

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE FIRST SURVEY CAMPAIGN AT ANCIENT AR-RABBA (RABBATHMOAB/AEROPOLIS)

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Introduction

The first survey campaign at the ancient monumental site of ar-Rabba الرّبة (Karak district) started in October 1999 as part of the Rabbathmoab Regional Project, that started in 1997 with a first survey followed by a first excavation campaign at Qaṣr Rabba. The project was conducted under the auspices of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, and funded by the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the National Research Council of Italy and the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient (Is.I.A.O./former Is.M.E.O.), Rome. This writer and Prof. Luigi Marino of the Department of History of Architecture and Restoration of Florence University acted as co-directors. The staff was composed of architects Giovanna Battista, Ombretta Dinelli, Francesco Ciampinelli, Mohammad 'Ali al-Khatib, Francesca Malesani, Rita and Roberto Sabelli, all from Florence University, and archaeologist Gianluca Grassigli and student Anna Heymann from Perugia University. Raffaele Calzini was video-operator.

The following primary objectives were achieved:

1. drawing a ground plan of the surface remains of the monumental ancient center (8.147m²);
2. gathering data for the last occupational period;
3. assessing the site's potential for future investigation and excavation;
4. starting a survey in the territory of modern ar-Rabba, and documenting all ancient surviving structures
5. preparing for future collaboration with the local authorities;
6. starting a collaboration with the Department of Antiquities and the local authorities for the enhancement of the archaeological sites, in view of the creation of a protected area or an archaeological park.

Recording System

Computer-assisted analysis and elaboration of data was greatly facilitated by the use of Nikon instruments.

Brief Comments on a First Ground Plan (Fig. 1)

Ar-Rabba, on the central Jordanian plateau at 15km to the north of al-Karak, is generally associated with the ancient site of Rabbathmoab, a capital of the Moabite kingdom. It was known as Arabatha by Flavius Josephus (*Ant.* 14.1.18) and listed by Ptolemy (*Geogr.* 5.16.4) as Rabathmoba among the cities and villages of Arabia Petraea. Rabatora on the Peutinger Map has been the object of much scholarly discussion regarding its connection with Bethora, generally identified with the legionary camp at al-Lajjūn. For the Byzantine period, Eusebius attests the use of both names: Rabbath Mōab and Areopolis (*Onom.* 10:17; 36:24; 124:15-17). In the Arab sources, the site is identified as Ma'āb.¹

The surface survey confirmed a last occupational sequence on the Byzantine period, with the inclusion of major Roman period constructions such as the temple of the Diocletianic era, the great reservoir or *birka*, and the Colonnaded Street.

