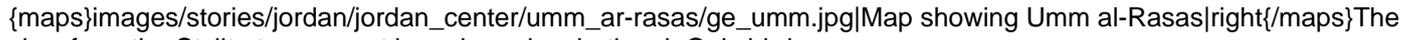


Umm al-Rasas

Contributed by Micah Key

The view from the Stylite tower must have been inspirational. Only birds now live in the little domed room at the top, but the monk who must have spent decades here, 45 feet above the ground, had more than a dozen churches only a mile to the south, and beyond them, the desert stretching to the horizon. The churches served the denizens of the little Byzantine garrison town of Kastron Mefaa, the fort of Mefaa, today known as Umm al-Rasas. The cavalry unit stationed here served the Empire's interest in holding desert marauders at bay.

A visitor arriving at Umm al-Rasas, even today, sees piles of rocks where the city was once, with free standing columns sticking out. In 1807, Ulrich Seetzen, the German explorer, re-discovered the site, located 30 km to the southeast of Madaba, while on his trek around the Dead Sea. Like other intrepid European travelers of his day, he avoided the ire of the Bedouin by disguising himself as a beggar, passing himself off as a Muslim by means of his flawless Arabic. Later, in 1896, Simon Vailhé identified the site as the ruins of a Roman camp, enabling J. Germer Durand to connect it to the place name of Mephaath in the Bible (Moses gave to the tribe of the children of Reuben according to their families. Their border was 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 by Medeba; Heshbon, and all its cities that are in the plain; Dibon, Bamoth Baal, Beth Baal Meon, Jahaz, Kedemoth, Mephaath|Joshua 13:18, and Moab is disappointed; for it is broken down: wail and cry; tell it by the Arnon, that Moab is laid waste. Judgment has come on the plain country, on Holon, and on Jahzah, and on Mephaath|Jeremiah 48:20-21). In addition, Eusebius, the early church historian, wrote about this site in his Onomasticon (128-129), adding that a garrison of Roman soldiers was stationed there, near the desert. The name Kastron Mefaa is written in mosaic tiles on the floors of St. Stephen's Church amid the ruins, as well as in the Church of the Lions.

The modern name of the site, "Umm al-Rasas" means "Mother (or Place) of Lead" in Arabic, but this is probably a corruption. In his report to UNESCO requesting the inclusion of Umm al-Rasas as a World Heritage Site, archaeologist Head of the museums and laboratories department at the Jordanian Department of Antiquities|Abdel Sami Abu Dayyeh writes:

Actually the term "Rasas" refers to the Arabic root "Rass" indicating the action of putting something on top of something else in perfect alignment. Therefore Um er-Rasas or "mourassas" in the toponomastic of the region is a term indicating a well-built [structure]. (p. 20)

The builders at Umm al-Rasas used a technique which involved fitting the rocks together closely, resulting in strong structures that have resisted several earthquakes. Arches still standing, as well as the Stylite tower itself, testify to the superior quality of construction.

During the 4th century AD, the emperor Diocletian, in a desire to strengthen and protect the Roman Empire's holdings from incursions by raiders, created the limes, a fortified network stretching around most of the Empire's borders. The limes Arabicus, among other things, protected the Paved by Trajan in the early 2nd century for 250 miles from Bostra to Aela (Aqaba) on the Red Sea|Via Nova Traiana. Mefaa was positioned nine miles east of this highway, between Madaba and Karak, and so a military camp was established here. It measured 150m by 120m. The unit based at the camp was recorded in the Notitia Dignatum (Register of Dignitaries, ca. 400 AD) as Equites promoti indigenae, or "native forward-placed cavalry." These locally recruited horsemen protected the area in the interests of Rome, and thanks to the security they provided, a small civilian town grew up over the next two centuries beside the camp. The town was about twice as big, but it contained a disproportional number of churches—at least 15. It was probably a pilgrimage center, because of the holy man (stylite) living on the nearby tower.

Several of the churches have been found to have unique and remarkable floor mosaics, making Kastron Mefaa one more locality in the Madaba area—including Madaba and Nebo—for viewing this art form. The mosaics of Umm al-Rasas are later than those of Madaba, however. They can be definitively dated to the 8th century. The town's largest sanctuary, the Church of St. Stephen, was dedicated in 785 AD, according to its mosaic inscriptions, about 150 years after Muslim rule was established in Transjordan. They give a picture of a thriving Christian community tolerated by Islam.

