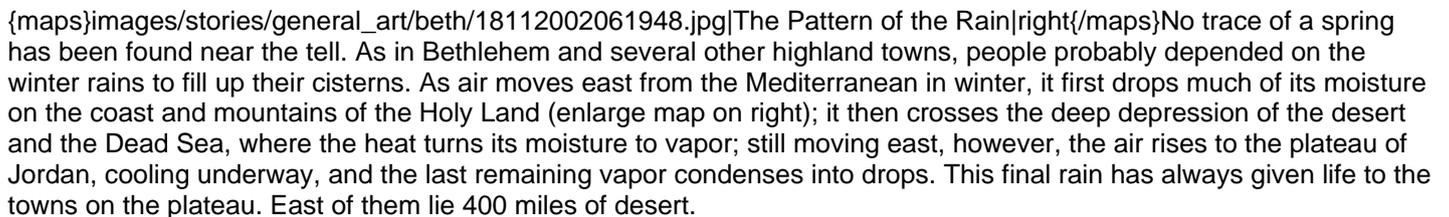


Madaba

Written by Micah Key

On a fertile plateau southwest of Amman lies a sleepy market town of many treasures: a trove of Byzantine mosaics that are among the best examples of this art form in the world. The town's name is Madaba, and although its most famous mosaic is the map of the Holy Land found in its Church of St. George, there are many more that are well worth seeing.

The history of Madaba goes back thousands of years before the mosaics, for there was already a settlement here in the 4th millennium BC. The center of the present town, higher than the rest, is in fact a tell. It was located on the N-S King's Highway near its intersection with the E-W road coming up to Heshbon. (See the satellite photo below.) Archaeology has turned up evidence of occupation in the 13th century BC, when the whole area east of the Jordan underwent a marked increase in settlement, as well as in the 10th and 9th centuries BC, a period that fits the mentions of Madaba in the Bible and the Mesha stele (discussed below).

The Pattern of the Rain
No trace of a spring has been found near the tell. As in Bethlehem and several other highland towns, people probably depended on the winter rains to fill up their cisterns. As air moves east from the Mediterranean in winter, it first drops much of its moisture on the coast and mountains of the Holy Land (enlarge map on right); it then crosses the deep depression of the desert and the Dead Sea, where the heat turns its moisture to vapor; still moving east, however, the air rises to the plateau of Jordan, cooling underway, and the last remaining vapor condenses into drops. This final rain has always given life to the towns on the plateau. East of them lie 400 miles of desert.

Given the scarcity of rain (about 12 inches or 300 mm. today), agriculture must have been marginal, but there would have been plenty of good pastureland. So, for instance, in the 9th century BC, when the area paid tribute to the northern kingdom of Israel, it took the form of *From 2 Kings 3:4. Now Mesha king of Moab was a sheep breeder; and he rendered to the king of Israel the wool of one hundred thousand lambs, and of one hundred thousand rams.* lambs and wool.

Madaba appears in Numbers, in an ancient song celebrating the defeat of Moab by the Israelites. Later, the plateau of Madaba is mentioned as part of the *Joshua 13:9. With him [Manasseh], the Reubenites and the Gadites received their inheritance, which Moses gave them, beyond the Jordan eastward, even as Moses the servant of Yahweh gave them: from Aroer, that is on the edge of the valley of the Arnon, and the city that is in the middle of the valley, and all the plain of Madaba to Dibon.* inheritance that the tribes of Reuben and Gad received from Moses.

In 1868, in nearby Dhiban (the Biblical Dibon - see the satellite photo), a stele was found, recording how the Moabite king Mesha triumphed over the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century BC. As mentioned above, the Bible says that Israel had been exacting tribute in the form of lambs and wool. In the stele, also known as the Moabite stone, Mesha claims to have thrown off the Israelite occupation throughout the "land of Madaba" (mentioned in lines 7-8). The account in 2 Kings gives the events a different "spin," but it is clear that Israel and its allies withdrew.