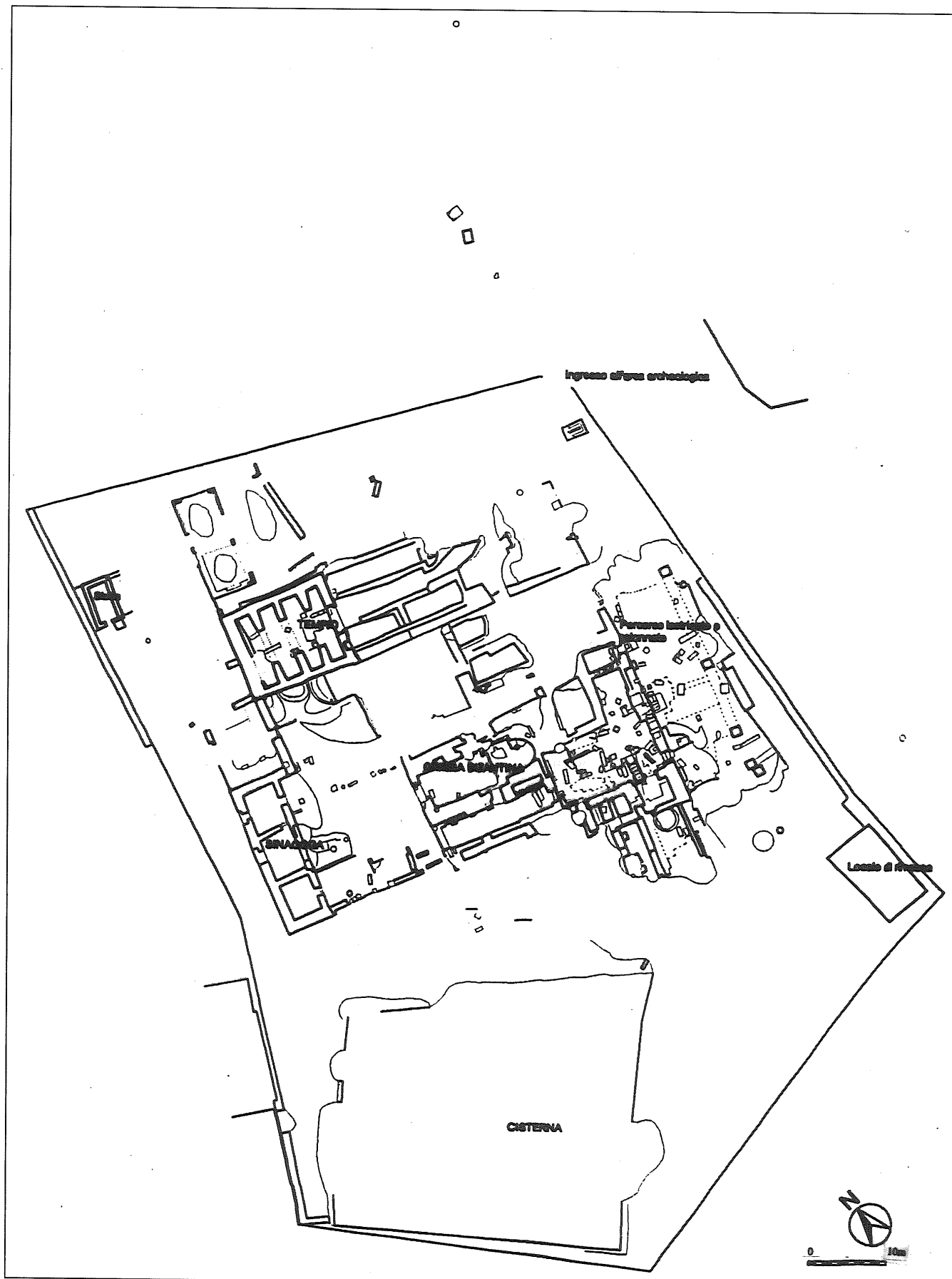
The central sector to the west of the Colonnaded Street was cleared of its debris by the Department of Antiquities in the early 1960's. On that occasion, the central part of a Byzantine church was also exposed.

There is no evidence of medieval or late Islamic constructions in the monumental center, although it should be stressed that the latest epigraphic building inscriptions found until now refer to a Christian monument dated to the Early Umayyad period (cf. Canova 1954: 198ff; Zayadine 1971: 75, building dedication to AD 687).

The Roman Temple was the only monument still standing and visible at the end of the 19th century, along with the two columns of the Roman Street (Fig. 2). During the same century, when modern sedentarization started in the region, the temple was re-constructed and utilized as a dwelling. The remains of this transformation certainly helped to conserve the ancient monument, which is of great interest in itself due to the high standard of local traditional construction techniques utilized. The ground plan and elevation of the temple have

1. A more complete list of sources will be annexed to a paper presented at the ARAM Conference on Palestinian Chris-

tianity, July 2001 (forthcoming).



1. Plan of last occupational phase (Byzantine/ early Umayyad) of ancient ar-Rabba.



2. View of the Colonnaded Street, ar-Rabba.



3. View of the area between the street and the church, ar-Rabba.

already been the object of study.

