Identification of Tall el-Hammâm on the Madaba Map.

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A. Introduction

There are limited resources available to those wanting to link sites mentioned in ancient sources with modern tells/talls in the Levant. The Byzantine Madaba Map, a masterpiece of Near Eastern geography, is often cited to lend weight to certain identifications. For Oswald Dilke, the mosaic map at Madaba is “probably the best known example of Byzantine cartography” (Dilke 1987: 264). Discovered in the late 19th century in the mosaic floor of the Byzantine church in Madaba, Jordan (Fig. 1), it is the oldest extant map of the Holy Land. Also, it no doubt preserves the location of sites from earlier eras; hence, it sheds light on the background of the biblical periods. The mosaic dates to the middle of the 6th century C.E. and highlights life in the region at the height of the Byzantine period (325–638 C.E.). Unfortunately, the outer edges of the map were missing, including one prominent site on the upper left edge above the Jordan River and Bethany beyond the Jordan. There have been several attempts to identify this site, but, in our view, incorrectly.

B. Unnamed Site

Only the vignette of the city remains and is unnamed (Fig. 2). Since the site is not labeled, the identification is still open to question on the basis of the map. The fact that various suggestions have been made with little support, other than personal preference and subjective arguments, merits further investigation and research. Thus, one must consider other criteria for its identity besides the name on the map.

C. Geographic Site Location Central

The most important criterion for its identification is the location on the map. The unnamed site (site two) on the Madaba Map is tucked away in the upper right corner of the Jordan Valley just northeast of the Dead Sea (Fig. 3). The site stands alone, with no other sites identified between it and the Wadi al-Zarqa Ma’in on the right (Avi-Yonah 1954: 37). It is our opinion that this site is none other than Tall el-Hammam. Whatever the identity of the site, Tall el-Hammam (long. 31° 51’ N; Lat. 35° 40’ E) was prominent in ancient and Byzantine times and had religious significance.

The fact that Tall el-Hammam is the largest site in the southern Jordan Valley argues for it as a leading candidate. We believe that the location of site two is precisely where the Madaba Map locates it. One proof of this is that when one stands on Tall el-Hammam looking across the Jordan Valley at 2 o’clock, Jericho is found right where it is on the Madaba Map (Fig. 3). Is this merely a coincidence?

D. Process of Elimination

Over the past few years, we have read and reread everything we could get our hands on regarding the archaeological sites on the east side of the Jordan River between the Dead Sea and the Jabbok River. Furthermore, we have walked, shered, and photographed them, and in the case of Tall el-Hammam, even excavated for two seasons. I think it is safe to say that we have a strong grasp on the size and occupational histories of these sites. By the process of elimination, we should be able to find, with a high degree of probability, what the Madaba Mosaicist had in mind for the site in question. Here is the list of candidate sites, fourteen altogether:

Tall el-Azemiah
Tall Bleibel
Tall Ghannam
Teleilet Ghassul
Tall Ghrubba
Tall el-Hammam
Tall Iktanu  
Khirbet Kefrein  
Tall Kefrein  
Tall Mustah  
Tall Nimrin  
Tall Rama  
Tall Sahl es-Sarabet  
Khirbet Sweimeh

Teleilet Ghassul (a large and well-known site) and Tall Ghrubba were only occupied during the Chalcolithic Age, and Tall Sahl es-Sarabet only has Islamic remains. That leaves eleven candidates. Eight of the remaining sites are very small; hence, they are not serious contenders. The three remaining sites are Tall el-Hammam (Fig. 5), Tall Iktanu, and Tall Nimrin. Tall Iktanu is larger than the small sites eliminated already, but it is not nearly the size of Tall el-Hammam and Tall Nimrin. Also, Tall Iktanu is closer to the Dead Sea than the other sites and would not fit proportionally on the map. Tall Iktanu, just does not make the cut. Further, Kay Prag states there is no Roman or Byzantine occupation there (Prag 1965: np). That leaves Tall el-Hammam and Tall Nimrin. Since there are only two unnamed sites on the Madaba Map (due to lost tiles), it seems clear that the northern site is Tall Nimrin, and that the southern site is Tall el-Hammam. The two sites are about eight kilometers apart. If there is a flaw in our reasoning, we welcome further input. James Flanagan, the excavator of Tall Nimrin has, in fact, recognized that Tall Nimrin is likely the northern site on the Madaba Map (Flanagan and McCreery 2004: np). Avi-Yonah and Eugenio Alliata also identifies site one with Tall Nimrin (Avi-Yonah 1954: 37; Alliata 1997, 54). By the process of elimination, it seems clear that the southern site is Tall el-Hammam.

