

## Identification Tharais: Rediscovering a Byzantine Archaeological Site on the Madaba Mosaic Map

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**Abstract:** This study delves into the archaeological site of Tharais, which is referenced in the famous Madaba mosaic map and dates back to the Byzantine era. Our goal is to determine the exact location of this ancient settlement by carefully examining the available literature. It includes archaeological reports, maps, and historical records. Fieldwork was conducted in the western extension of Karak Governorate in Jordan between 2021 to 2024. Our investigations successfully identified Tharais in the northwestern region of the town of El-ʿIrāq, located on Karak plateau, historically known as the land of Moab. Archaeological remnants characteristic of the Byzantine period has been excavated in this area, including pottery shards, stone implements, and architectural remains. This discovery of Tharais significantly enhances our understanding of the history and cultural structure of the region during the Byzantine period. The site's strategic position on the trade corridor linking Moabite plateau to the south-eastern Dead Sea region hints at its prominence as a commercial and religious hub. To fully grasp the specific roles and historical context of Tharais within the Byzantine period, further archaeological exploration is imperative. In conclusion, this research not only illuminates a specific archaeological site but also aligns with the broader endeavor to safeguard and protect Jordan's cultural legacy.

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### Introduction

First, it is necessary to introduce the topic of this study, which revolves around the Byzantine Map of Madaba, also known as the Madaba Mosaic Map. This map is part of a mosaic floor that was discovered in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Father Bieber in the Greek Orthodox (Basilica) Church of St. George in modern-day Madaba, the fifth-largest city in Jordan, located southwest of the capital of Amman. Currently preserved on the floor of the St. George Church, the Madaba Map was originally discovered as part of the ruins of a Byzantine church that was constructed during the reign of Emperor Justinian (527-565 AD)<sup>1</sup>. It is considered one of the masterpieces of ancient Near East geography and is the oldest surviving map of the Holy Land. The map undoubtedly preserves the locations of archaeological sites from earlier periods, it's also shedding light on the Biblical periods. Dating back to the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century AD, the mosaic map offers valuable insights into the nature of life in the region during the height of the Byzantine period in Jordan (325-638 AD)<sup>2</sup>.

After this significant discovery, the Madaba Mosaic Map attracted the attention of numerous travelers, researchers, and engineers who visited the site to document and study it. They drew sketches, took photographs, and worked on restoring the map to better understand its content. The primary objective was to analyze the names of the sites depicted on the map and compare

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<sup>1</sup> Leal 2018, 119-255.

<sup>2</sup> Piccirillo 1993a, 29; 1993b, 34; Piccirillo – Alliata 1999, 15-24; Madden 2012, 495.

them with biblical references. This research was particularly crucial because the Madaba Map is one of the oldest and most important maps depicting the geography of the Holy Land as described in the Bible<sup>3</sup>. The map contains a total of 157 sites. However, it is worth noting that some sites mentioned on the map have not been definitively identified on the ground. The vast geographical coverage of the map is believed to be the reason for this challenge. Additionally, the map covers extensive areas of Jordan, Palestine, Phoenicia, and the Egyptian Delta, providing a comprehensive overview of the region during the Byzantine period.

