



The Mosaics at Um er-Rasas in Jordan

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by Michele Piccirillo

About 30 kilometers southeast of Madaba in Jordan are the ruins of Um er-Rasas. Beginning in 1986, three seasons of excavations at the site¹ have yielded many discoveries, most notably the mosaic floors of two churches dating, respectively, to the sixth and eighth centuries C.E. These mosaics provide new evidence for the history of the Transjordan in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, and one of them is among the most important archaeological finds in Jordan, equaled only by the famous mosaic known as the Madaba map. In the following pages I shall describe the mosaics at Um er-Rasas and their setting and suggest some of the things that they can tell us.

The ruins of Um er-Rasas, situated at a high elevation on a plateau and thus visible for nearly 20 kilometers, cover an area of about 3 hectares (or 7.5 acres). The site consists of a walled area forming a fortified camp, and an open quarter of roughly the same size to the north. About 1.5 kilometers further north there are two towers: one, 15 meters high, is surrounded by ruined buildings, and the second, square in shape, is near large rock-hewn pools.

Our work at the site began on July 26, 1986. For practical reasons—specifically, to facilitate the removal



of a considerable amount of debris—the two edifices with apses on the north edge of the ruins were chosen for excavation.

Thus far we have excavated two churches, a paved courtyard that was later converted into a chapel by the addition of an apse on its western wall, and another paved chapel to the west. The four structures form a large and interconnected liturgical complex unique in the region. This area may have been a large monastic complex.

This basalt capital or base was found reused in the Church of Bishop Sergius. It may be evidence of the Iron Age settlement at the site. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs in the following articles are used courtesy of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Jerusalem.



The northernmost church has a dedicatory inscription in its mosaic pavement that reads: "In the good times of our lord, the most holy and most blessed Bishop Sergius, the whole work of this most holy church was mosaicked by the priest Procopius in the month of Gorpiaus on the sixth indiction of the year 482 of the Province of Arabia [a date that corresponds to 587 C.E.]." We thus refer to this building as the Church of Bishop Sergius.²

To the southeast of the Church



Above: The presbytery of the Church of Bishop Sergius, which dates to 587 C.E. The dedicatory inscription contains much historical information, including the name of Sergius I, who was a bishop of the diocese of Madaba in Jordan. **Right:** The church complex as it appeared after the first season of excavation in 1986.



The mosaic floors in two churches at Um er-Rasas provide us with new evidence of the Transjordan in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods.

A personification of the season in the southeast corner of the nave of the Church of Bishop Sergius was preserved without damage because it had been covered by a pulpit.

of Bishop Sergius is another church with a mosaic pavement featuring two dedicatory inscriptions. The first, located along the step of the presbytery, reads: "At the time of the most holy Bishop Sergius the mosaic of the holy and illustrious proto-deacon and proto-martyr Stephen was completed by the care of John, son of Isaac, most beloved of God, lexou and deacon and leader of Mefaa, econom, and by the care of all the people of Kastron Mefaa who love Christ, in the month of October, the second indiction year of the Province of Arabia 680 [785 C.E.], in memory for the repose of Fidonus (son) of Aeias, lover of Christ." The second inscription, near the altar in the presbytery, reads: "By the grace of Christ, the mosaic of this holy bema was decorated at the time of our most pious father Bishop Job . . . in the month of March, the ninth indiction of the year 650 [756 C.E.]. Remember, oh Lord, your servant Staurachios, the mosaicist of Hesban, the son of Zada and Euremois his companion. Lord, remember your servant Elia, (son) of Samuel



lexou, of Constantine, of Germanus, of Abdela, together with Mary." We refer to this building as the Church of Saint Stephen.

The Church of Bishop Sergius

The Church of Bishop Sergius and the Church of Saint Stephen sit side by side and have the same basic structure: each with two rows of columns creating a central nave flanked by aisles on the north and south, and each with an apse and an elevated presbytery on the eastern end, two steps higher than the nave.

In the presbytery of the Church

of Bishop Sergius we find the base of the altar and a bench that runs around the apse. The mosaic floor within the apse features a geometrical pattern. In front of the altar the mosaic pavement forms a rectangular panel; it has a frame that encloses a medallion (which contains the dedicatory inscription) flanked on each side by a lamb and a fruit-laden tree.

