

Jerash

Heritage and History

by Mary Coons

Ancient provides a pretty broad frame of reference in mystical Arabian Jordan. And Jerash with its medieval character and former glory is likened to the grandeur of Imperial Rome, as it is one of the world's largest and most well preserved sites of Roman architecture outside Italy.



(1) & (5) Jerash's colonaded street
 (2) Jerash complex
 (3) Friezes behind cathedral arch
 (4) front of Hadrien's arch

Visiting Jerash is like walking through a mirror and tunneling back through two thousand years into the deepest depths of history. Modern Jerash rises up next – and in some places upon buried rubble – to ancient Jerash and the two are connected by roads and a river.

The ancient city of Gerasa – with the modern name Jerash – was founded in the fourth century BC by Semitic peoples on a site that had been occupied during the Neolithic period (9500 BC) that is conservatively considered the end stage of the Stone Age. It is nestled in a low-lying valley surrounded by the Gilead Mountains approximately 30 miles from Jordan's capital city of Amman.

Jerash's multi-layered history is a fascinating blend of the Greco-Roman world and ancient Arab traditions with its unbroken chain of human occupation dating back more than 6,500 years.

Briefly, the earliest Arabic/Semitic residents called their village Garshu. The Romans Hellenized the Arabic name (translating it into a Greek word) to Gerasa sometime during the fourth century BC. Arab inhabitants transformed the Roman Gerasa into the Arabic Jerash in the late 19th century.

The ancient city was hidden in sand for centuries before being discovered in 1806 by a German traveler who recognized a portion of the ruins. Its remarkable preservation is due to its burial in sand. Excavation



began in 1925 and continues today. Its medieval, cobbled colonnaded streets, hilltop temples, two amphitheatres, hippodrome, spacious public squares, Roman baths, fountains, and city walls exemplify its exceptional condition.

Ornately carved friezes are scattered everywhere, most having toppled from Ionic and Corinthian columns.

An Islamic mosque was discovered with excavation beginning in August 2006. An early Islamic housing quarters inhabited from 660-800 AD was also unearthed depicting Islamic architecture and also undergoing restoration. These Islamic discoveries are not yet open to the public.

Historical Roots

Alexander the Great, was born in 356 BC in Pella, the ancient capital of Macedonia. He spent his childhood watching his father transforming Macedonia into a great military power, winning victory after victory on the battlefields throughout the Balkans. When Alexander was 13, his father hired the Greek philosopher Aristotle to be his personal tutor under whose tutelage Alexander excelled. Jerash quickly began to develop under Alexander the Great's rule in the fourth century BC, and it enjoyed a gloried golden age.

In 63 BC soon after Rome seized control of Syria, Emperor Pompey proclaimed the conquered city as one of the great cities of the Decapolis

League (a confederation of ten main cities). As a result, Jerash enjoyed tremendous economic benefits with flourishing trade routes.

Roman emperor Trajan annexed the wealthy Nabataean Kingdom (now known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan) in 106 AD and created Arabia, which conveyed even greater trading riches into Gerasa.

Some 20 years later (129 AD) Emperor Hadrian visited the city. To commemorate his arrival, the citizens constructed a monumental arch at the city's south end – Hadrian's Arch – that was supposed to become the main southern gate of the city but expansion plans were never completed.

The city's prosperity peaked early in the third century AD

once bestowed with the rank of Roman Colony. During this golden age, approximately 20,000 people inhabited Gerasa.

With the advance of shipping routes during the third century and land trade routes ultimately seeing less travel, the city began its decline.

By the mid fifth century, Christianity was the region's principal religion. Pagan temples were razed with their solid stones commonly used to construct the many new Byzantine churches featuring mosaic floors.

With the Persian invasion of 614 AD followed by the Muslim conquest of 636 AD, the city's decline continued to spiral downward as did its population. Finally, in 749 AD, a series of powerful earthquakes struck Jerash seriously debilitating the city's infrastructure.

Historical records indicate that the Crusaders described Jerash as uninhabited; thus, it remained abandoned until its rediscovery in 1806.