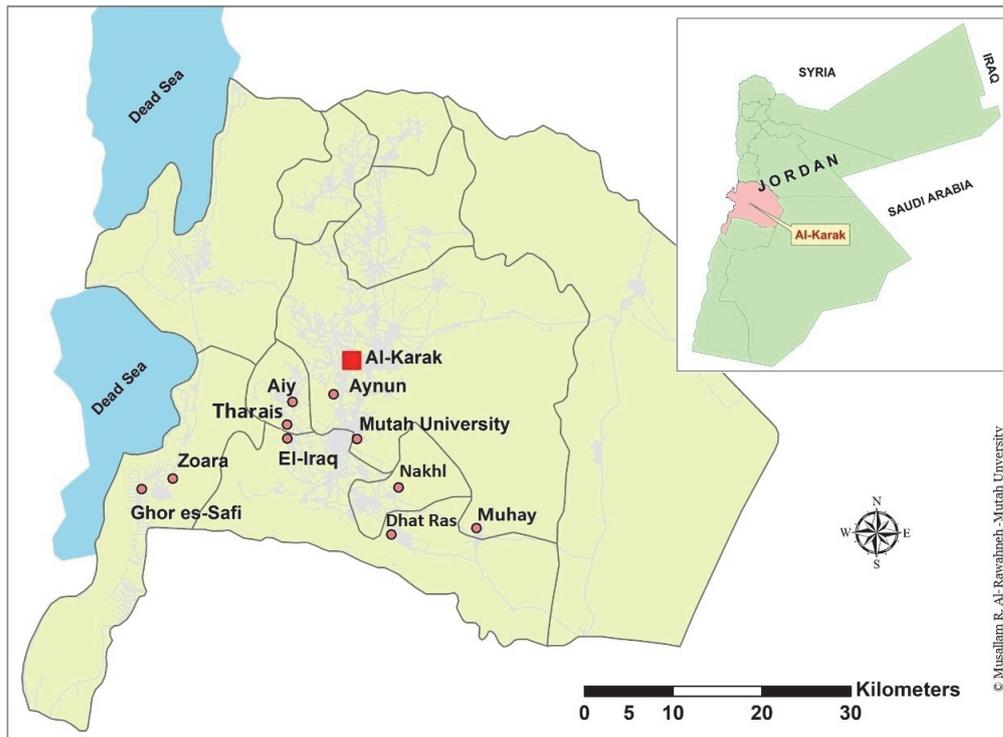


Fig. 1) Map of the Karak Governorate showing the site of Tharais (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)

### The Story of Discovery

The project of searching for the archaeological site of Tharais was initiated in 2021. However, the groundwork for the investigation and data collection from the residents of the region began several years earlier, specifically in early 2018. Insights shared by local residents, notably Khaled and Ahmed Al-Mawajdeh of El-‘Irāq, proved instrumental in initiating our in-depth exploration of the Tharais site. This research thoroughly examined existing scholarly works, including archaeological studies, maps, and historical documents. A careful analysis of diverse perspectives on Tharais’ location was undertaken to build a comprehensive understanding of the region’s past and narrow down potential sites. Multiple field trips were conducted across the western expanse of Karak Governorate between 2021 and 2024 to gather firsthand data. These on-site investigations significantly enhanced our research efforts.

Based on the information provided, the researcher has developed a clear vision and conviction that starting the search for the location of Tharais from the archaeological site of ‘Ai is necessary for several reasons. First, the location of ‘Ai is well-known and precisely defined, and it is the closest site to Tharais according to the Madaba map. The map indicates that Tharais is situated to the

<sup>3</sup> Piccirillo 1993b, 35.

south of 'Ai (Figs.1, 2, and 3). With this understanding, the researcher initiated a field survey south of the village of Ai, heading toward the town of El- 'Irāq. During the archaeological surveys conducted in the region, which are characterized by rugged terrain, mountains, and deep valleys, a collection of pottery shards dating to various time periods was discovered. The artifacts unearthed during our excavations primarily date back to the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic eras, including the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. These discoveries are tangible evidence of human activity and settlement in the region during these historical epochs. By meticulously examining the geographical clues provided by the Madaba Map, along with our fieldwork and archaeological discoveries, we are gradually building a convincing case for the possible location of Tharais and gaining a deeper understanding of the historical context of the area, particularly during the Byzantine period.