The Roman Temple, which according to dedications to the Emperors Diocletian and Maximinian copied by Brünnow and von Domascewsky may be dated to the beginning of the fourth century, covers an area of 175m². Its width is 12.60m, its length 14.30m, and its orientation is 107°E. The original facade presents a central opening (3.50m) and two niches on both sides, 70cm deep and 230cm high. The monument stands at +1.18m above the Colonnaded Street (the basis/level of our measurements).

The Roman Temple Precinct: The existing floor level is 1.2m above the original courtyard level. Two parallel 12m long arched constructions built of stone, run towards the entrance of the ancient

temple. Their function is unknown. They should be dated to the Byzantine period.

The Byzantine Church: The only partially excavated construction of the monoapsidal type. It measures 16m length and ca. 5m in width. The area covered by the nave is ca. 45m², while the area of the apse is ca. 24m². Apparently, the church was built on a public space paved with the same type and color pattern as the Colonnaded Street. The orientation is 107°E.

Paved Area between the Church and the Colonnaded Street (Figs. 2, 3)

This area presents a complex occupational level with the superposition of constructions of different periods. One remarks the general re-use of archi-

tectural fragments of previous buildings. The pavement consists mainly of basalt slabs.

The So-Called Synagogue: The area southwest of the Roman Temple and west of the Byzantine Church, is attributed to have been occupied by a west-oriented monument that was later transformed to a church, if our localization is correct. The synagogue has been connected with Barsaumas' destruction in the beginning of the fifth century. According to the plan sketch published when the area was cleared, the building was of a tripartite type and would have covered an area of 130m².

The Paved and Colonnaded Street

The now visible sector of 30m length with a width of 10m, has been cleared of its debris by the

Department of Antiquities. This important feature of the Roman urban landscape was probably the *cardo* of Rabbathmoba. Five square column basis are still *in situ*, the diameter of the columns measuring ca. 1m, the interaxes 4.80m. The pavement of calcareous and basalt slabs shows a sophisticated striped color pattern created by the juxtaposition of 130cm wide black color strips to the basic white grey stone slabs. The Colonnaded Street was still in function during the Byzantine/Early Islamic period.

The Water Reservoir or Birka

One of three water reservoirs still existing at ar-Rabba, this was certainly a Roman period construction, and is situated at the extreme southwest sector