- (6) Jerash Hippodrome
 (7) Elliptical shaped Forum
 (8) Cathedral arch

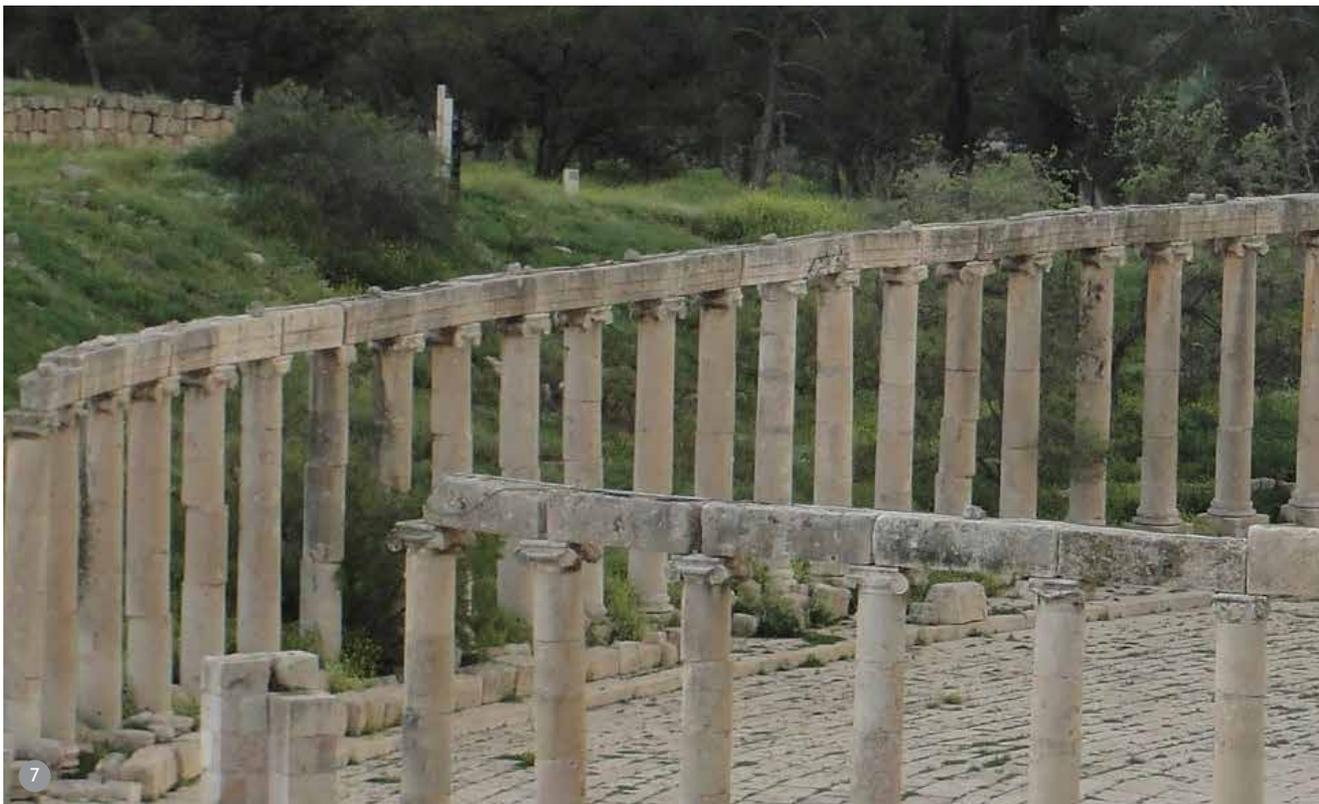


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A Self-Guided Journey

Entering from the south gate, the mighty Hadrian's Arch with its finely carved acanthus wreaths strategically resting above the honey-colored stone pillar bases exemplifies the unusual Roman architectural construction detail. The Triumphal Arch exudes this aura as one passes through.

The massive 265-yard Hippodrome, immediately to the left once passing through Hadrian's Arch, set the scene for athletic competitions, horse races, chariot races (currently, re-enactments are performed twice weekly), and other sporting



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venues. In its heyday, the arena accommodated 15,000 spectators. The Hippodrome was constructed sometime between the mid second and third centuries AD, and only a portion of it has been restored.

Venturing into one of many unmarked doorways of partially preserved structures along the outer wall of the Hippodrome, I was pleasantly surprised to happen upon the remains of a once white patterned mosaic tiled floor dating back to the third century AD.

Jerash's long principal road runs north to south and is known as the *Cardo Maximus*. This colonnaded street, still paved with the original stones, served as the city's architectural spine and focal point. The previous Ionic columns were replaced some time after 170 AD with the current elaborate Corinthian columns. A broad sidewalk on either side remains clearly visible and spills in to the spacious Oval Plaza (Forum). The columns once covered a row of shops along the *Cardo*. It is therefore believed that the Forum plaza predominantly existed for economic purposes rather than political or religious reasons.