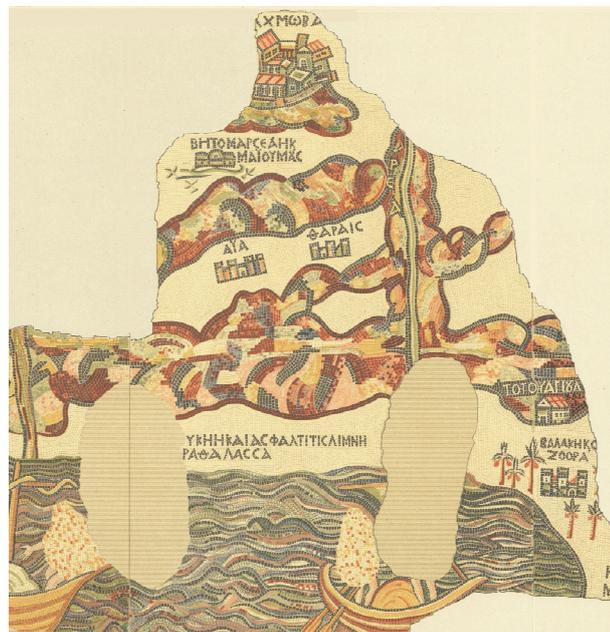


Fig. 2) Al-Karak (*Xaplaξwβa/ Kyriakopolis*), Ai (*Aiy/ AίA*), Zoar (*Zoopa/Zoora/ Zoara*), and Tharais (*Θαραίς*), on the Madaba Mosaic Map



Fig. 3) Karak, Aiy, Zoar, and Tharais (Google Satellite Map)

In addition to pottery shards, the field survey yielded stone tools, fossils, glass finds, and even fragments of mosaic art. Intriguingly, the concentration of pottery shards increased markedly after each exploration heading towards El-‘Irāq. This pattern reinforces our assumption that the southern region, especially close to El-‘Irāq, holds a secret that almost unravels the mystery of Tharais.

Our participation in the Greek and Latin Inscriptions registration project in southern Jordan has produced remarkable results. Collaborative efforts with Professor Fontana Elboj of the University of Zaragoza, Spain, have led to important discoveries in Tafilah Province<sup>4</sup>, and Karak Governorate, including the town of El-‘Irāq<sup>5</sup>. These unearthed tombstones, inscribed in Greek and Latin, have been the subject of in-depth study and publication. Furthermore, by the end of 2022, additional inscriptions from El-‘Irāq, which we explored and investigated in collaboration with colleagues from the HISMA laboratory and the University of Lumière Lyon 2 in France<sup>6</sup>, deepen our understanding of the region’s history and culture.<sup>7</sup>

South of ‘Ai (northwest side of El-‘Irāq town), a treasure trove of archaeological remains has emerged. Among these discoveries were the ruins of a mill, an olive press, and the skeletal remains of a grape press, and the foundations of the structure are closely related to the Byzantine church and its accompanying adjacent buildings. These architectural vestiges, combined with other intriguing archaeological artifacts, provide compelling evidence for a substantial settlement dating back to the Byzantine era. The presence of these structures, including agricultural and industrial installations, underscores the site’s economic vitality during that period. Moreover, the potential identification of a Byzantine church and its associated elements highlights the site’s religious and cultural significance. These discoveries significantly bolster the hypothesis that this location is indeed the long-sought Tharais, as referenced in the renowned Madaba Mosaic Map (Figs. 4, A, B, C).

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<sup>4</sup> Elboj – Al-Rawahneh 2020, 339-359; Al-Rawahneh – Elboj 2022a, 144-148.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Rawahneh – Elboj 2022b, 196-201; 2022c, 311-316; 2024, 221-240; Al-Rawahneh 2025, 70- 77.

<sup>6</sup> Al-Rawahneh – de Varax 2023, 194-201.

