

The Garden of the Lord: *Works and Days* in the Byzantine Agricultural Landscape of Mefaa (Umm ar-Rasas), Jordan

South of Madaba, dubbed the “city of mosaics”, Umm ar-Rasas, a Unesco World Heritage site in the semi-arid steppe on the edge of the desert, is famous for its 16 Byzantine churches, of which five were uncovered by Fr Michele Piccirillo, OFM, between 1986 and 2007. Under the name of *Kastron Mefaa* (Fig. 1) it was, since the late 3rd or early 4th century AD, the military base of a cavalry unit, the *Equites promoti indigenae*, under the command of the *Dux Arabiae*, which protected the Late Roman villages near the *Limes arabicus* from beduin raids. From 529, this unit was replaced by the Christianized Ghassanid bedouins who, as the result of an alliance treaty (*foedus*) with the Byzantine Empire, patrolled the desert.

Population growth in the 5th and 6th centuries resulted in its development as the civilian, double, walled town of Mefaa under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the bishopric of Madaba, houses and churches filling the area of the camp, with attached to it on the north, another walled complex around a *forum* with a central column topped by a cross.

What was the economic basis of such a town situated on a main north-south Byzantine road and endowed with a stylite’s tower (Fig. 2), a focus of Christian pilgrimage?



Fig. 1. *Kastron Mefaa* on the mosaic of the 8th c. Church of St Stephen (Photo SBF)



Fig. 2. *The Stylite's tower* (Photo C. Dauphin 2017)

By comparing and combining data from old British RAF aerial photographs, with satellite imagery, and field-checks, the agricultural landscape of the lands of the Byzantine town of Mefaa was recaptured by myself and the GIS expert of my Project “*Fallahin and Nomads in the Southern Levant*”, affiliated to the Council for British Research in the Levant (British Academy). The complex system of

four major *wadis* (“rivers” in Arabic) and their tributaries, walled-in lengthwise and bridged by a succession of dams (Fig. 3), totalled 658 plots of varying sizes and shapes inside the *wadis*, and another 68 plots edging some segments of *wadis*.

The data from the fields of the agricultural *wadis* were put through a set of GIS statistical and spatial analyses: Slope or Incline; Aspect

(Exposure of slope towards a direction); Elevation/Digital Elevation Model (DEM); Area; Area and Geology; Area and Pedology; Area and Slope, in order to discover the significant variables in the original creation and subsequent organic development of the system.



Fig. 3. Camels resting in an ancient plot in a ruined agricultural wadi (note the heaps of stones from destroyed dams) Photo J.-M. Castex (2017)



Fig. 4. Pomegranate and apple trees on the mosaic pavement of the late 6th c. Church of the Lions (Photo SBF)

The depiction of Mother Earth (*Gê* in Greek), ploughs, a variety of fruit trees (Fig. 4) and activities connected with vineyards (Fig. 5) on the mosaic pavements of the 6th-8th c. churches of Mefaa fleshes out the archaeological evidence for the spider-web system of paths

leading to the fields of wheat and barley, and to the orchards, olive groves and vineyards of a most bountiful “Garden of the Lord”.

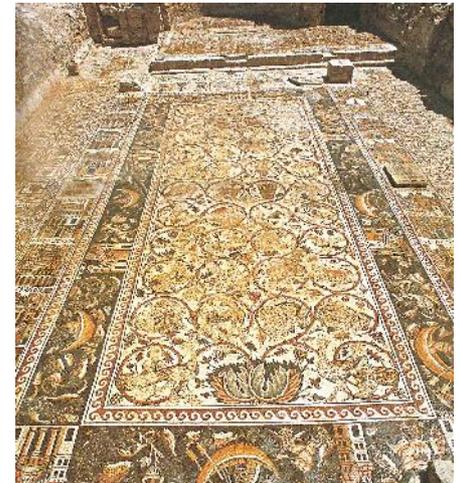


Fig. 5. Vintaging on the nave pavement of the 8th c. Church of St Stephen (Photo SBF)