

TELL MADABA EXCAVATIONS, 2001

PRESS RELEASE

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The 2001 field season of the Tell Madaba Archaeological Project (TMAP) was conducted between June 1 and July 27. The primary objective of the season involved the consolidation and restoration of a large Late Byzantine and Early Islamic complex preserved along the lower western slope of the tell acropolis. Uncovered during Phase I of TMAP (the 1998-2000 seasons), our excavations have revealed the remains of a large rectangular building, possibly a wealthy private residence, or villa, preserved in two architectural phases that span the Late Byzantine/Early Islamic transition (6th-7th/8th Centuries A.D.).

Initially believed to have been a series of isolated shops that backed against the pre-classical town fortification wall, it is now clear that these structures were the back rooms of a large building complex, at least 20 m [N-S] X 30 m (E-W) in size. The building apparently faced onto a north-south street located west of the acropolis area. Although the building has not yet been fully excavated, thus far excavations have revealed a series of interconnected rooms with variously paved floors. In at least two rooms, the floors were paved with decorated mosaic pavements. One contained a field of fleurettes or rosebuds framed by a double-swastika meander border, while the second depicted a large amphora flanked by a ram and a horned stag, with a simple border of diamonds along the periphery. Several rooms preserved the remains of arches, and in one case an intact vault, which together supported a second story to the building. At least one second-floor room contained a decorated mosaic floor.

One of the more striking features of the Field C building is the elaborate water system that serviced it. Fragmentary pieces of large ceramic drainpipes were recovered from the excavated debris, and several meters of intact clay piping were found embedded behind plaster in one of the building's walls. In another room, the excavations revealed a network of water channels and trap-dams concealed beneath a heavy flagstone pavement. In addition, many of the building's rooms were equipped with rectangular stone drainage basins.

The pottery found in the rubble sealing the complex consisted predominantly of 6th-7th, with some early 8th Century A.D. material. In addition, excavations in the central room along the back wall produced a well-preserved surface strewn with smashed pots (including bowls, cooking pots and storage vessels), and a number of bronze (an intact jug) and iron implements. The soil that filled this room also contained numerous fragments of painted plaster, including discernable portions of a Late Greek inscription and parts of two crosses. The small finds recovered from the other rooms in the complex included several coins and a ceramic stamp seal incised with a cross.

When combined with the presence of 6th Century mosaics (dated on stylistic grounds), our excavations suggest that the complex experienced two distinct architectural phases, which straddled the Late Byzantine-Early Islamic transition. The first phase was constructed in the 6th century (or Late Byzantine period), and included the mosaic pavements

now on display in the Madaba museum. The building was then renovated in the 7th or early 8th century (i.e. the Umayyad period), when a vault was built over the mosaic floor in the southern room along the back wall, and supplementary walls were judiciously inserted to shore up several sagging walls elsewhere in the complex. The entire complex apparently was abandoned sometime later in the 8th Century.

In conjunction with the 2001 consolidation effort, the Italian restorer Franco Sciorilli has begun preparing a mosaic pavement removed from the site in 1980 in anticipation of its return to the site as part of a conservation and restoration program we plan to launch in 2002. Finally, detailed plans were made of the entire west acropolis area, including architectural reconstructions of the Late Byzantine villa, to provide supporting documentation for a proposal to transform the west acropolis area into an archaeological park, designed to benefit the local community as a self-sustainable cultural resource.

As part of the broader TMAP research objective to develop a regional database, and in keeping with our commitment to document the visible archaeological remains at sites in the Madaba region that face expanding modern development, intensive mapping and surface collection efforts were initiated during the 2000 field season at a series of hinterland sites to the west and south of Madaba. This initiative was continued during the 2001 field season, with the primary focus aimed at completing mapping and surface surveys begun in 2000 at Libb, Khirbat al-Mukhayyat and Masuh.

Funding for the 2001 field season was provided by a research grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The excavations were conducted in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, which provided guidance and access to field equipment. The season's results would not have been possible without the dedicated help of Dr. Fawwaz al-Khraysheh, Director General of the Department of Antiquities, and Hazem Jaser, Director of the Department of Antiquities Office in Madaba. I wish also to thank the Mayor of Madaba, who unhesitatingly offered his assistance and freely made available the resources of the Municipality of Madaba, including use of an end loader and several dump trucks.