<sup>7</sup> The Al-Rawahneh and de Varax study describes seven new Byzantine inscriptions from Moab, two of which are from El-‘Irāq and date from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century BC. These inscriptions follow the general formula of Byzantine Christian inscriptions. This usually includes the name of the deceased, the father’s name, and his age at death. This illustrates the continuity of Christian funerary practices in the region during the Byzantine era, Al-Rawahneh – de Varax 2023, 194-201. In their investigation of Byzantine funerary texts from El-‘Irāq, unveiled several insights regarding the fact of Byzantine dominion in the region. The article presents nine previously uncovered inscriptions dated to the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century AD, which substantially increase the existing stock of Byzantine epigraphy. The epitaphs carved in the native limestone grave markers exhibit several decorations and inscriptions that show clear Christian imagery and current practices, with some strict norms complying, suggesting the presence of an established and flourishing Christian society. New names from the local context, are introduced, which contributes to broadening the understanding of the local population and their relationship with the larger Byzantine population. This study provides insight into Byzantine period burial practices in the area, showing the relationship between those practices and the social order and belief systems. This study expands knowledge on the historical geographic context of Christianity in this part of southern Jordan. In particular, the way in which Commagenean expansion into the Byzantine period adapted to local practices and existing social systems, Al-Rawahneh – Elboj 2024, 221-240.



Fig. 4) A general view of the site (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)

### The site and its historical background

The archaeological site of Tharais (Θαράις in Greek, ثاريس in Arabic) is a small site located north of the Ain Al-Qala'a, in the northwestern part of the town of El-'Irāq, within the Al-Aiy District (عي in Arabic), also referred to as "Liwa'a Ai." It is located in the Karak Province, which is a sub-division of the Karak Governorate. Specifically, Tharais is found within the city of Charach-moba (Kerak) in southern Jordan. Tharais is situated at the coordinates lat. 31° 9' 20" N and long. 35° 41' 39" E. It sits at an elevation of approximately 490 meters below the level of the Moab Plateau and is situated approximately 5 kilometers west of the town of Mutah. The geographical characteristics of the site include springs, olive and fig trees, and fertile plains, which contribute to its distinct environment<sup>8</sup>. The history of human settlement in this area dates back to the Early Bronze Age, as evidenced by archaeological evidence<sup>9</sup> (Figs. 1, 2, and 3).

Tharais holds great religious significance as a sacred Christian site that emerged in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century AD, possibly constructed around the same period as the Madaba Map Church in Madaba<sup>10</sup>. The construction of the Madaba Map Church is believed to have taken place during the reign of Emperor Justinian, who ruled from approximately 527 to 565 AD<sup>11</sup>. The Madaba Map itself was discovered in the city of Madaba in 1898 and is renowned for its depiction of the topography of holy places in Egypt, Palestine, and Jordan during the Byzantine period<sup>12</sup>. The modern town of El-'Irāq, where Tharais is located, continues to experience growth with the ongoing construction of new roads and houses. This development signifies the active and evolving nature of the town, alongside the preservation and exploration of its rich historical and religious heritage.

The archaeological remains in the southern area of the town of El-'Irāq, provide evidence of human settlement during the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD<sup>13</sup>. They include architectural structures that reflect the historical developments and activities during these periods. The name El-'Irāq (العراق in Arabic) means "bottom of the land." The word "ravine: lowland" is used by the people of Hijaz to refer to areas near the sea. The presence of Roman tombstones among the stones reused in the recent construction of retaining walls in the town and its streets indicates the significance of the region during the Roman period. This shows that the area was prosperous and populated during that time. El-'Irāq benefits from an abundance of spring waters and farmland. The same is true of inhospitable terrain that could act as a natural fortress. These geographic boundaries may have influenced the attraction of human settlements to the region at different times. The availability of water sources and fertile land will provide favorable conditions for agriculture and sustainable human settlement.

### The Location of Tharais: Insights from European Travelers and Scholarly Debate

The location of Tharais has received a great deal of attention among scholars. Many European travelers and scholars visited El-'Irāq and shared their observations and insights. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, European travelers such as U.J. Seetzen and J.L. Burckhardt toured the area

<sup>8</sup> Al-Rawahneh – Elboj 2023, 194-201.

<sup>9</sup> Canova 1954, 306-307.

<sup>10</sup> Piccirillo 1993a, 29; Piccirillo 1993b, 34; Piccirillo – Alliata 1999, 15-24; Madden 2012, 495.

<sup>11</sup> Piccirillo 1993b, 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Abu Khait 2000, 47.