E. Identifiable Features

The identifiable features of the portion of the Madaba Map in question include date palm trees, hot springs, and proximity to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The indication of date palms is significant because according to Diodorus Siculus (Bibl. Hist. 2.48–49) around the Dead Sea “the land is good for growing palms, wherever it happens to be crossed by rivers with usable water, or to be endowed with springs that can irrigate it” (cf. Theophrastus Pot. Hist. 2.5; Pliny Nat. Hist. 5.9, 17; Tacitus Hist. 5.6). Such a supply of fresh water exists at Tall el-Hammam. The Madaba Map identifies two thermal springs at Baaras (Josephus Jewish War 7:180, 189; Eusebius Onomasticon 44:22ff; 112:17; Taylor 2003, 117) and Kallirrhoë (Josephus Antiquity 17:171; Jewish War 1:657; Pliny Nat. Hist. 5:16) on the opposite (south) side of the Wadi Zarqa Ma’in (Donner 1999: 39), and from the five date palms in the mosaic it would be reasonable to expect springs or thermal springs around site two. Tall el-Hammam has two springs, and the word hammam in Arabic actually means “spring” or “watersource.” One is found around the base of the upper tall in the early bronze age area among Roman ruins (Fig. 6). The second location of springs at the tall is across the modern road at the foot of a Roman fortification on a hill where at least five cisterns are identified (Fig. 7, 11). The Roman ruins have been surveyed, but not excavated (Fig. 9). The Madaba Map identifies five palm trees on site two (two on the right and three on the left. Fig. 2). This would indicate a well-watered region consistent with the finds of two springs and the presence of the Wadi Kefrein.

F. Byzantine Prominence of Site

The vignette on the map represents two towers that appear to frame a “church” or other major structure with a roof and series of windows. There appears to have been Byzantine or Early Roman ruins on this site during the construction of the Mosaic. Obviously site two was known to the mosaicist during the Byzantine period. This being the case, it would be reasonable to assume that one should find some significant presence of occupation during or immediately preceding the Byzantine period.

To date, no remnants of major Byzantine structures have been found at Tall el-Hammam, but during the 2007 excavations a small amount of Byzantine pottery was discovered near the first spring in the region of the lower tall around the Roman ruins and massive early bronze age region (Fig. 8). Further excavations may reveal a significant Byzantine and/or Early Roman presence. If so, this would confirm the presence of Byzantine/Roman structures consistent with the Madaba Map. We hope to execute a probe of this area in the 2008 excavation season.

Eusebius Pamphili, the bishop of Caesarea in Palestine (A. D. 275–339), wrote a four part geographical work called Onomasticon (330 C.E.). Eusebius’ Greek text introduces the Onomasticon with the words “On the Names of Places in Sacred Scripture” (Taylor 2003, 5). In short, it is a geographical dictionary of the Holy Land. The localization of wadies, mountains, and other geographical features makes this a valuable asset when
determining ancient locations. Some argue as well that the Madaba Map was strongly dependent on the Onomasticon. However, Wolf points out that there is no direct correlation between the terminology used in the Onomasticon and the size of the locations.

All the large walled cities with towers behind on the Madaba Map are called “city,” “large city,” “famous city,” “metropolis” by Eusebius. For the smaller cities with only a front wall and four or five towers and for the larger villages with three or four towers connected by a wall, there is no consistent correlation with the Onomasticon’s terminology. (Nor is there any consistency in the various strata of the Onomasticon that can be checked out in the present state of textual criticism and archaeological research.) Both Beersheba and Ekron are called “large town” but are different as depicted on the map. Does this imply Ekron had declined in the intervening centuries? Bethzur and Bethel are both simply villages in Eusebius, but Bethzur is a large town on the map while Bethel is small, having only two towers and the connecting wall. Does this accurately record the changed fortunes? (Wolf 2004: np).

