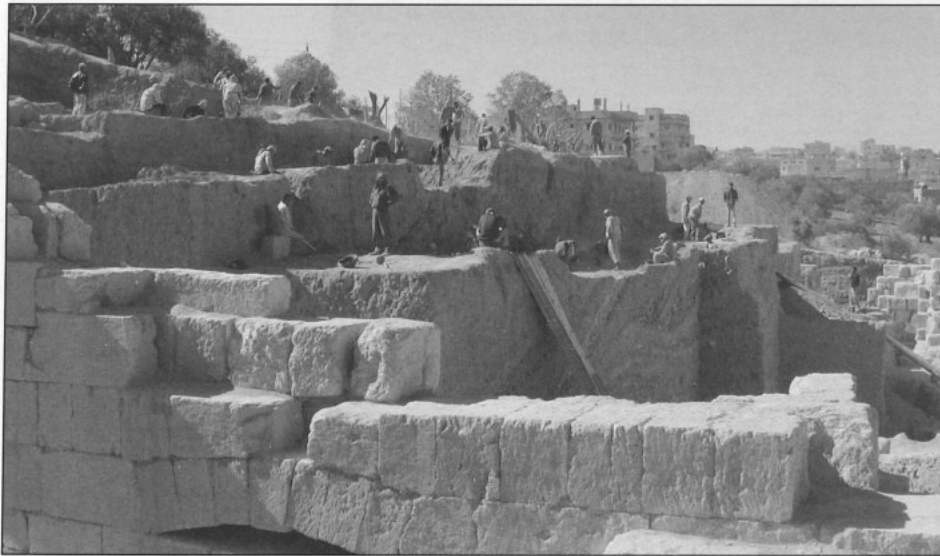
façade) has three main phases

1. The main façade (the back stage) that has seven doorways dates back to the earliest Roman period phase (the second century AD).
2. During the late Roman period, a buttressing wall was constructed in front of the main façade, totally blocking its doorways while leaving an entrance at the central doorway, with the same width of 2.10m.
3. During the constructing of the buttressing wall,

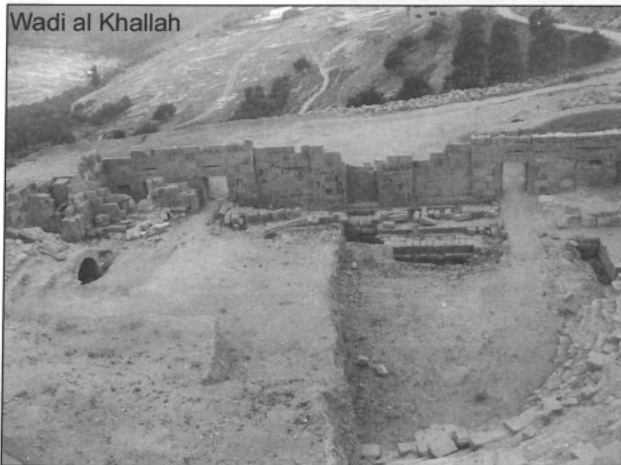




6. Open Area Excavation within 5 x 5m squares without barks.



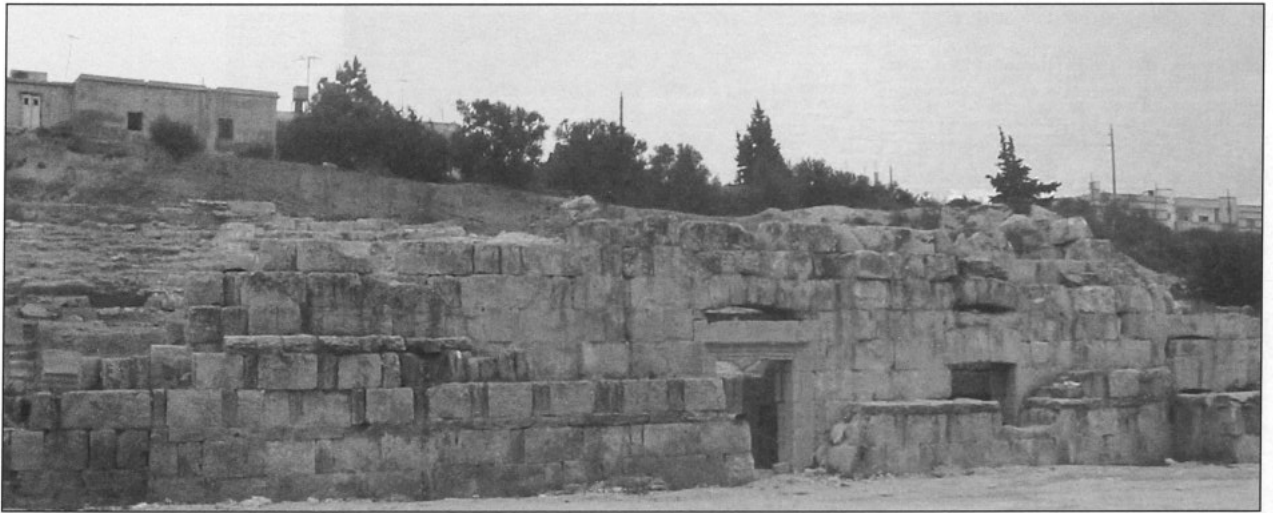
7. The Archaeological Terraces Excavations (steps).