<sup>13</sup> Miller 1991, 117.

and recorded their experiences. Seetzen's visit in 1802 was recorded in his work, and Burckhardt provided a geographical description of the area during his visit in 1816<sup>14</sup>.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Alios Musil explored the area approximately 1907<sup>15</sup>, and N. Glueck mentioned it in 1930 as a modern village<sup>16</sup>. In her research, R. Canova, identified two Christian tombstones in the town of El-ʿIrāq dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD<sup>17</sup>. In 1963, Donner visited the town of El-ʿIrāq and collected pottery shards from the Roman, Byzantine, and late Islamic periods. Earlier research, notably by Miller in 1991, suggested that the ancient site of "Tar ʿin," (ترعين in Arabic) now lost within the modern town of El-ʿIrāq<sup>18</sup>, holds the key to understanding Tharais. This theory was bolstered by the extensive fieldwork conducted by Miller and Pinkerton between 1978 and 1982, as well as in 1991. Their discovery of over 144 pottery fragments spanning from the Roman to the late Islamic (Ayyubid Mamluk) periods provided compelling evidence of continuous human habitation in the region.

Adding to this puzzle, Musil's 1907 account described El-ʿIrāq as a small village surrounded by caves, with a nearby settlement or ruin named Tar ʿin<sup>19</sup>. Intriguingly, Musil linked this Tar ʿin to the Tharais mentioned on the renowned Madaba Mosaic Map. These observations were later corroborated by the explorer Alt in 1937 Tar<sup>20</sup>.

However, the exact location of the ancient Tharais has remained a subject of scholarly and exploratory debate for many years. One proposal, put forth by the traveler Durand, suggested that Dhat Ras, located south of the Karak Governorate, is the site of ancient Tharais which appears on the Madaba Mosaic Map. This identification has gained some acceptance, although not unanimously<sup>21</sup>. However, it is argued that considering Dhat Ras as the location of Tharais is not plausible. One of the reasons is the spatial distance between Tharais and ʿAi on the Madaba map. The view that Dhat Ras represents Tharais contradicts this spatial relationship. Therefore, it is clear that the archaeological site of Tharais, which held significant ecclesiastical importance in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century AD, does not extend beyond the western borders of the town of El-ʿIrāq. Zayadine, in an internet article, explained why Dhat Ras cannot be considered the location of Tharais. One argument is the discrepancy between the building depicted on the Madaba map and the Nabatean temples found in Dhat Ras<sup>22</sup>. Zayadine contends that it was Tar ʿin that actually represented the true location of Tharais<sup>23</sup>.

Ben David provides an alternative perspective on the villages of ʿAia and Tharais depicted on the surviving portion of the Madaba Map, which is situated east of the Dead Sea. According to Ben David, these villages were included on the map because they were situated along the main Roman

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<sup>14</sup> Seetzen 1810, 416, 426; Burckhardt 1822, 389, 396.

<sup>15</sup> Musil 1907, 72-73, 75, 151, 257-259.

<sup>16</sup> Glueck 1939, 94-96.

<sup>17</sup> Miller 1991, 117; Canova 1954, 306-307.

<sup>18</sup> Miller 1991, 117.

<sup>19</sup> Musil 1907, 258.

<sup>20</sup> Alt 1937, 240-244.

<sup>21</sup> Miller 1991, 157-158.

<sup>22</sup> Donner 1967, 251.

<sup>23</sup> Zayadine 1970, 2, 117-135.

routes<sup>24</sup> that ascended eastward from the Dead Sea toward the Moabite plateau. The villages do not have references in the Bible, early Christianity, or other historical sources'. Aia, which corresponds to the present-day village of 'Ai, is located at the summit of a well-constructed Roman road that ascended from Zoar (Zoara/Zoora)<sup>25</sup>, mentioned in the Bible as Tzo'ar<sup>26</sup>, to the Moabite Plateau. Ben David suggested that the inclusion of the 'Aia on the Madaba Map was due to its strategic position along this Roman road. He also links the site of Tharais to the ruins of the Medinat ar-Ras, which was built on a hill overlooking the western slopes of Karak<sup>27</sup>.