Therefore, the correlation between Eusebius and the Madaba Map may not be as helpful as first thought. Just because Livias is mentioned repeatedly in the Onomasticon (Taylor 2003, 16, 18, 32, 33, 142) does not mean that it may be found on or correspond to the Madaba Map.

1. **Tall Nimrin’s Byzantine Occupation**

Beth-Nimrah (“house of abundant waters”) is mentioned in Numbers 32:26. The excavation report at Tall Nimrin indicates that there was a small Byzantine occupation evident by some walls and plastered floors.

Few ceramics were recovered from the Hellenistic era and no associated architecture. Likewise, no architectural remains can be dated to the Roman period. This may be explained by modern bulldozing and development which have destroyed or removed the remains. Some Roman and Byzantine ceramics were found in several fill layers, but they were mixed with Persian and Iron materials because Roman/Byzantine pits had been dug into the earlier levels. A few walls and plastered floors can be dated to the Byzantine period (Flanagan and McCreery 2004: np; See also Taylor 2003, 121).

The mosaic floor of a Byzantine church was discovered in 1980 during the construction of a house on the northwestern slope of the tall. The mosaic pavement was excavated by Michele Piccirillo. “In his 1982 report, Piccirillo reported a Byzantine church with a central and two side naves, which together measured 18.45 m x 13.52 m. The church had been in use for more than two centuries from the 6th century C.E. through the 7th and 8th centuries and into the Umayyad Period” (Flanagan and McCreery 2004: np). Also, during the 1993 season, a horde of Byzantine coins were discovered from the reigns of emperors Valens, Valentinianus I, Leo, Zeno, Basilius, and Anastasius from the middle of the 4th century to the early 6th century C.E. (Flanagan and McCreery 2004: np). Schick, Flanagan, and McCreery identify Tall Nimrin on the Madaba Map as the other unnamed site (site one) beside the unnamed site (site two) we are identifying as Tall el-Hammam (Flanagan and McCreery 2004: np; Schick 1999: 228). In our opinion, they are correct in their evaluation.

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2. **Tall Iktanu’s Byzantine Occupation**

Kay Prag gives the history of the excavations at Tall Iktanu from the first exploration by Selah Merrill in 1871 through the 1920’s and 30’s by A. Mallon. She notes that it was included in field surveys by Nelson Glueck in 1943, by Kay Wright (Prag) in 1965, and by M. Ibrahim, K. Yassine and J. Sauer in 1976. Excavations were directed by Kay Prag in 1966 on behalf of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem and in 1987, 1989 and 1990 on behalf of the British Institute at Amman for Archaeology and History. The north hill was occupied in the Early Bronze IB, Intermediate Early Bronze-Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze, Iron Age and Persian periods. The south hill was partly occupied in the Early Bronze IB and very extensively in the Intermediate Early Bronze-Middle Bronze Age. There are occasional Roman, Byzantine, medieval, Ottoman and modern sherds on the site, but no evidence for occupation at these periods (Prag 1965: np).
So while there was evidence of some Roman or Byzantine pottery on the site, Prag maintains that there was no Roman or Byzantine occupation. Therefore, as previously mentioned, Tall Iktanu is out of the question. Besides, it is far too small for the site on the Madaba Map.

Taylor also comments on the occupation at Tall Iktanu. She states that “Tell Iktanu is an excavated site at which a single occupation, an extensive and well planned settlement of the Middle Bronze I (EB-MB, EB IV) culture was revealed. Aharoni’s identification [of Livias as Tall Iktanu] is, therefore, extremely unlikely” (Taylor 2003, 142). She is clear that there is no Roman or Byzantine occupation.