8. The Main façade of the backstage of the theatre, showing Wādi al-Khalla to the north.



9. Stratigraphy of the southern section of the theatre (dump levels of 13m).



10. View of the blocked doorway in the main façade / backstage of the theatre in the late Roman period.

the main entrance to the theatre was open, then blocked later on. It may be that this access was to enable the carrying out of stone blocks from the side (changing) rooms, internal divisions and the theater seating. The stone blocks were reused in the blocking of all entrances to the theater by building the additional wall in front of the theater façade.

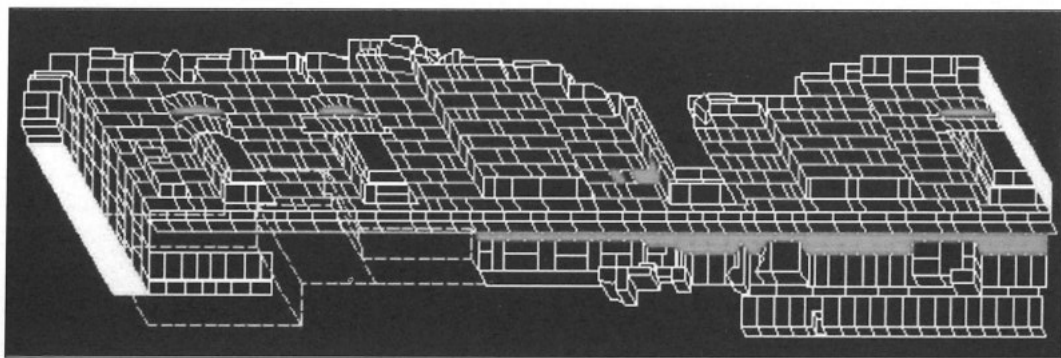
4. The architecture of the eastern façade, that had four doorways at four different levels (Audiences Entrances) has several changes
  - a. During the late Roman period all entrances of the theater were blocked.

- b. During the Byzantine period a large wall was built in front of the doorways making access difficult and several additions were made to this wall.

- c. During the Umayyad period, parts of the eastern façade had collapsed, especially the entrance of the third-level vault.

From the pottery reading and the bronze coins studying, four different periods have been identified: early Roman, late Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad period.

Finally, the project is still in progress under the auspice of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan



11. Elevation plan of interior façade in the backstage.

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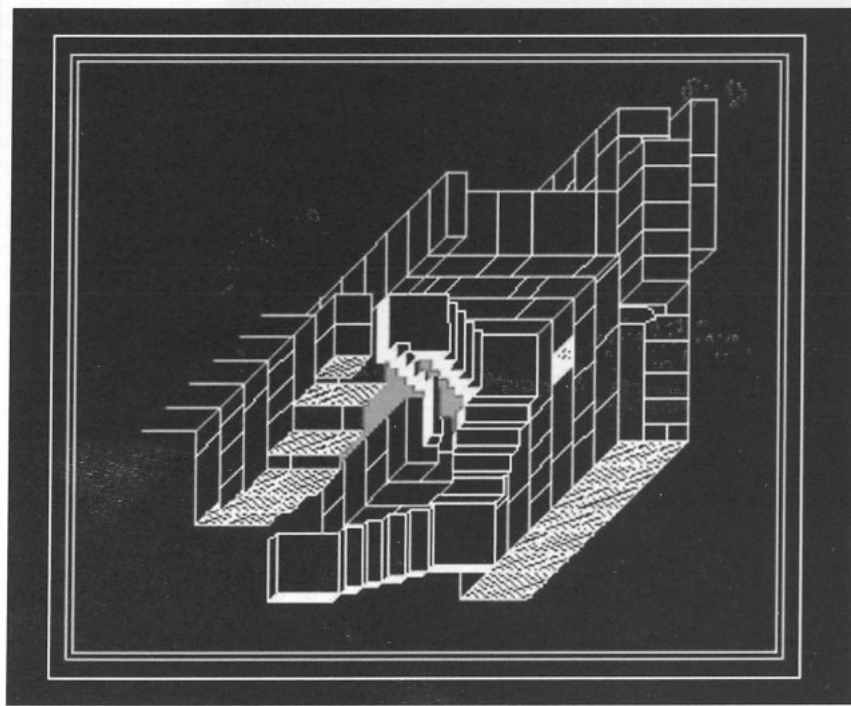
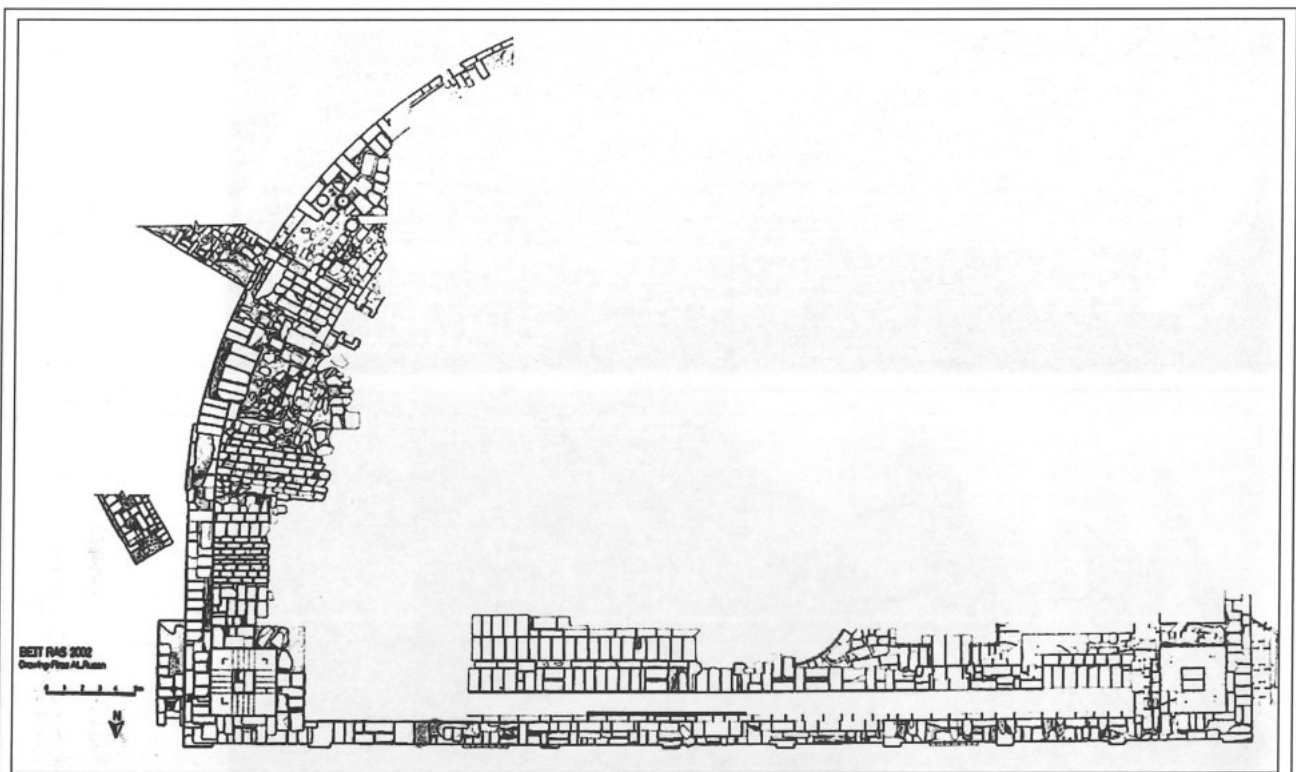
### Acknowledgements

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Ahmad Jum‘a Ahmad al-Shami  
Department of Antiquities  
Amman-Jordan  
P.O. Box 88  
a.alshami@dao.jo.com  
alshami66@yahoo.com

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12. General plan of the Roman architectural elements dated to the second century AD.