### Discussion and Analysis

Landslides have caused considerable damage and backfilling at the archaeological site. Despite this, some architectural remnants and features remain visible on the surface. Among these are large rectangular stones with precise geometric dimensions, which likely mark the main entrance of the church. (Figs. 5, and 6), which faces west. The entrance's jamb is a rectangular stone that was carefully carved to form the main door, which was probably made of wood and no more than 50 cm. thick. This stone jamb was prepared with precise geometric dimensions. Its length is approximately 288 cm, its width is approximately 148 cm., and its height is approximately 100 cm. The northern jamb was smaller than the southern jamb. It is approximately 240 cm. long, 95 cm. wide, and 100 cm. high. The lower central threshold of the church entrance had four holes of unequal diameters. Two of them are large and located at the ends of the threshold, and the other two are small and located in the middle with precise proportional dimensions. Each hole is 43 cm. away from the other.



Fig. 5) The stones of the main entrance frame of the church (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)

<sup>24</sup> For more information about Roman roads in Southern Moab see Davidovich *et al.* 2022, 141-159. for the Via Nova Traiana in Arabia Petraea see Graf 1995, 241-267.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Rawahneh – Elboj 2022c, 311-316.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 14:8.

<sup>27</sup> Ben David 2001, 136-144; 2003, 249-256.



Fig. 6) *The stones of the main entrance frame of the church* (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)

It is clear that these architectural remains represent a relatively large Byzantine church built in the basilica style common during that period. This is confirmed by the size of its entrance, which may have been closed by a thick wooden gate with a width of approximately 205 cm., relative to the measurement of the entrance threshold and the depth of the recesses in the two supports representing the sides of the entrance. Its height does not exceed 288 cm., based on the length of the southern support. These supports and the threshold are arranged above a wall made of trimmed stones, with an estimated length of approximately 13 meters, which may represent the front facade of the church. This wall is interrupted by a rectangular gate, from which the upper part is visible, and it may contain small columns on either side (Fig. 7). Adjacent to the main entrance on the eastern side, there is a stone block that features a hole. It is speculated that this hole served as a foundation for the installation of a wooden gate. Alternatively, it is possible that the stone block was intended for the production of a grinding stone but was ultimately unsuccessful (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7) *The front façade of the Church* (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)



Fig. 8) A foundation of the gate, or unsuccessful production of a grinding stone (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)

To the east of this entrance, the remains of the walls that form the basilica-shaped church are visible on the earth's surface. The area is filled with white and colored mosaic cubes, but they are poorly finished, suggesting that they have been moved from the entrance floors by weathering. This confirms that the main mosaic floors of the church are still under the layers of earth. To the north of the site, a secondary entrance to the church is visible, and to the west, the archaeological site of Tharais contains several notable features. In the center, there is a circular stone basin with a diameter of approximately 240 cm. (Figs. 9, and 10), which includes a central cavity. This basin is identified as a crushing mill, where olives are ground and crushed into a pulp by turning the stone while animals or beasts of burden are harnessed. This process facilitated the extraction of olive oil. Nearby, there is a cylindrical stone that may have served as an olive press or for grinding grains, although it might not belong to the same period as the construction of the church. To the west of the cylindrical stone of the olive oil press, a large, irregularly shaped rock was discovered near the modern street. It was found that the rock had fallen from the top of the large stones located at the site. It is possible that this rock is part of an olive oil bed press (Fig. 12)<sup>28</sup>, additionally, the proximity of the site to the nearby Al-Qala'a spring and the abundance of springs in the town of El- 'Irāq suggest the possibility of a watermill in Tharais, and the availability of an ample water supply from the springs would have supported the operation of a watermill. An ample water supply would have been essential for such a mill.