G. Not Consistently Identified

The prominent works on the Madaba Map identify the unnamed site (site two) in question on the Madaba Map with various possibilities. This indicates that the identification is uncertain and up for debate and further consideration. In 1954 Michael Avi-Yonah in his book *The Madaba Mosaic Map*, identified the site (site two) as Beth-jeshimoth (Khirbet Suweime) and site one to the left as Khirbet Kefrein (Fig. 4)10 or Tell Rame:

Across the Jordan and opposite Galgala we notice above the gazelle the fragmentary representation of a locality, with the trunks of two palm trees to the right [site one]. To judge from its position on the map this might refer either to Abel (Khirbet el Kafrein) or to Livias-Bethramtha (Tell er-Rame). Another equally nameless village [site two] is situated between this place and the Dead Sea. If the latter is meant to represent Beth-jeshimoth (*Onomasticon* 48:7), then the northern village would be Beth-ramtha, and Abel might have been located in the lost part of the pavement further to the north-east. Possibly, however, Abel was not represented at all. Eusebius mentioned Beth-ramtha (Livias) seven times (*Onomasticon* 48:13–15), while he mentions Abel but does not locate it (Avi-Yonah 1954: 37).

Later Avi-Yonah states “Above it ([Aenon-Sapsaphas and another shrub] i.e. eastwards) stands a biggish village surrounded by palm trees; as suggested above its most likely identification is with Beth-jeshimoth (Khirbet Suweime)” (*Onomasticon* 48:7; Glaueck 1943: 13–18; [Bethasimouth] Taylor 2003, 121).

In Herbert Donner’s 1992 book *The Mosaic Map of Madaba*, he identifies the nameless site (site two) with Livias, Tall Iktanu, and Tall Rama. “The Old Testament town was called Beth-Haram, later on, under the Roman emperor Augustus, it was called Livias or Julias. It is identical with Tall Iktanu and the small but remarkable Tall ar-Rama.11 It appears to be situated at the upper course of Wadi Zarqa Ma’in which runs into the Dead Sea after its turn” (Donner 1992: 39; Fig. 10).

Alliata in an article on the identification of the sites in *The Madaba Map Centenary* identifies site two with Betharam (Josh 13:27) or Buthramphtha, now Livias or Tell al-Ramah (*Onomasticon* 48:14–15; Alliata 1997, 54).

Robert Schick in an article on northern Jordan in *The Madaba Map Centenary* proposes Beth Jeshimoth (Suweima) as site two. “Small portions of two other unlabelled city vignettes survive. A variety of suggestions have been made for their identification. The city vignette above the gazelle to the left [site one] could be Abel (Khirbat al-Kafrein) or Livias/Beth-Ramtha (Tell Rame), or perhaps Beth Nimrin (Tell Nimrin), while the city vignette above the gazelle to the right (site two) could be Beth Jeshimoth (Suweima)” (Schick 1999: 228). As we have proven earlier, only Tall Nimrin and Tall el-Hammam are logical candidates for these sites (Fig. 12).

H. Livias

Donner identifies site two as Livias or Tell Rame, (Beth-Ramtha, Betharam [Jos 13:27], a city of the tribe of Gad, near the Jordan, called Bethphartha by the Syrians). The name of the site was changed by Herod to honor Augustus (Eusebius, *Onomasticon* 48:14-15 [ca. 330 C.E.]; Avi-Yonah 1954: 37; Donner 1992: 39; Schick 1999: 228). However, there is no evidence directly linking the unnamed Madaba Map site and Livias, other than general speculation and the fact that Eusebius mentioned Livias in his writings seven times. While “it is the commonly accepted view among scholars that the Madaba Map depends heavily on Eusebius’ gazetteer of biblical places, the *Onomastikon*, . . . it is at [sic.] at least conceivable that, rather than the Madaba Map mechanically depending on the *Onomastikon*, both the *Onomastikon* and the prototype of the map may have derived from a common cultural lore” (Di Segni 2007: np). But, just because Eusebius is aware of Livias, does not mean that this site is Livias. However, if Tall el-Hammam were proven to be Livias, this would not hurt our argument in the least.

