

TELL MADABA EXCAVATIONS, 1996

PRESS RELEASE

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In the modern Middle East, with its long history of urbanism, the consequences of urban continuity present a daunting challenge to archaeological research. The city of Madaba, located 30 km southwest of Amman amidst the fertile rolling plains of the Central Jordan Plateau, is a case in point. Continuing an urban tradition of some 5,000 years, the modern town engulfs the ancient settlement, preserved in the form of a large low-lying tell and acropolis (ca. 16 ha in area at the base and 9 ha at the summit) that still forms a visible rise in the town center. Yet, Madaba's historical prominence prevents us from ignoring its role in the rich and eventful history of Highland Central Jordan. The ancient urban core of Madaba, therefore, presents both a challenge and an opportunity to explore the complex remains of a site at the center of the cultural and political life of this region.

In 1995, the author initiated the Tell Madaba Archaeological Project (TMAP) with the goal of pursuing this investigation. The project constitutes part of a larger ongoing study of the social, economic and political institutions developed by Bronze and Iron Age communities in the Madaba Plain region. By focusing on the central site of Madaba, the project will expand an emerging regional data base that will permit detailed analysis of the changing economic and socio-political organization of communities on a regional level, thereby enhancing our ability to chart the dynamic development of social complexity in the region.

The primary goals of the 1996 field season were to establish a stratigraphic profile of the Bronze and Iron Age levels on the tell, and assess the feasibility of conducting further, long-term excavations at the site. Though brief, the 1996 pilot season succeeded in achieving these basic objectives. A computerized base map of the entire urban core of Madaba was established, enabling future discoveries to be integrated in a single data base for the site. From this a topographic relief map was created that defined the extent of the Bronze and Iron Age tell. Excavations on the southeastern slope of the tell (Field A) resulted in an 8 m vertical profile of the existing stratigraphy of the lower tell, extending from the summit down to bedrock. The earliest occupational levels reached in Field A revealed a settlement history that began in the Early Bronze Age, with the first settlement founded as early as the late EB I/II period (ca. 3100 B.C.). Although Field A produced a lengthy occupational gap, extending for the better part of the 3rd and 2nd millennium B.C., there is little doubt that human activity occurred on the tell during much of this time, as was indicated by the ceramic evidence recovered from the Iron Age midden deposits that covered the Early Bronze Age levels. The evidence uncovered in Field A suggests that the settlement was confined further to the west and north during these periods. The Field A excavations also revealed some of

the richness of the Iron Age levels at Madaba, preserved in the secondary context of rubbish (or midden) deposits. As a preliminary, exploratory effort, the 1996 field season succeeded in demonstrating some of the considerable potential at Tell Madaba, particularly in the area of the western acropolis, for further archaeological research into the Bronze and Iron Age history of the Madaba Plain region of Highland Central Jordan.