<sup>28</sup> Olive oil has multiple significant uses. It is commonly used for cooking, but its applications go beyond that. It was used for anointing individuals in remembrance (1 Samuel 16:13, Luke 7:46) and as a base for perfumes (Esther 2:12). and as fuel for clay lamps to provide light (Matthew 25:3-4). Olive oil also had medicinal purposes (Luke 10:34) and was used in sacrifices (Exodus 29:40). It was even utilized in sacred places like the Tabernacle (Exodus 27:20). The abundance and versatility of olive oil, which was sourced from the flourishing olive trees in the Mediterranean basin, made it highly valuable. In Ancient Times in the land of the Bible (Holy Land) people used oil lamps for light "20 Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning. 21 In the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that shields the ark of the covenant law, Aaron and his sons are to keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening till morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come." (Exodus 27:20-21).



Fig. 9) A cylindrical stone of the olive oil press, or for grinding grains (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)



Fig. 10) A stone olive press (© M. R. Al-Rawahneh)



Fig. 11) An open-air, man-operated olive mill from Jordan, early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Frankel et al. 1993, p. 111)

Furthermore, the discovery of a rectangular stone with intricate vertical carvings indicates a potential link to classical architectural elements. This stone may be part of a Nabataean or Roman temple (pediment) that was reused at this site (Fig. 13), as it resembles features found adorning the upper parts of columns in classical buildings. These characteristics provide valuable insights into the historical activities and architecture of Tharais.



Fig. 12) A part of olive oil bed press  
(©M. R. Al-Rawahneh)



Fig. 13) A stone may be part of a Nabataean or Roman temple  
(Pediment) (©M. R. Al-Rawahneh)

Based on the above, we can deduce several clear indicators confirming the identity of the discovered location as representing the sacred site of Tharais, located north of the Ain Al-Qal'a in the town of El-'Irāq:

**Topographic and architectural compatibility:** The depiction of the site on the Madaba mosaic map aligns with the natural features of the discovered location. This includes the presence of a gateway and the remains of towers on the edges of the front facade wall. The construction of the site within a naturally fortified area, overlooking the Dead Sea and Palestine, suggests its strategic positioning as an entrance to the trade route from the Jordan Rift Valley to the Moab Plateau.

**Sacred significance:** The site's location in the Dead Sea and Palestine, considered a holy land, indicates its potential spiritual and religious significance. It may serve as a symbolic gateway or a pilgrimage site for religious travelers.

**Byzantine mosaic floor remains:** The presence of mosaic floor remains at the site provides evidence of its association with Byzantine religious practices. Mosaic floors were commonly found in Byzantine churches and religious structures, suggesting that the discovered location was likely a religious site during that period.

**Architectural match:** The shape of the church depicted on the Madaba Mosaic Map, including the gate and the presence of remains of towers on both sides of the front facade wall, matches what was discovered on the ground.

**Proportionality and importance of the site:** The proportionality of the building's dimensions and parts indicates the great importance attached to the site. It represents a sacred Byzantine religious site from the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. This explains why it was built in a naturally fortified area overlooking the Dead Sea and Palestine, which was considered a holy land, and at the entrance to the trade route from the Jordan Valley to the Moab Plateau.

**Mosaic art and classical influence:** The presence of mosaics at the site confirms its identity as a Byzantine religious site, as mosaic art was widely used in the decoration of church floors during

the Byzantine period. Additionally, the presence of triglyphs confirmed the classical influence on the construction. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that Tharais represented a sacred site where prayers were performed, and it was likely associated with a group of inhabitants within an agricultural village. The presence of fertile agricultural land in the vicinity of Tharais along with available water sources indicates the suitability of the area for agricultural activities. This is consistent with the existence of farming villages prevalent in Jordan during the Byzantine period, within several regions extending from the Yarmouk River in the northern part of Jordan, including ten cities (Decapolis), the Moab Plateau, Jordan Valley and Dead Sea and reaching as far as the Gulf of Aqaba<sup>29</sup>.

The region encompassing Tharais, bordered by Wadi Al-Moujib in the north, Wadi al-Hassa in the south, and the southern Jordan Valley (Ghor) to the west, was along the administrative boundary of the Third Province of Palestine (Palestina Salutaris or Palaestina Tertia and the Arabian Provinces) under the Byzantine period. This geographic framework provides a valuable context for understanding Tharais' role in the wider region. Although the available evidence clearly shows that Tharais was an agricultural village with religious importance, more archaeological research is needed to understand its specific function, cultural practices and the historical route during the Byzantine period.