The excavation of the central nave revealed a rich mosaic floor that had, unfortunately, been seriously defaced by iconoclasts. Originally it consisted of a frame featuring acanthus scrolls and scenes of hunting,

Excavators remove the base of a pulpit that covered one of the personifications of the season in the Church of Bishop Sergius. The season and the two lambs in the presbytery are the only images in the floor that escaped damage.



The mosaic panel of the Palestinian city of Neapolis in the Church of Saint Stephen.



fishing, and vintage. In each of its corners there was a depiction of a season holding a cornucopia from which sprang the acanthus scrolls. Within the frame the central carpet included two classical personifications: on the end toward the altar, the Abyss (or Sea); and on the end toward the main door, the Earth. Between these were portraits and life scenes of the benefactors of the church—the sons of John, the sons of Sophia, Ouadia with a censer in his right hand, John with a book in his hand, and an anonymous benefactor with a boy on his shoulders and pointing to a church. In addition, there were Baricha, Zongon, and John of Porphyrius holding ropes around a bull they were about to kill with an ax and a knife; Soelos plowing with a pair of oxen; Peter and John riding horses, accompanied by a foot soldier and an archer and fol-

lowed by two oxen. Two unusual images in the central carpet were a phoenix with rays coming out of its head and a man carrying a bed on his shoulders.

The personification of the season in the southeast corner of the frame was preserved without damage because it had been covered by a pulpit. This figure and the two lambs of the presbytery are the only intact images. The remaining images had been badly patched, but the accompanying Greek inscriptions are useful in their interpretation.

The northern aisle is largely decorated with geometric motifs, and the southern aisle is, for the most part, paved in red stone from Bethlehem.

In addition to the dedicatory inscription, there are three other inscriptions in the church. Near the step of the presbytery are three lines

that quote Psalm 87:2. In a tabula ansata in the first intercolumnar space of the north row of columns is the following: "Oh Lord, have mercy on all who toiled on this mosaic. Their names are known to you. (It was done) in the times of Soelos, of Casiseos, of Abdallos, of Obedos, and of Elias your faithful (ones)." A third is found in a medallion near the door: "For the salvation of . . . (son) of Isaac and of Matirius (son) of Sabinus, and of Theodorus his brother, and Marinus."³

Two other interesting features of this church are an opening for a water cistern to the right of the main door and, near this, a stand for amphoras made from an ancient capital.

The Church of Saint Stephen

The Church of Saint Stephen lies 1 meter higher than the Church of

The mosaic panel of Jerusalem (the Holy City) in the Church of Saint Stephen.



This dedicatory inscription, located along the steps of the presbytery, is one of two in the Church of Saint Stephen. It dates to 785 C.E. Note the damage that was done below it to what apparently had been human images.





Above: The mosaic floor of the Church of Saint Stephen. **Left:** The church's two dedicatory inscriptions. The inscription near the altar dates to 756 c.e. It identifies the mosaicist, Staurachios of Hesban, the first mosaicist in the region whose place of origin is known. The other inscription, located along the steps of the presbytery, dates to 785 c.e. It twice mentions the name of *Kastron Mefaa*, the ancient site of *Um er-Rasas*.

Bishop Sergius. In addition to its main entrance on the west, access to the former was also possible from two doors along the south wall.