4. View of the tower (ar-Rabba).

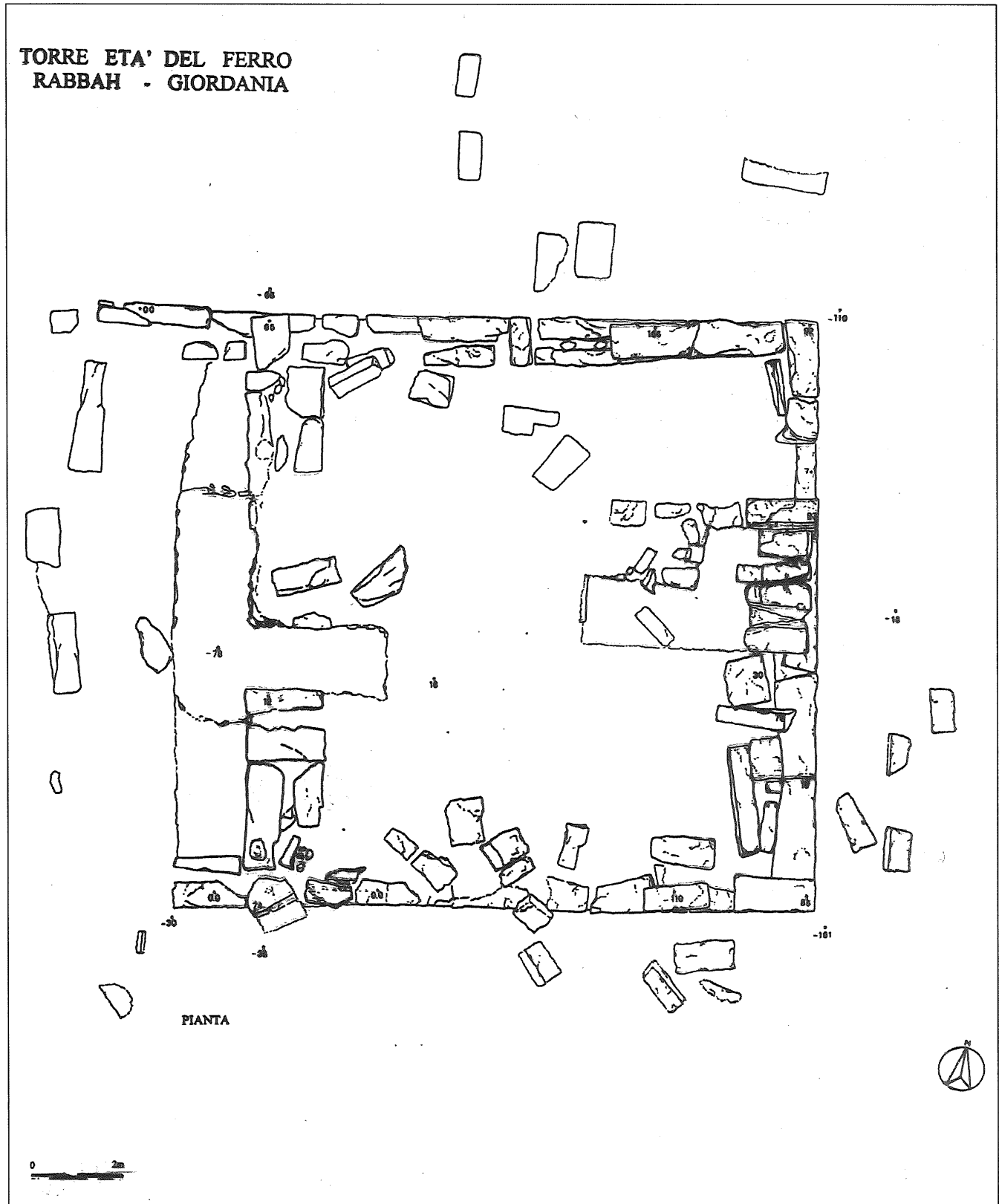


5. Measuring the southern curtain wall of the tower.

of the monumental center. It has a trapezoidal shape and occupies an area of 1200m², with a perimeter wall of ca. 140m (around 33 x 36m). It is in good shape.

Conclusions

This first ground plan of the last occupational phase (Byzantine/Umayyad transitional period) remains of the monumental center of ancient ar-



6. Plan of the tower (Iron Age II?).

Rabba/Areopolis/Ma'āb still shows some indication of orthogonal planning. Not all Roman monumental architecture seems to have fallen into disuse during the period. No domestic architecture in this area has been recognized until now. The next season of IsIAO's research at ar-Rabba will be dedicated to the completion of the ground plan and to trial soundings.

A Tower of the pre-Roman Period at ar-Rabba

We report on the ruins of a small watchtower situated on the eastern edge of the modern village of ar-Rabba, near where the plateau descends in direction of al-Lajjūn (Fig. 4).

This most impressive, nearly square (13 x 13m) construction, is conserved at a ca. 2.50m height. It was built of huge calcareous stone blocks laid in the header-stretcher fashion. The average length of the blocks is 200cm and their width is 50cm (Fig. 5). Entrance to the tower is gained through the center of the south curtain wall. The ruins received our first attention during our 1999 survey. A plan is now provided preliminary to its excavation (Fig.

6). No surface pottery shards were found. The internal space shows the remains of two transverse walls. The most interesting architectural feature is the presence of casemate structures exposed on the east and west sides, which could open the option for a date within the period extending from the Iron II to the Persian period. Among the variety of surface ruins yet to be investigated and excavated on the site of ancient ar-Rabba (Rabbathmoab/Areopolis), this monument will receive all our attention in our forthcoming October 2001 season.

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