I. Beth Jeshimoth (Suweima)

Both Avi-Yonah and Schick identify site two with Beth Jeshimoth (Suweima or Suwaymah). Numbers 33:49 tells us that “There on the plains of Moab they camped along the Jordan from Beth Jeshimoth to Abel
Shittim” (NIV). This was one of the borders for “Sihon king of the Amorites” (Josh 12:2-3) and described as a Moabite frontier town in Ezekiel 25:9. The modern town of Suwaymah is the location of the Movenpick hotel on the Dead Sea and is much too far south on the Dead Sea to be identified with site two. Also, it is on the other side of the Wadi al-Zarqa Ma’in (Fig. 10). If Beth Jeshimoth is identified with modern day Suweima or Suwaymah ([Bethasimuth] Taylor 2003, 121), which appears likely to us, then it is certainly not site two.

J. Conclusion

Tall el-Hammam has flourished throughout history because of its defensibility, abundant water, and proximity to the Kings' Highway, a major trade route linking Egypt and Mesopotamia. Dr. Steven Collins from Trinity Southwest University seems to be in the process of supplanting the view that Sodom and the other Cities of the Plain were located at the southern end of the Dead Sea, and in fact, that Sodom was in the north at Tall el-Hammam. If this is true, then the huge Early Bronze city on the lower tall is the Sodom of Genesis 10. Likewise, the Middle Bronze city on the upper tall would be the Sodom of Genesis 13-19 and the Quran (Surah 11:74-83). Tall el-Hammam is also likely the Shittim of the Late Bronze Age (Beecher 1949, 7; Harrison 1983, 413), where the Israelites encamped for two years before entering Canaan (Num 33:49; Josh 2:1; 3:1) furthermore the huge Iron II city at Tall el-Hammam may prove to have been one of Solomon's twelve administrative centers. Perhaps it was also the Livias of New Testament times. If our argument is valid, that Tall el-Hammam is the unidentified site two on the Madaba Map, then we have just placed several important cities and sites on the Map – the Madaba Map.
NOTES

1 Today the Greek Orthodox Parish Church of St. George has been built over the Byzantine Church preserving the mosaic.
2 The site of Christ’s baptism and of the Israelites’ entry into Canaan to begin the Conquest.
3 There are two unnamed sites in the region; the one on the left with only two palm trees above the lion will be called site one while the other on the right depicted with five palm trees above the gazelle will be called site two. site two is the site in dispute.
4 To date the occupation levels of Tall el-Hammam include early bronze, middle bronze, late Iron I & II (Harrison 1983, 413), Roman and Byzantine. This is according to the identified pottery on the site from seasons 2005-2006 and 2006-2007.
5 “Date palms (Phoenix dactylifera) are shown on the Madaba mosaic map as being grown around Scythopolis (barely shown on far left), Phasaelis, Jericho, Bethagla, Bethnambris, Livias, Calliroe, and Zoara” (Hepper and Taylor, 2004, 35).
6 While it is probably a coincidence that there are five palm trees on the Mosaic and five cisterns have been found, it is nonetheless an interesting parallel.
7 The modern Kefrein dam indicates that this was a well-watered region in ancient, as well as modern, times.
8 Since the site appears to have been last occupied in the Byzantine Era, any Byzantine ruins on the surface probably suffered significantly from erosion, scavenging for nearby structures, and modern bulldozing. This is a common problem at Levantine tells.
9 Since there is no evidence of LB occupation in the entire eastern kikkar, we believe that the evidence for such cited by Prag merits re-examination.
10 Harrison states that “the area of this site [Tell el-Hammam] was nearly a hundred times bigger than that of Tell el-Kefrein” (Harrison 1983, 414). Therefore, Tell Kefrein (Fig. 4) can be reasonably eliminated on the basis of it being too small compared with Tell el-Hammam. The Greeks have excavated this site, but it is unknown at this time if they uncovered any Early Roman or Byzantine pottery or ruins.
11 Donner’s use of the term remarkable is an interesting descriptor as there is nothing remarkable about Rama either archaeologically or in size. The site of Tell Rame has not been excavated (Taylor 2003, 142).
12 In the Koran the name of Lot is Lut and the name of Abraham is Ibrahim. Also, the Koran does not record that Lot’s wife was turned into a pillar of salt but that she ended in a terrible fate and was left behind.

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