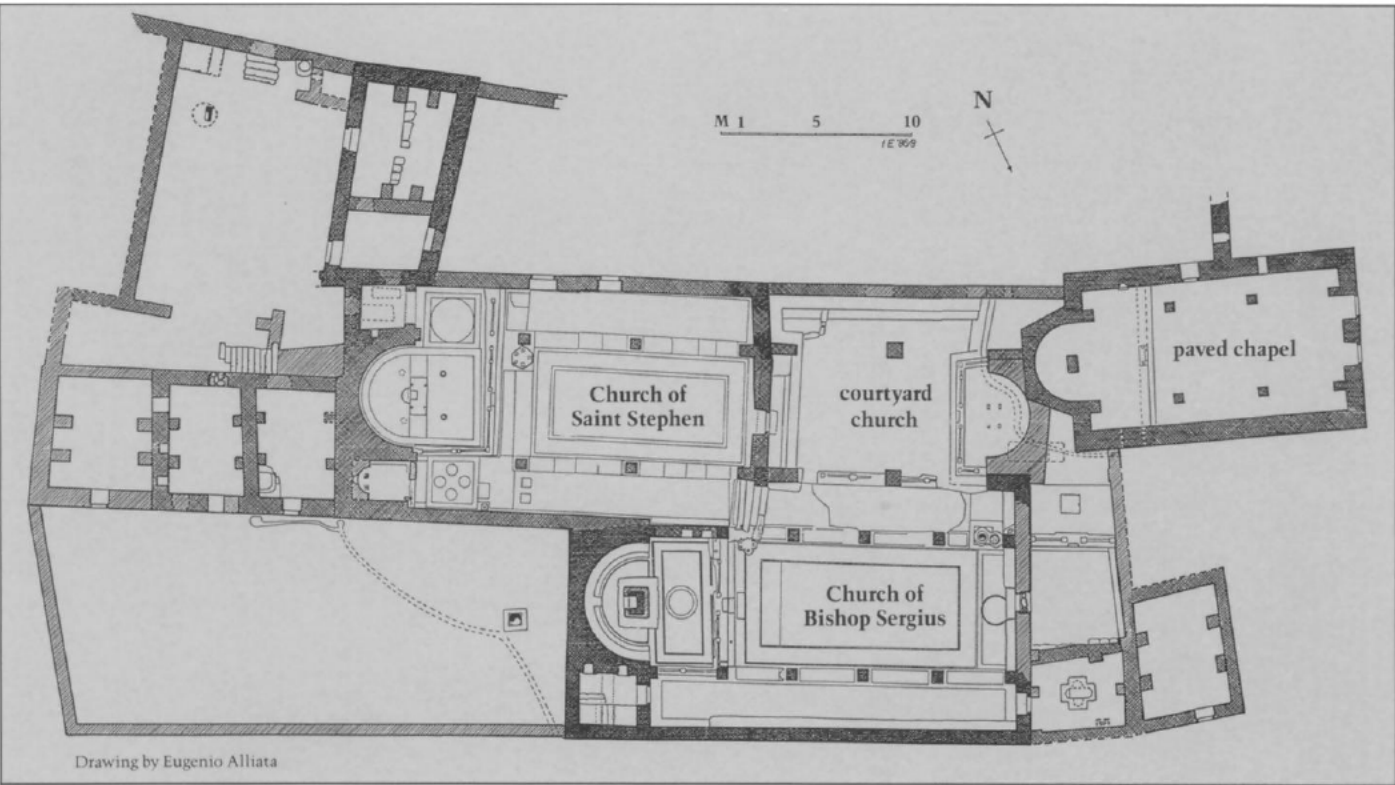
This church is of great interest. The richness of the inscriptions and the quality of the motifs of its mosaic pavement make it one of the most important archaeological monuments in Jordan.

The dedicatory inscription along the step of the presbytery provides us with the ancient name of *Um er-Rasas*: *Mefaa*, or *Kastron Mefaa*⁴ The dedicatory inscription near the altar in the presbytery also contains important historical information. Although there is some difficulty in

reading it because of its use of abbreviations, its date of 756 c.e. confirms the reading of the first inscription and furnishes the name of a hitherto unknown bishop, Job, who along with Sergius II, can be added to the list of bishops of Madaba. It also identifies the mosaicist, Staurachios of Hesban, the first mosaicist in the region whose place of origin is known.

The two dates given in these inscriptions, 785 and 756 c.e., indicate that the mosaic floor in the nave and aisles is a later restoration by a team of mosaicists who wished to remain anonymous, since a third inscription in the south aisle says: "Oh Lord,

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remember your servants the mosaicists whose names you know.”

It is the mosaic of the nave that is of the most interest. Although the portraits of the benefactors and the scenes of hunting, agriculture, and pastoral life that make up the central portion have been disfigured and are often unintelligible, the double frame that surrounds these is intact and an important discovery. Here we find a number of city plans, each

accompanied by its toponym, or place-name, in Greek.

