

# JERASH ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARK

## Italian Contributions to Research, Conservation, and Public Engagement

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### INTRODUCTION

Jerash – historically known as **Gerasa**, a Hellenized form of the Semitic *Gershu* (attested in a Nabataean inscription from Petra) – stands as one of the Near East's most well-preserved Roman cities and serves as a crucial site for understanding urban life in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. Situated in the fertile highlands of northern Jordan, the city thrived from the Hellenistic era through the early Islamic period, leaving behind an extraordinary monumental ensemble that includes colonnaded streets, theatres, temples, baths, and residential areas (see Fig. 1).

Archaeological evidence shows that human activity in Jerash long predates the Roman city walls. At Abu al-Sawan, about 100 meters southeast of Hadrian's Arch, Neolithic flint tools (8000-4500 BC) were discovered, while additional sites on the northern and eastern hills date to the Chalcolithic period (4500-3200 BC). Within the city, pottery from the Bronze and Iron Ages has also been found. Although some traditions link the foundation of the city to Alexander the Great or his generals, archaeological evidence indicates that Gerasa emerged as a Hellenistic city after the region came under Seleucid control under Antiochus III (223-187 BCE). The site was re-established as **Antiochia on the Chrysorroas**, possibly under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who may have introduced the cult of Zeus Olympios here, as he is known to have done in Jerusalem. Following its abandonment around the 12th century, the site remained deserted for several centuries. The ruins of the ancient city were rediscovered in the early 19th century, sparking renewed interest and paving the way for ongoing exploration and documentation. Systematic archaeological investigations began in the 1920s, with revitalised research emerging in the 1980s through the *Jerash Archaeological Project*.

Today, Jerash is among Jordan's most visited archaeological parks. In 2019, visitor numbers reached **about 500,000**, the highest ever recorded. Tourism declined sharply during the COVID-19 pandemic and again due to recent regional instability, but numbers are rising again as conditions improve.

Jerash's outstanding state of preservation, together with ongoing international research and conservation initiatives, makes it a key centre for cultural tourism, public engagement, and archaeological scholarship in the region.



Fig. 1: View of the oval square and the cardo from south.



Fig. 2: The Artemis Temple, from east.



Fig. 3: The Roman Nymphaeum of Jerash.

### THE ITALIAN CONTRIBUTIONS

Italy has played a key role in the exploration and conservation of Jerash, particularly through its long-term work at the Temple of Artemis and the nearby Propylaea Church. Since 1977, Italian archaeologists, architects, and conservators have conducted extensive investigations across the sanctuary – excavating the terraces, restoring the monumental façade and vaulted shops in collaboration with the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, and later focusing on the temple cella and the Propylaea Church area. Building on this legacy, the current *Monumenta Orientalia* project (since 2018) continues the stabilization, documentation, and conservation of the Temple of Artemis, while advancing restoration and structural consolidation at the Propylaea Church. Through targeted interventions and the training of local staff, these efforts aim to secure the long-term preservation and enhance the public understanding of both monuments within the wider urban landscape of ancient Gerasa.

The training activities of the project **“Establishment of the Regional Center for Conservation and Restoration in Jerash”** officially commenced on November 1, 2023, at the centre's premises in the ancient city of Jerash. Supported by the **Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)** and following the refurbishment of the building by **UNOPS**, the programme – led by **Università degli Studi Roma Tre** in partnership with the **Istituto Centrale del Restauro** and the **Fondazione Scuola dei beni e delle attività culturali** – offers two specialist courses: in the first year, conservation and restoration of ceramics, terracotta, metals, organics and glass; in the second year, conservation and restoration of stone materials, architectural surfaces and mosaics. By mid-2025, graduates will become trainers themselves under a “Train-the-Trainers” model, enabling the centre to swiftly assume a leading regional role in heritage conservation.

The *Jerash Sostenibile* project, funded by the **Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)** and implemented by **ARS Culture Solidali** in collaboration with the **Jordan Department of Antiquities (DoA)**, and local stakeholders, aims to enhance the cultural heritage of Jerash while promoting the social inclusion of vulnerable groups and persons with disabilities through responsible and sustainable cultural tourism. The initiative seeks to safeguard and valorise the city's rich heritage as a driver of inclusive local development, addressing the limited economic impact that tourism currently has on the community. Key activities include the recovery and restoration of the **Eastern Roman Baths**, improving accessibility within the archaeological site through a dedicated golf-cart route and digital visitor tools, strengthening the skills of local staff through continuous training, and creating employment opportunities – such as a community-run restaurant – with particular attention to the participation of people with disabilities.

### THE JERASH NYMPHAEUM PROJECT

Among the recent initiatives that strengthen cooperation between Italy and Jordan is the mission of the University of Udine, launched in 2024 as part of the three-year research project *WaterDecor: Water for the People, Décor for the City: Nymphaea and Public Fountains in Iudea/Syria-Palaestina and Provincia Arabia from the Roman to the Byzantine Periods* (ca. 1st BCE–7th CE), funded by the European Commission through the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (Grant Agreement ID: 101104972).