In 1 Maccabees 9:32-42, we learn that Madaba was inhabited by a Nabataean tribe, the sons of Jambri or Jamri, in the 2nd century BC. In their own language they were called the Banu Amrat. They appear under this name in an inscription found in the Madaba cathedral; it shows that the city was part of the Kingdom of Petra. Other inscriptions indicate that the Nabataeans were still ruling Madaba in the 1st century AD. When Rome annexed their kingdom in 106 AD, Madaba

became part of the Provincia Arabia (as mentioned in a description found near Mount Nebo), and so it remained well into the Byzantine era. It was during this period that the mosaic artists began their work.

{mospagebreak title=The mosaics}

The Mosaics

Written by Micah Key and Stephen Langfur

In 1884, Christians were preparing to build a Church of St. James or "Brother of Christ" at Madaba (today the Church of St. George) when they discovered, beneath the ruins of an earlier church at the site, a mosaic map of the Holy Land. Professor Herbert Donner writes: As "a real geographical map apparently intending to depict real geographical and topographical facts... it is totally unique in the whole of antiquity. The mosaic artist of Madaba tried to represent as precisely as possible the nature of Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River and to establish the locations of Palestinian sites. Naturally, he did not succeed in that everywhere, but still he did to a considerable and astonishing degree" (Donner).

The original map, only part of which is preserved, probably measured some 15.60 meters by 6. It belonged to the floor of a larger Byzantine church. Two of the original columns can be seen in the courtyard of the present Greek Orthodox Church of St. George.

What was a map like this doing in a rural Byzantine town? A common theory holds that it functioned as a guide for pilgrims wishing to visit the various shrines and holy sites scattered throughout the area. The names on the map seem to correspond with those in the Onomasticon of Eusebius (ca. 263-339 AD), Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, was a historian of the early Christian church at the time of Constantine. However, since the map was created in the 6th century, the artist was able to update it beyond the scope of Eusebius's knowledge.

Others hold that the map depicts Moses's view of the Holy Land from Mount Nebo, which Byzantine tradition located just a few miles northwest of Madaba. In his paper "The Madaba Map Revisited," Irfan Shahid agrees with this theory but proposes an overlapping view which takes Christian worship into account:

The map represents the history of Christian salvation in its entirety encompassing both the old and the new chosen peoples. That this was and must have been the message of the map is clearly indicated in the prominence given to Jerusalem in which the Church of the Holy Sepulchre dominated the city and the city dominated the map. The survival, almost intact, of the vignette of Jerusalem in the map was a singular stroke of fortune, without which it would have been practically impossible to guess what the message of the map was. (The Madaba Map Centenary, Jerusalem 1999, 147-154)

Indeed, the Holy City is shown in remarkable detail. On the left side, corresponding to the north, one can clearly see the north gate, known today as the Damascus Gate. The Arabic name, Bab Al-Amoud, means Gate of the Column, although for ages there has been no column there. Looking at the map, however, one sees a huge column depicted just inside the gate.

Today, after entering the Old City through the Damascus Gate, one soon comes to a fork. The left road leads south through a valley dividing the city as far as the Dung Gate. Josephus knew this valley as the Tyropoeon. And there it is on the Madaba map, beginning just east of the column (it has a colonnade on its east side only). Parts of this eastern "Cardo" ("axis")—146 feet of it—dating from the time of Hadrian (135 AD) at the latest, have recently been discovered in the southern end of the city, 15 feet beneath today's Western Wall Plaza. The road was 36 feet wide between the columns on either side (not just on one side, as in the map).

East of this road we would expect to find, on the map, some indication of the former Temple Mount. But no! There are just a few nondescript buildings, south of which is a red-roofed structure, most likely the nunnery founded by the Empress Eudocia in the 5th century. The Byzantines paid the erstwhile Temple Mount their utmost disrespect—according to one account they used it as a garbage dump—because it was the holy place of a people that had refused to accept Jesus as savior, urging his crucifixion instead. On the Madaba map, therefore, the Temple Mount does not exist.

Staying with the photo above, note that a road branches eastward from the Valley Road, leading to a city gate. This was probably the "Sheep Gate" {tips}Now in Jerusalem by the sheep gate, there is a pool, which is called in Hebrew, “Bethesda,” having five porches.[of John 5:2,{/tips} today known as the Lions' or Stephen's Gate. Just to its left, on the map, we see the Church of St. Mary. (A red gabled roof on the map always signifies a church.) This was the church whose supporting arches we see today at the Pool of Bethesda, beside St. Anne's.