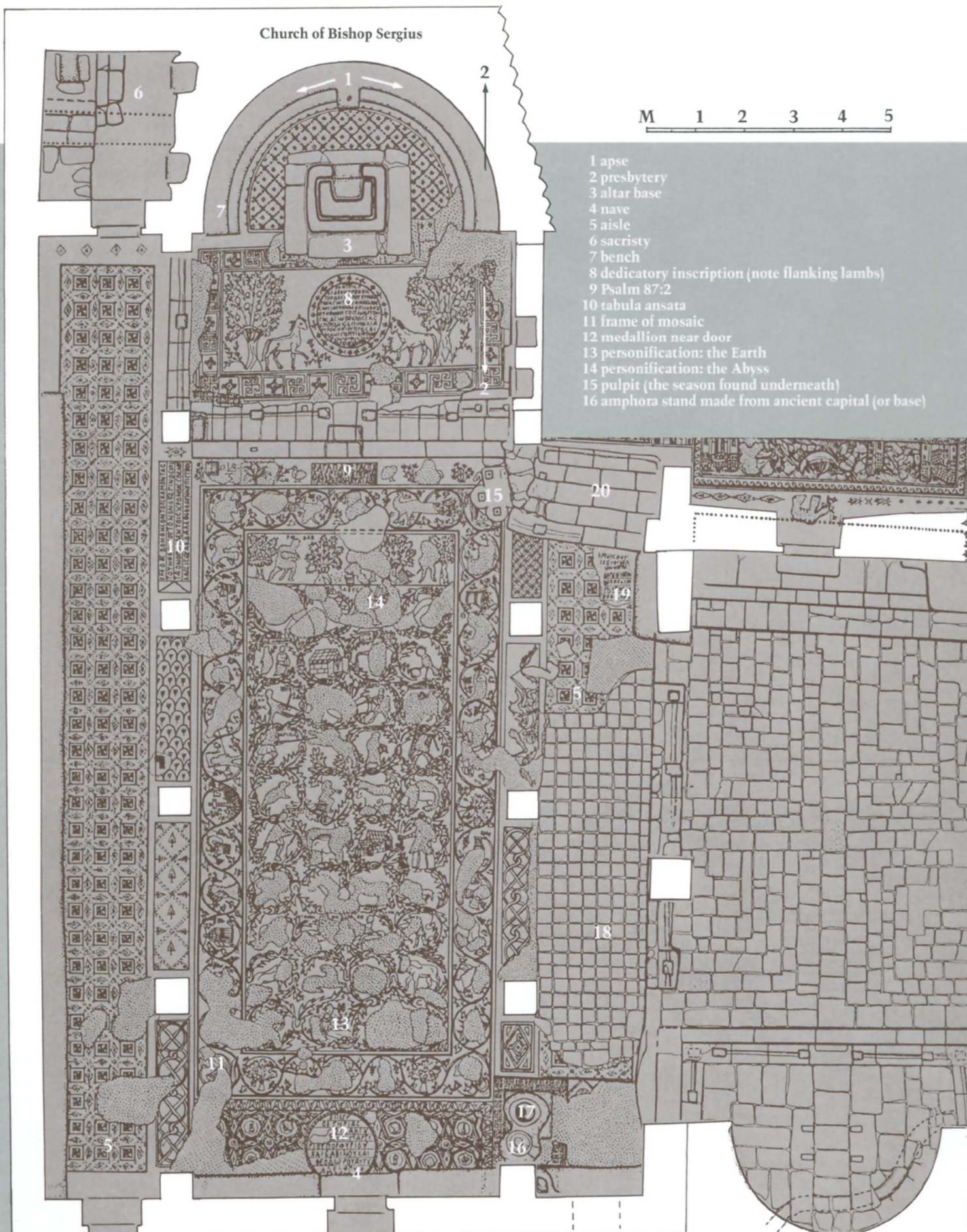
The outer frame, occupying the spaces between columns, borders only the two long sides of the rectangular central mosaic. In the intercolumnar spaces of the north row a series of eight Palestinian cities are depicted: Jerusalem (the Holy City), Neapolis (Nablus), Sebastis (Sebastia), Caesarea, Diospolis (Lidda), Eleutheropolis (Beth Guvrin), Aska-

lon (Ashkelon), and Gaza. In the intercolumnar spaces of the south row a series of seven Jordanian cities are shown: Kastron Mefaa (Umm er-Rasas), Philadelphia (Amman), Madaba, Esbounta (Hesban), Belemounta (Ma'in), Areopolis (Rabba), and Charachmoba (el-Kerak). (Two additional Jordanian cities, Limbon and Diblaton, are portrayed, one at the head of each aisle, associated with portraits of benefactors and inscriptions, and another toponym, without illustration, mentions the superior of the monastery on Mount Nebo.⁵)