### Conclusions

The study successfully pinpointed Tharais, a Byzantine settlement previously referred to on the iconic Madaba mosaic map. Tharais is located in the southern part of 'Ai (northwest of El-'Irāq town) on the Moab plateau, (Land of Moab) at coordinates 31° 9' 20" N and 35° 41' 39" E, Tharais provides invaluable insights into the history and culture of the region under the Byzantine period.

Archaeological discoveries include pottery shards dating back to the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods, stone tools, fossils, glass finds, and even fragments of mosaic art, as well as architectural remains such as the ruins of a mill, an olive oil press, and a potential church structure. These findings confirm the existence of a thriving Byzantine community. This, combined with the site's modern resemblance to the Madaba map symbol, reinforces the site's identity as Tharais.

Evidence shows that Tharais had religious significance as a Christian sanctuary erected around the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Its strategic location overlooking the Dead Sea and the Holy Land makes it a potential pilgrimage destination, a starting point, and a gateway for religious travelers. The presence of fertile lands (countryside) suggests that it also served as an agricultural hub.

The Madaba Mosaic map places Tharais in the southern site of 'Ai, which is consistent with our archaeological surveys in El-'Irāq. Tharais' strategic location on the trade route between Moabite plateau to the south-eastern Dead Sea region supports its potential role as a commercial and religious center. The unearthed pottery, stone tools, and architectural structures further emphasize its importance during the Byzantine era. Moreover, the site's architectural features, including a gateway and tower remnants, mirror its depiction on the Madaba Map. To fully comprehend Tharais' specific functions, cultural practices, and historical context within the Byzantine era, further archaeological exploration is essential.

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<sup>29</sup> Macdonald et al. 2001, 466.

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### **Tharais'ın Tespiti:**

### **Madaba Mozaik Haritası'nda Bir Bizans Arkeolojik Alanının Yeniden Keşfi**

#### **Özet**

Bu çalışma, ünlü Madaba mozaik haritasında atıfta bulunulan ve tarihi Bizans dönemine kadar geri giden Tharais arkeolojik alanını araştırmaktadır. Amacımız, mevcut literatürü dikkatle inceleyerek bu antik yerleşimin tam yerini belirlemektir. Bu literatür arkeolojik raporları, haritaları ve tarihi kayıtları içermektedir. Saha çalışması 2021-2024 yılları arasında Ürdün'deki Karak'ın batı uzantısında gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmalarımız, tarihsel olarak Moab toprakları olarak bilinen Karak platosunda yer alan El-'Irâq kasabasının kuzeybatı bölgesinde Tharais'i başarıyla tespit etti. Bu bölgede çanak çömlek parçaları, taş aletler ve mimari kalıntılar da dahil olmak üzere Bizans dönemine özgü arkeolojik kalıntılar ortaya çıkarılmıştır. Tharais'in bu keşfi, Bizans döneminde bölgenin tarihi ve kültürel yapısına ilişkin anlayışımızı önemli ölçüde geliştirmektedir. Bölgenin Moabit platosunu güneydoğu Ölü Deniz bölgesine bağlayan ticaret koridoru üzerindeki stratejik konumu, ticari ve dini bir merkez olarak önemine işaret etmektedir. Tharais'in Bizans dönemindeki belirli rollerini ve tarihsel bağlamını tam olarak kavramak için daha fazla arkeolojik araştırma yapılması zorunludur. Sonuç olarak, bu araştırma sadece belirli bir arkeolojik alanı aydınlatmakla kalmamakta, aynı zamanda Ürdün'ün kültürel mirasını koruma ve kollama yönündeki daha geniş çabalarla da uyum sağlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Güney Ürdün; Karak; Irak; Tharais; Bizans arkeolojisi; Madaba Mozaik Haritası.