

Tell Madaba Excavations, 2002
Press Release

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The Tell Madaba Archaeological Project (TMAP) undertook its fourth season of full-scale excavations on the western slope of Tell Madaba from July 15 to August 31, 2002. Our goals for this season were to expose more of the Iron II levels encountered during previous seasons in Field B, and to complete the excavation of a large Late Byzantine/Early Islamic complex in Field C. In addition, time and resources were devoted to continuing the consolidation and restoration work on the Field C building.

The city of Madaba is located 30 km southwest of Amman amidst the fertile rolling plains of the Central Jordanian Plateau. The principal architectural remains uncovered on the western acropolis thus far include: (1) a monumental 5-7 m thick Iron Age fortification wall preserved to a height of 4-6 m, and exposed for more than 25 m encircling the upper mound; (2) a series of superimposed buildings dating to the Late Hellenistic-Early Roman/Nabataean Periods; (3) a large Late Byzantine/Early Islamic residence paved with mosaic floors; and (4) the foundations of a series of late Ottoman buildings.

Textual sources are unequivocal about the importance of Iron Age Madaba and the surrounding tableland, which became the scene of a succession of power struggles for control of the strategic north-south transit corridor, the so-called King's Highway, during the Iron II period. According to the Mesha Inscription, Madaba was under Israelite control when Mesha captured and rebuilt the town along with a series of other cities on the tableland in the mid to late 9th Century BCE (either during or shortly after the reign of Ahab, the son of Omri). The surface survey we conducted in 1993 supports this view of a flourishing settlement during the Iron IIB period, with surface sherd distribution indicating a site between 13 and 16 ha in size, easily making Madaba one of the largest Iron Age sites in Jordan and the entire southern Levant. The archaeological evidence we have uncovered thus far also suggests that Madaba was destroyed and abandoned toward the end of the Iron IIB or early in the Iron IIC period (ca. mid- to late-7th Century BCE). This destruction was apparently so devastating that the site remained uninhabited for about 500 years until it was reoccupied in the Late Hellenistic period.

In an effort to unearth more of the Iron Age levels in Field B, two 5 x 5 m units were reopened to the east of the large pre-classical fortification wall. Excavation in the easternmost unit exposed the remains of a poorly built rectilinear structure, constructed of medium-sized, unhewn stones. The upper course of a wall made of considerably larger stone had begun to appear beneath this structure toward the end of the season. In the western unit, the remains of a north-south wall with a possible doorway were uncovered. The size and shape of the stones in this wall suggest that it should be associated with the earlier phase wall in the first unit.

Excavations to the east of the wall encountered a substantial amount of destruction debris, which sealed the remains of three tabun and a debris-strewn surface. The ceramics associated with the two separate architectural phases uncovered in Field B date to the Iron IIB period (ca. 9th-8/7th Century BCE).

Christianity gained an early foothold in the Madaba region, and by the mid-fifth century, the Christian community had grown large enough to warrant the services of a bishop, a development revealed in the Acts of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE). Although the town goes unmentioned in the literary sources for the remainder of the period, it clearly continued to prosper, and the succeeding two centuries (ca. 6-7th Centuries CE) witnessed the construction of numerous churches and other public structures. Following the Islamic conquest and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate in the mid-7th century, Madaba continued to flourish. Renovations were carried out on a number of Byzantine churches, and the town remained the seat of a bishopric. It is during this important transitional period that the Field C complex, with its impressive architecture and artistic embellishments, was built and occupied.

Excavations in Field C focused on two sections of the partially excavated complex: a bedrock ledge to the west of previously exposed rooms that back against the fortification wall, and an undisturbed area to the north of these rooms. Although heavily damaged by bulldozing activity in the early 1980s, excavations on the bedrock ledge produced a series of interconnecting walls. More of the flagstone floor and water channel system, first exposed in 2000, were also uncovered. To the north of this area, a substantial portion of the superstructure of the building was still intact, including the second floor paved with a white mosaic. This second floor was supported by three arches located in the ground floor room below. The floor of this room was carved directly out of bedrock, and was equipped with a channel running down the center toward a shallow oval depression set against the room's north wall. Excavations to the west uncovered a second well-preserved room paved with a polychrome mosaic. The room underwent substantial renovation, including a mortar patch and repairs along the western edge of the mosaic, and the installation of a painted plaster niche in the southeast corner of the room, directly on top of the mosaic pavement. The pottery and associated small finds from the remains of the Field C complex date consistently to the 6/7th through 8th and 9th Centuries CE.

The ongoing effort to preserve the architecture in Field C continued during the 2002 field season. This restoration and consolidation work included the stabilization of the walls and standing architecture uncovered by our excavations, and the completion of a project initiated in 2001 to restore mosaic pavements lifted from the site in the 1980s. This restoration project, which has been supervised by the Italian conservator Franco Sciorilli, has involved the removal of concrete bedding from the pavement sections, and their reinstallation on the site.

Madaba is already a popular stop for tourists. The Church of the Map, the Archaeological Park, the Church of the Apostles, and the Madaba Museum form the core of the tourist attractions in the city. Plans are underway to develop the tourism potential of the west acropolis, and incorporate it into the larger framework of the city of Madaba.