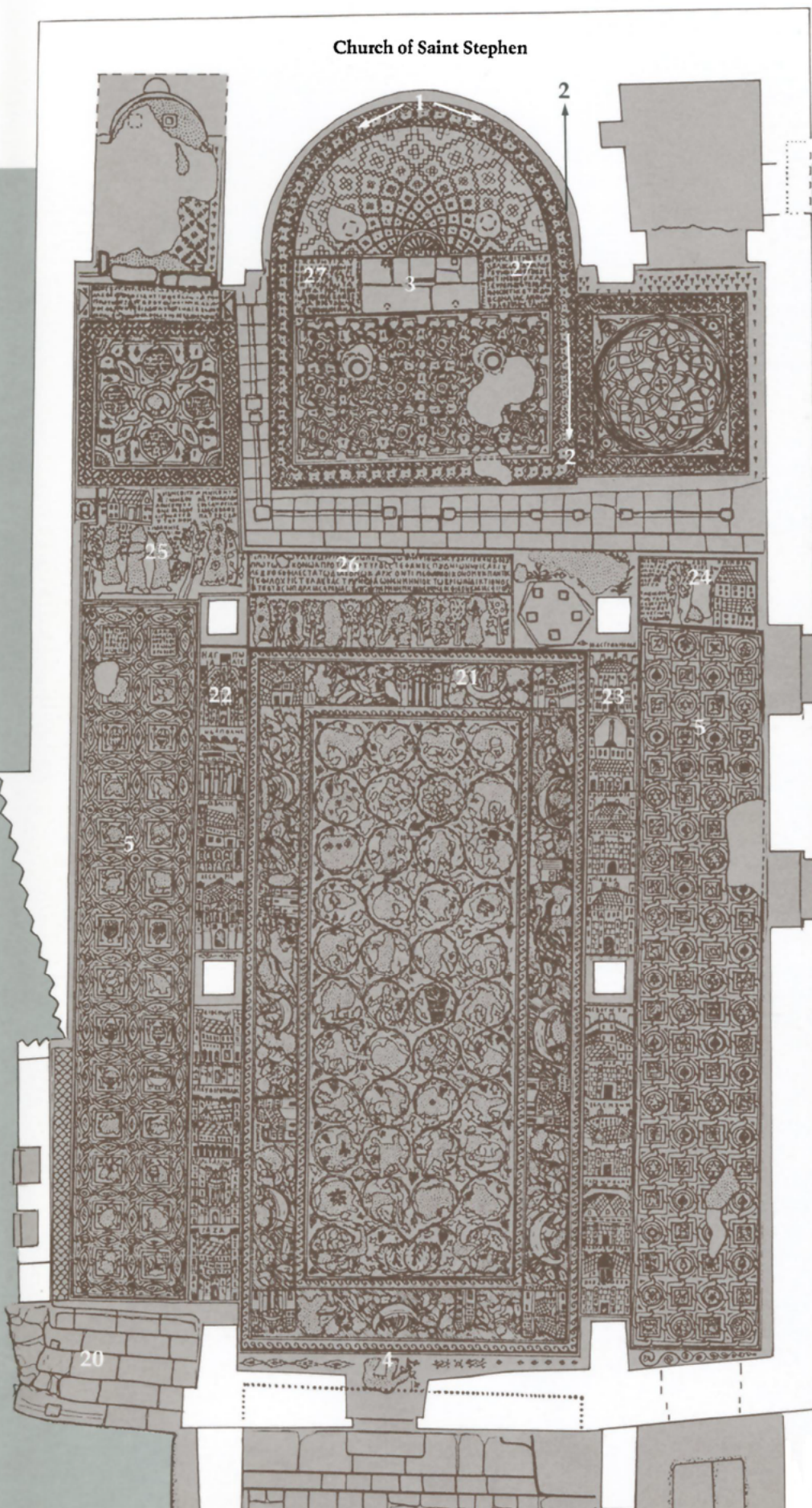
The inner frame, which depicts a river with fish, birds, and water flowers as well as boats and boys fishing or hunting, also portrays a series of ten cities in the Nile Delta: Alexandria, Kasin, Thenesos, Tamiathis, Panau, Pilousin(?), Anticiaou(?), Eraklion, Kynopolis, and Pseudostomon.