Returning to the fork near the Damascus Gate, if today you take the road on the right, you walk through a narrow, busy alley, filled with shops serving the local population, but a few meters beneath you is what we see on the Madaba map: To the right of the column, running through the city on a north-south axis, is the Cardo Maximus. This was the city's main north-south street, and the mapmaker left no doubt of that! Colonnaded on both sides, its southern portion, in today's Jewish quarter, has been excavated. Because of the Madaba map, the archaeologists knew they would find the Cardo here.

On the Madaba map above, halfway down the Cardo Maximus, we see a huge building, the main goal of Christian pilgrimage: it is the church marking the site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection, today called the Holy Sepulcher. The map shows its structure in detail, beginning with steps from the Cardo, then a triple gate, then the orange roof of the basilica, and finally the rotunda of the Anastasis, or Resurrection Church, built over Jesus' tomb—all as constructed under order of Emperor Constantine I in the 4th century. Note that the church is crooked in relation to the Cardo. This was no fault of the artist. In reality, the church is crooked to the street - and precisely at that angle! You can check this in the satellite photo below.

Now, why would Constantine's church be crooked to the *Cardo Maximus*? No one knows for sure. But we should remember, first, that the church was built on the site of a Roman temple, namely, the one erected under Hadrian in 135 AD. That temple would have had the same angle to the *Cardo*, which was likewise built by Hadrian. According to Roman custom, the siting of the temple would have been determined by augurs. Some think that the augurs lined the temple up with the peak of the Mt. of Olives, but if that was the determining factor, they could have moved it a bit to the north and kept it perpendicular to the *Cardo*. What led them to line it up precisely as they did? We should bear in mind one possibility: perhaps there was already a Christian sanctuary here that was oriented in this direction, in accordance with the layout of Jesus' tomb. For although Hadrian had banished the Jews from Jerusalem after the Bar Kochba Revolt, non-Jewish Christians had remained, and they would have had their holy places. Unlikely as this theory may sound at first blush (for why should the mighty Romans pay attention to a Christian site?), we have a parallel instance in Bethlehem, where the Romans established a grove of Adonis at a cave venerated by Christians since the 2nd century as Jesus' birthplace. For more on this, go here to the Holy Sepulcher and then here to Bethlehem.

The *Cardo Maximus* continued as far as the New Church of Mary, also known as the Nea, which abuts the *Cardo*'s east side. History records the dedication of this church on November 20, 542, a reference that helps us to date the map itself. Further south, beyond the *Cardo*, we find the Holy Church of Zion, which included the Upper Room .

North of the Damascus Gate, the map shows us the Benjamin Plateau and part of the hill country. The city of Nablus, marked as Neapolis, appears in a charred section at the left edge.

On the upper part of the map above lies Jericho, graced by palms. The photo below shows the area just east of Jericho, where the Byzantines located Jesus' baptism. In the Jordan near the Dead Sea, note the fish that has turned around to escape from the salty waters, returning upstream.

In the Dead Sea we find ships that are laden with grain (yellow) and salt (white). On its northeast shore, the famous thermal baths of Callirhoe are indicated in detail, and east of them the baths of Baaru, today's Hammamat Ma'in.

Although Transjordan was once represented, most of it is missing from the extant mosaic. On the other side of the Dead Sea the mountains can still be seen, with the fortress of Karak on one hilltop and, just to its south, the Zered valley, probably to be identified as Wadi Isal, which leads up to Karak.

And here are the Negev and the city of Gaza. Just south of Gaza appear the words, "Border of Egypt and Palestine," about where the border is today.

The southernmost section of the map, to the viewer's right and extending to the far wall of the church, shows the Nile Delta. Here the map is turned 90 degrees so that the river's arms appear to be flowing eastward, rather than from south to north as they do. The artist may have resorted to this distortion in order to allow extra space for some of the major pilgrimage centers, especially Jerusalem.

