

## Um er-Rasas (Jordan)

No 1093

### 1. BASIC DATA

*State Party:* The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

*Name of property:* Um er-Rasas (Kastron Mefa'a)

*Location:* Madaba Geographical Region

*Date received:* 21 February 2002

*Category of property:*

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

*Brief description:*

Um er-Rasas is an archaeological site, most of which is not excavated, with remains from Roman, Byzantine and Early Moslem periods (end of 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. to 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). It started as a Roman military camp and grew to become a town, from 5<sup>th</sup> century on. On the site there are several churches, some of which with well preserved mosaic floors. Two square towers, outside the site's nucleus, suggest the stylite monasticism practise. The area is rich with remains of ancient agricultural activities.

### 2. THE PROPERTY

#### *Description*

Um er-Rasas is an archaeological site of the Roman-Byzantine-Early Moslem periods. The site was founded in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. as a Roman military camp, closely associated with the borders of the empire (the *Limes*), the border with the desert and possibly with the Eastern branch of the incense route. The big camp (*castrum*) gave the site its ancient name – Kastron Mefaa. The roughly square, fortified *castrum*, of the size of about 150 x 150 metres is almost unexcavated.

While the *castrum* itself became the core of the later settlement the ruins of the Byzantine settlement outside it, cover an area of about 200 x 300 metres. Among the visible and partly excavated structures on the site are several churches. These can be easily identified before excavations, and attracted the main attention of archaeologists working on the site since 1986. For this reason much less is known of the character of housing, town plan and daily life.

Among the extraordinary remains on the site are several mosaic floors, one of which of special importance. The mosaic floor of the Church of Saint Stephen shows an incredible representation of towns in Palestine, Jordan and Egypt, including their identification.

At a short distance from the town, a well preserved tall tower from the Byzantine period is probably the only existing remain of a well known practice in this part of the

world – of the stylite ascetic monks. (i.e. monks sitting in isolation, for long time on top of a column or tower. The tower has no stairs and is in a relatively isolated area).

Um er-Rasas is surrounded and dotted with remains of ancient agricultural cultivation – from water reservoirs to terracing, water channels, dams and cisterns.

There are two small cemeteries on the site, one immediately to the west and the other to the east. The Eastern is an old Bedouin cemetery, while the Western is a modern one. About 150 meters are separating between the site and the main modern North-South road. In this area there are several ruins of relatively new structures, from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. These structures are abandoned.

#### *Management regime*

*Legal provision:*

The site is legally protected by the law of antiquities – though just for passive purposes, of what should not be done. The main cores of the site are state owned and therefore no private or non authorised activity can take place on the site.

*Management structure:*

There is no management structure to manage the site, nor a management plan. On site there are four permanent guards who provide basic cleaning and maintenance.

At the time of the site evaluation the place was considered dangerous for visitors, due to lack of signage, many open trenches and non stable structures. The only managed structure, including shelter and suspended walkway, is the church of Saint Stephen.

Some other structures on site went through an initial conservation treatment and most excavated mosaics are covered, for their protection, with a thin layer of soil.

A larger conservation campaign took place in 2003 with the objective of stabilisation of 5 of the excavated churches. The evaluation points at many problems with the work on site.

A management plan is being suggested through a European Community grant, including the recommendation for management structure. The nomination dossier indicates the scope of such plan but without any indications on time frame for its preparation or implementation.

*Resources:*

- Ministry of tourism;
- Department of Antiquities;
- European grant.

#### *Justification by the State Party (summary)*

The State Party justifies the nomination by explaining the importance of the site through several features. Those include the artistic value of its mosaics, the importance of the mosaics inscriptions for the understanding of geography in the region, evidence of evolution of construction techniques, the religious tolerance as proven

by the construction of churches under Moslem rule, uniqueness of the tower of the stylite monks and the importance of the desert agriculture.

The property is nominated on the basis of *criteria i, iii, v and vi*.

### 3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

#### *Actions by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS mission visited the site in July 2003.

ICOMOS has also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Management Heritage.

#### *Conservation*

##### *Conservation history:*

The Church of Saint Stephen is under a hangar like shelter and visitors to the church walk on elevated walkway. Many of the other excavated areas have been backfilled (with no information on proper documentation prior to this action).

Conservation plans are being prepared and some conservation works are being implemented.

The evaluation points out that there are no proper conservation plans, wrong materials are being used, no proper archaeological supervision during conservation works and absence of proper equipment.

##### *State of conservation:*

The site has no proper comprehensive conservation plan and many of its structures are not stable.

##### *Management:*

There is total lack of management structure and plans. No sufficient staff on site, no signage, dangerous trenches and basic problems regarding responsibilities – Ministry of Tourism through its staff or Department of Antiquities (often not involved in planning and decision making process). There is neither technical nor management unit in the responsible bodies to take care of the planning and implementation of the plans.

##### *Risk analysis:*

Like any site without management plans and management-implementation structure, the main risk is that nothing in the direction of sustainable protection will take place. As a result of excavations and exposure of walls and mosaic floors, the site is at much higher risk than before to deterioration and damage.

Conservation works being carried out without proper planning and specifications present another risk.

#### *Authenticity and integrity*

The site kept its full authenticity. The only 'non authentic' elements on site are the shelter over a mosaic and two reconstructed arches. The shelter has an important conservation role and its only possible negative impact is to the integrity of the site. It is though reversible and plans are being prepared for new shelters.

The arches were reconstructed as full anastylosis.

#### *Comparative evaluation*

ICOMOS sees a big problem in lack of sufficient comparative analysis. The region is rich with sites of this period. Some have several churches with important mosaic floors (see Madaba). Evidence for evolution of building techniques in the region and relevant periods is also not special to this site.

Ancient agriculture is typical to the region and the comparative analysis did not show whether this site is better in any aspect than others.

The stylite tower might be of outstanding value. The Roman *castrum* is possibly of outstanding value as well, but this is not shown in the dossier through comparisons.

#### *Outstanding universal value*

##### *General statement:*

Without proper comparative studies it is difficult to establish the outstanding universal value of the site. It might meet the requirement and it might not, at the same time.

##### *Evaluation of criteria:*

Depending on the comparative analysis, the site may meet *criteria i* (the mosaics), *iv* (*castrum*, stylite tower), *v* (agriculture), *vi* (stylite monks – Christian monasticism as ideology).

### 4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Recommendation for the future*

It is recommended that:

- a management plan and proper conservation plans be prepared;
- a management and implementation structure be established;
- a proper comparative analysis be prepared and submitted.

#### *Recommendation with respect to inscription*

That the nomination be *deferred* for the following steps to be taken by the State Party:

- Preparation of a comprehensive management plan, and having a management system in place;
- Preparation of proper conservation plan for the whole site;
- Submitting a comparative analysis for sites of his kind in the region;
- Justify the Outstanding Universal Value and meeting of criteria.

ICOMOS, March 2004