Byzantine	324 to 640 C.E.
Early Byzantine	324 to 491 C.E.
Late Byzantine	491 to 640 C.E.
Early Islamic	640 to 1174 C.E.
Umayyad	661 to 750 C.E.
Abbasid	750 to 878 C.E.
Fatamid	969 to 1174 C.E.

The Mosaics (continued)



Church of Saint Stephen



- 17 opening to water cistern
- 18 red brick from Bethlehem
- 19 inscription copied from upper church
- 20 stairway between the churches
- 21 inner frame with Nile cities
- 22 northern border with Palestinian cities
- 23 southern border with Jordanian cities
- 24 Limbon, Mount Nebo
- 25 Diblton, benefactors
- 26 dedicatory inscription along steps of presbytery
- 27 dedicatory inscription near the altar

As far as historical identification is concerned, all the toponyms of Palestine and Jordan are well known, with the exception of Limbon. It's possible that this site could be identified with the village of Libb, which is 10 kilometers south of Madaba. Diblton, which is known in the Bible as Diblataim (Numbers 33:46–47) and on the Moabite Stone (also called the Stele of Mesha) as Beit-Diblataim, has not yet been identified with a ruin in the area. It may be north of Dhiban; perhaps it is Khirbet et-Teim, based on the homonymy of the two names: et-Teim, Diblataim.

An important question here is whether the depictions of the cities are conventional or whether they are simplified realistic representations. This is difficult to answer because we have a limited knowledge of the monuments that were in these cities. In the case of Kastron Mefaa, however, it seems fairly certain that the mosaicist was inspired by reality and gave actual details, since a tower is shown and there is a tower at the site. And we might point to the depiction of Jerusalem, where it is possible to identify the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre according to the iconography attributed to it in the Byzantine period. Also, for Neapolis, the

An inscription in the Church of Saint Stephen identifies the ruins of Um er-Rasas with *Mefacat*. Is it biblical *Mefacat*?

mosaicist used the facade of a temple to represent the city. This might be the temple on the top of Mount Gerizim, which is found on coins struck at Neapolis in the Roman period.

The monotonous repetition of a city plan with walls, towers, gates, and one or two internal edifices does support the opinion that the cities of Jordan are presented in very conventional fashion.

From an artistic point of view, the illustrations of the Palestinian cities are notable for their freedom of composition and variety of color tones.

The Historical Importance of the Mosaics

The mosaics of Um er-Rasas provide a great deal of new evidence on the history of the region, especially in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. The long process of evaluating this evidence has, of course, only begun, and I can give just a few examples here.

Kastron Mefaa. The name Kastron Mefaa, which means "camp of Mefaa," suggests the military nature of the settlement in the Roman, Byzantine, Arabic, and possibly even Nabatean periods. We find historical evidence for this in several written sources. In the *Onomasticon*, written in the first half of the fourth century C.E., Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that there was a unit of the Roman army stationed on the edge of the desert at Mefaat. The *Notitia Dignitatum*, an imperial document of the fourth century C.E., records that local soldiers who had been promoted to the cavalry, that is, auxiliary troops of the Roman army, were stationed in the camp of Mefaa. A Nabatean inscription, said to have been found by

Bedouins at Um er-Rasas and published by Charles Clermont-Ganneau, records the names of some Nabatean military governors.

The mosaics at Um er-Rasas also provide evidence for the Arab military nature of the settlement. Thus far, of the sixty-four Greek inscriptions noted, mainly dedications with the names of benefactors, the majority of the Semitic names are of Arabic origin. There are the common names such as Abdallos, Obedos, Naoum, Kaïoum, Soelos, and Elias as well as rarer names such as Abesobeos, Uaias, Alafa, and Gomela, and in one case there is an unambiguously Arabic name: Petron Arabbous—that is, Peter the Arab, or so I construe it. In addition, all of these except one, Mary, are men's names, and only male family relations (father, son, and brothers) are mentioned. Since we know from the dedicatory inscription of the Church of Saint Stephen that Kastron Mefaa was governed by the deacon John, we can conclude that the settlement was, like Resafe (Sergiopolis) in northern Syria, a Hira, or a camp of the Arab auxiliary soldiers who served the Roman, the Byzantine, and the Umayyad armies.