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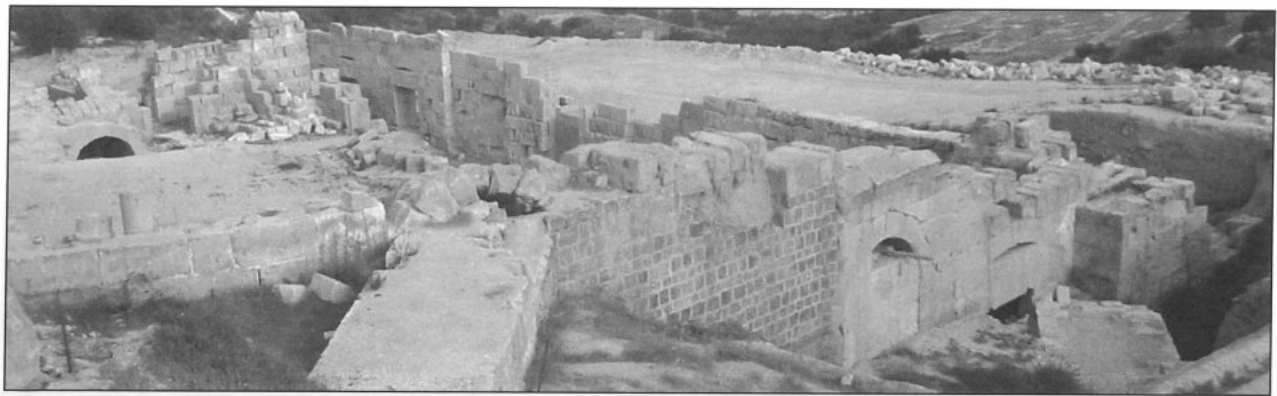
46: 61-69 (Arabic Section).

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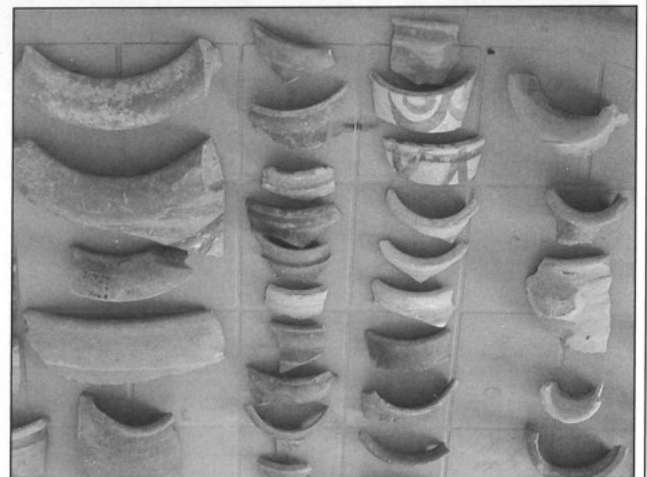
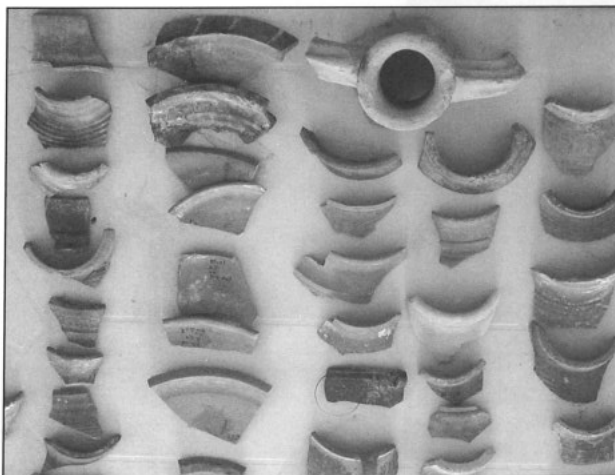




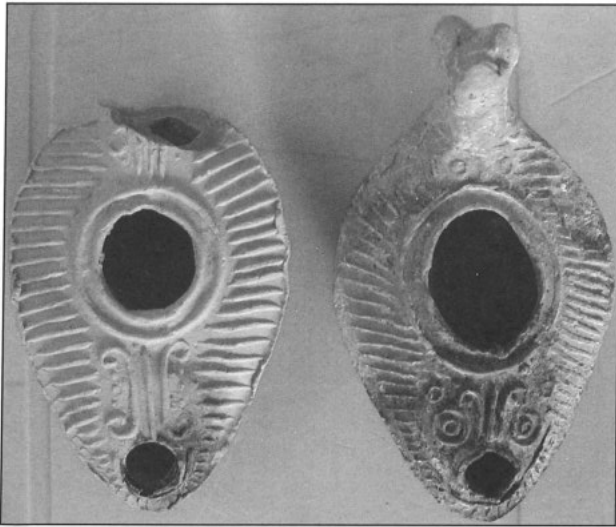
13. The eastern sector of the theatre showing the blocked façade and the basalt wall.



14. The collapsed vaults of the western sector.



15. Pottery sherds from early/late Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad period.



16. Lamps dated to the Byzantine period.



17. Bronze coins dated to late Roman and Umayyad periods.



18. Decorated architectural elements with floral and animals presentation.