This Church of St. Stephen, at the northeastern edge of the settlement, contains a mosaic floor laid out like a carpet, and all around its border can be seen pictures of cities with their names in Greek:

The north row, between the columns, presents eight cities of Palestine: Jerusalem (the Edicule of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre can be made out), Neapolis, the Nablus of today (including what may represent the the Theotokos Church on Mount Gerizim), Sebastis (Sebastia), Caesarea Maritima, Diospolis (Lydda), Eleutheropolis (successor to Maresha-Beit Guvrin), Ashkelon, and Gaza.

In the south row, seven places of Transjordan can be seen. From the left, they are Kastron Mefaa itself (with a square tower or column featured prominently near a church façade) Philadelphia (Amman), Madaba, Esbounta (Hesban) Belemounta (Ma'in), Areopolis (Rabba), and Charach Mouba (Karak). The floor also depicts Mount Nebo, including written reference to the fact that a donation for St. Stephen's construction came from the monastery there.

The inner frame depicts boys hunting and fishing in boats, interspersed with ten cities in Egypt as well: Alexandria, Kasin, Thenesos, Tamiathis, Panau, Pilousin, Antinau, Eraklion, Kynopolis, and Pseudostomon.

In the nave, the church's original Greek dedication can still be seen; we read that it was built by: "John, son of Isaac, deacon and chief of the people and camp of Mephaon." The mosaic inscription reveals the dual ecclesiastical and temporal nature of the town leadership, noteworthy at a time when most towns were overseen by Muslim authorities. We can also make out the names of the church's benefactors. All are written in Greek characters, but the names themselves are Semitic.

Other churches discovered in the town also have decorative mosaic floors, though none as spectacular as St. Stephen's. The Church of the Lions receives its name from a mosaic depicting lions, gazelles and sheep on the floor of the presbytery. Near it, the Church of Bishop Sergius has a mosaic showing pomegranate trees and sheep, and next to one wall, a human figure that managed to survive the 8th century iconoclastic decree of the Byzantine Emperor Leo forbidding the depiction of living beings in artworks.

About a mile north of the town stands the Stylite tower. Over a dozen meters high, it is solid inside—with no stairwell—but it has a clearly habitable room at the top.

The tower has been identified as a rare relic from the ascetic Christian movement started by St. Simon Stylites of Aleppo in the 5th century. A few words about Simon may help us imagine the function of this tower:

In the years before he ascended his pillar, Simon's reputation for holiness attracted so many pilgrims that he hardly had time for his own devotions. His solution, in 423 AD, was to spend the rest of his life atop a pillar, on a small platform, but this only served to attract more visitors. He became so influential with the masses that Byzantine emperors came to consult with him. He gave audiences in the afternoon, when clients could climb a ladder to him. Simon occupied his power center, in heat and cold, for 37 years, dying there. His example was widely imitated throughout the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Palestine.

The square tower at Umm Er-Rassas seems to have been part of this movement. At its base lie the ruins of a small church, a courtyard, and two Byzantine-era cisterns hewn from the rock. Structures found nearby suggest a guesthouse. No doubt some of the churches in the nearby town were built to accommodate the many pilgrims who came to consult with or gawk at the stylite.

The monks of Mefaa may have had an influence on the development of Islam. According to Al-Malik's biography of Mohammad, an Arab hanif (pre-Islamic monotheist) named Zayd bin Amr came to Mefaa in the 6th century to consult with the holy man in his tower. While he was there, a monk foretold that a prophet with the religion of Abraham would shortly arise from among his own people. Greatly encouraged, Zayd returned to his country, and the story was later repeated to bolster the status of the nascent prophet of Islam.

Even after the Islamic Empire swept through the Near East in the 7th century, Umm al-Rasas remained Christian. A little more than a century later, however – not long after the building of Stephen's Church - the ecclesiastical complex and the town appear to have been abandoned. Archaeologists working at the site hope to gain a greater understanding of the forces that led to this desertion, which left the place to the keening winds that blow through the nearby wadis.