The Tower of Um er-Rasas. The double plan of Kastron Mefaa as depicted in the series of Jordanian cities might provide a clue to the purpose of the tower north of the ruins. Some have thought it was a military watchtower, guarding against either the danger of Bedouin raids from the desert or protecting the water cisterns hewn out of the rock. Others have thought it served as a platform for a stylite, one of the ascetics who would live on top of a pillar.

The mosaicist added a second plan related to Mefaa outside of the

camp proper. He depicted a church with three burning lamps hanging from its arches. Behind the church is a courtyard surrounded by rooms on all sides. In the courtyard is a solitary column shown against a white background. On top of the column is a kind of parapet with a line of black tesserae in the middle. This may be a representation of the tower complex north of the city. If so, then the tower may be seen not as a watchtower but as a column for a stylite.

The tower itself, as we could ascertain in the summer of 1987, had no stairway and no door, except at the very top, and its roof was dome-shaped. Moreover, excavations around it uncovered a simple church that was in use in the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. Beneath the east end of the north aisle was an intact reliquary containing the partially cremated bones of an adult. Adjoining the church on the north are two rooms, while the wall lines of a courtyard are visible on all sides of the tower.

A Locality Mentioned in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, *Mefacat* is listed among the localities of the high plateau of Moab, along with such other places as Madaba, Nebo, Macin, and Dhiban (Joshua 13:18 and 21:37 and Jeremiah 48:21). The inscription in the Church of Saint Stephen identifies the ruins of Um er-Rasas with the name *Mefacat*. Thus far, however, no definite trace of human occupation before the Nabatean epoch has been found among the ruins. For instance, Nelson Glueck in his 1933 survey of the site collected only Nabatean, Byzantine, and Arabic sherds. In our excavations we reached bedrock in the section south of the Church of Saint Stephen, and our earliest sherds are



Nabatean (a period running approximately from 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.). We have, however, found a basalt capital that may be the first evidence of the Iron Age settlement. Future research on the site will ascertain if the ruins of the Byzantine Arabic Um er-Rasas cover the Iron Age village of the eighth through sixth centuries B.C.E.

Conclusion

I have suggested only a few of the areas in which the discoveries at Um er-Rasas have contributed to our knowledge of history in the Transjordan. There are many more. For instance, the late date of the mosaics in the Church of Saint Stephen opens what was a closed chapter of

Jordanian history relative to civil, religious, and artistic interests. We now know that at the end of the eighth century C.E. an urban community still existed at the site. That community was religiously and administratively organized and exhibited an unexpected artistic vitality. It still remains to be seen what our excavations will tell us about the disappearance of urban life in the region (and in the whole Middle East). And, finally, the excavations reopen the problem of iconoclasm. Because the figures in the mosaics were defaced after 785 C.E., we need to consider the possibility of an iconoclastic movement in Jordan that was contemporary with iconoclasm in the Byzantine Empire but

with its own local character, so radical that not even the figures of fish and other animals were spared. We will eventually know much more than we do today, as scholars continue their evaluation of the archaeological evidence and as excavations continue.

Notes

¹The excavations, under the direction of myself and Taysir Atṭiyat, were carried out by the Franciscan Biblical Institute in Jerusalem in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. This work is part of a larger research project devoted to the Byzantine and Umayyad mosaics of Jordan as guidelines for an eventual rewriting of the history of Jordan in that period, a history largely unknown to us from literary sources. It should also be noted that in the spring of 1988 a Swiss team from the Max van Berchem foundation in Geneva conducted its first season of excavation at the site in one of the churches inside the walled enclosure in the south part of town.

²Sergius I, a bishop of Madaba, was already known to us. In his time the Church of the Apostles and the Church of the Prophet Elijah were built in Madaba, and the new basilica of the memorial of Moses was built on Mount Nebo. His name in this inscription confirms that the territory of the diocese of Madaba reached the Wadi Mujib-Arnon, the southern border of the Province of Arabia.

³Also, near the first step of the stairway between the two churches, an unskilled workman copied an inscription from the upper church.

⁴It also provides evidence for an organized Christian community governed by a deacon with a bishop and local clergy at the end of the eighth century, and its date of 785 C.E. extends the history of mosaic art in Jordan for almost a century.

⁵"Oh Lord, remember your servant Kayoum, monk and priest of Phisga." In the Bible Mount Nebo is called Pisgah.