For an excellent and comprehensive presentation of the Madaba Map, we recommend the Franciscan Cyberspot.

More mosaics at Madaba

Over the last century or so of building and excavating, the Madabans have uncovered many additional mosaics, some in churches, others gracing the rooms of Byzantine mansions. Located near St. George's Church, the Burnt Palace is one example of a 7th century mansion destroyed by fire. It contained mosaics depicting hunting scenes and a representation of Tyche ("Fortune"), the city goddess.

Beyond the Burnt Palace, the municipality of Madaba has created an Archaeological Park to showcase some of its mosaics in a restored Byzantine setting. The oldest mosaic yet found in Jordan is on display here: a section of the bathhouse floor from Herod's fortress at Makawir (Macherus).

Within the Park stand the remains of the Hippolytus Hall, an early 6th century mansion. Its mosaic floor tells the story of Hippolytus, a prince who loved hunting and chariot racing. He preferred to worship Artemis, goddess of the hunt, rather than Aphrodite. In revenge, the love goddess caused Phaedra, his father's wife, to fall in love with him. When Hippolytus rejected her, Phaedra wrote to his father, claiming that Hippolytus had raped her. This father was none other than

Theseus, who had won from the Sea God the right to deliver three deadly curses. He used one against his son. While Hippolytus was racing in his chariot on the beach, a Sea Monster frightened the horses, which dragged him to his death. Phaedra, in grief and guilt, committed suicide. The main figures appear in the central panel of the mosaic, but the Hippolytus section is badly damaged. In the well-preserved upper panel we see Aphrodite herself, instigator of the tragedy, accompanied by her lover Adonis, whose bitter fate lay just ahead. In revenge for what Aphrodite had done to Hippolytus, Artemis would send a wild boar to kill Adonis. He would rise again, however, die again, and rise again, seasonally with the vegetation.

The Hippolytus mansion was leveled to make room for the Church of the Virgin next door. Its circular chapel was probably built into a semicircular {jtips}A semicircular area with benches, sometimes adjoining a street, used for discussions|exedra{/jtips} on the Roman street. (A stretch of the street is preserved nearby.) Constructed late in the sixth century, the church's main mosaic has an intricate pattern, with a central inscription urging the viewer to purify himself before looking upon Mary.

The last current site for mosaics in Madaba, though probably not the last where mosaics can be found, is the Church of the Apostles. Originally a large basilica with adjoining side chapels, it was built in 568. The main mosaic consists of a pattern of dancing pigeons facing one another (in which no two are quite alike) and in the middle, a medallion depicting Thalassa, the Greek personification of the sea, rising out of the waves. Around her cavort some fish and an octopus. She holds a rudder in one hand.

The town of Madaba preserves a world heritage in its mosaics. Although many were damaged by Christian iconoclasts in the 8th century, others were protected by the rubble of buildings that had collapsed in earlier disasters. Who knows how many remain hidden still!

{mospagebreak title=Later history}

Madaba's Later History

After the Muslims defeated the Byzantines at the Yarmuk River in 636, Madaba became part of the Umayyad dynasty's southern Jund al-Falastin (Palestine Administrative District). The transition was peaceful, and because of Islam's general policy of respect for other peoples "of the book," Madaba was able to retain its distinctive Christian character throughout this era. As in its sister town of Um Er-Rasas, the Madabans continued to build churches and lay mosaic floors at least until the 8th century. A mosaic inscription found in Um Er-Rasas mentions a bishop of Madaba as late as 785.

The town appears to have been abandoned at some point during the Mameluke period (1250-1517). It lay in ruins, which hid the mosaics. European explorers came through in the 19th century but saw little to interest them. Only Henry B. Tristram, in his *The Land of Moab* (1873, pp. 306-315), spent four days here and understood the potential: "Excavations

we were not able to attempt; but I have seen no place in the country where they seem more likely to yield good results."

In 1880 a large group of Christian Arabs from Karak came to Madaba after a dispute with their Muslim neighbors. Under the Ottoman laws of the period, they were not allowed to build new churches, but they could build on the ruins of previous ones. These projects led to the discovery of the mosaics described above, including that of the celebrated map.