The project investigates urban water-dispensing structures across the Roman Levant, with the aim of elucidating the management of public fountains, their essential role in supplying water to the population, and their function as instruments of imperial and local elite euergetism.

The Udine mission focuses on the first systematic investigation of the Roman nymphaeum at Jerash (Fig. 3), conducted with the support of the European Commission, under the patronage of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), and in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DoA).

The monumental fountain, located along the cardo, south of the Temple of Artemis and north of the so-called Cathedral, was dedicated to Emperor Commodus and can be securely dated to AD 191/192 thanks to its dedicatory inscription..

The archaeological mission has produced the first scientifically accurate architectural survey and 3D model of the nymphaeum, demonstrating that earlier published plans were incorrect. The mission has also revealed a previously undocumented staircase to the north and documented evidence for the long-term use of the fountain and its surroundings from the 2nd to the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the conclusion of the excavation season, the area north of the monument was reopened to public access (Fig. 4).

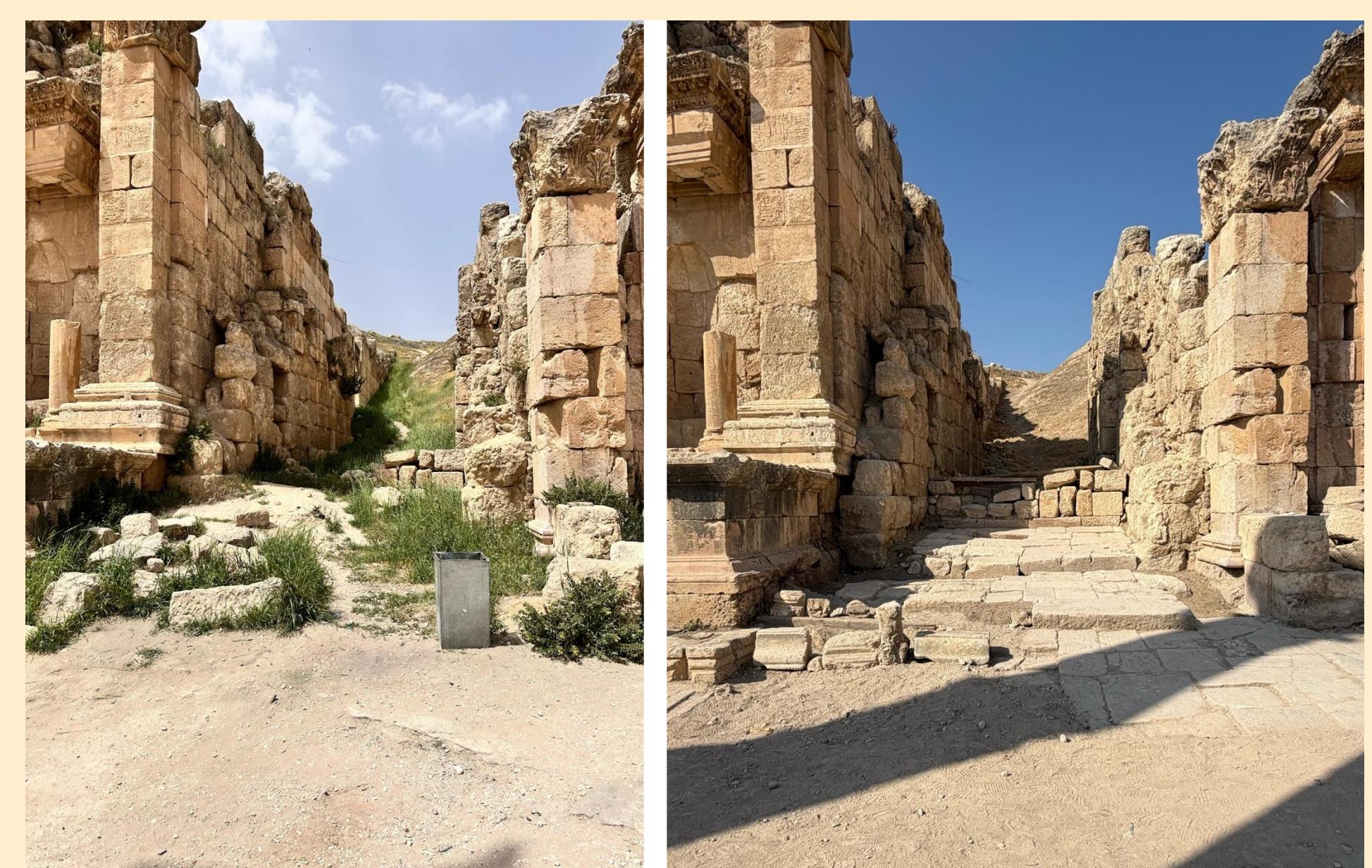


Fig. 4: The area excavated north of the Nymphaeum, before (left) and after (right) the 2025 field season.