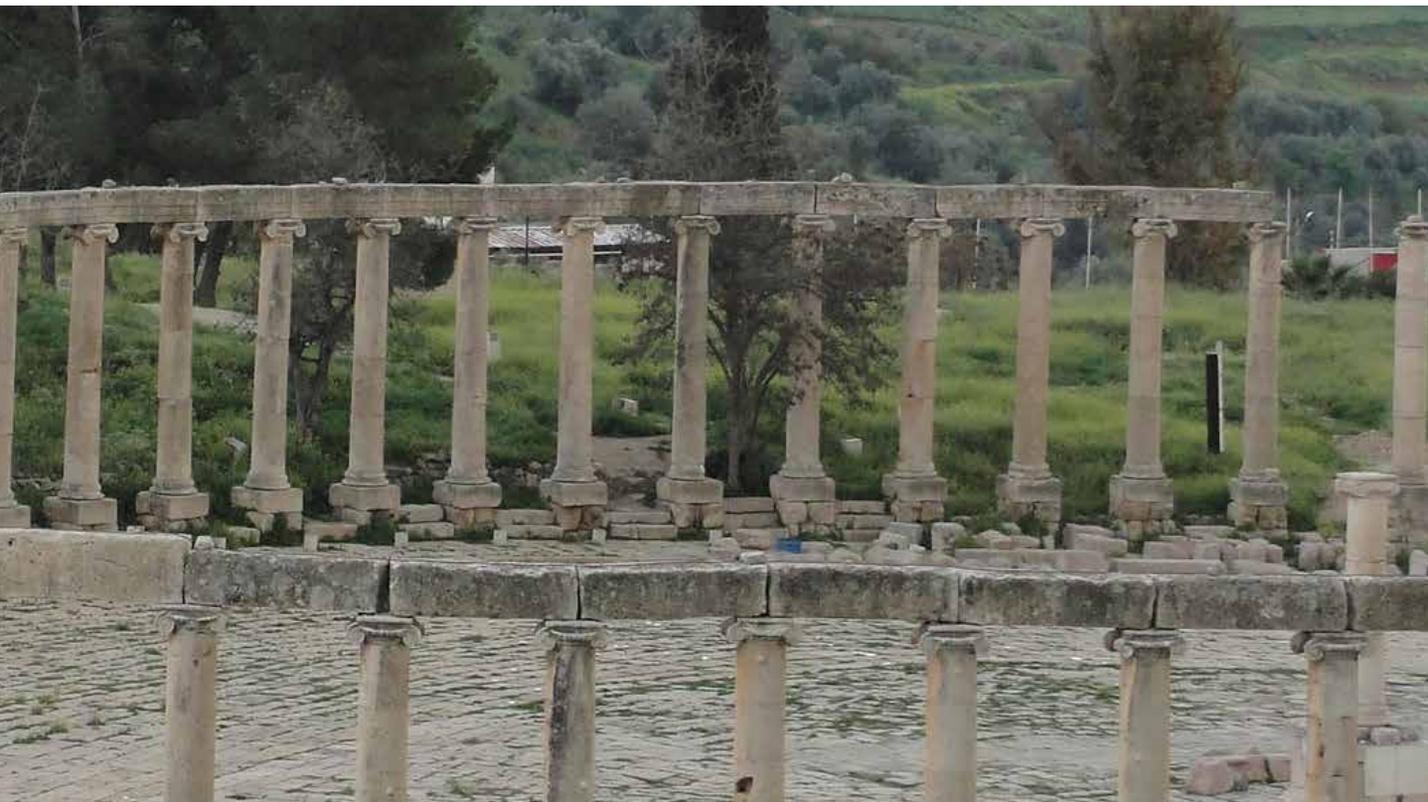
Passing through the remains of the Cathedral arch, a richly carved gateway of the second century Roman Temple of Dionysus, brings you to the start of the colonnaded street from where the major temples, monuments and shops were an extension.

The timeworn city also boasted two theaters –South and North. The older South Theater,



constructed between 90 and 92 AD, seats more than 3,000. The first level of the two-story stage was reconstructed, and due to its remarkable acoustics, is still used for community cultural festivals. Panoramic views from the top row of seats looking out over the Jerash ruins are stunningly spectacular.

The Temple of Zeus, erected in 162 AD,





occupies the remnants of earlier sacred Pagan sites with its Sanctuary lying immediately to the north of the southern gate of the city and composes structures spread across two stepped terraces. Eight of the 46-foot columns framing the front remain upright unscathed from earthquakes.

Restoration of the Zeus sanctuary began in 1982 and continues today. The original sacred sanctuary space was developed around a natural cavity in the rock estimated to be as early as the 7th to 8th century BC. During the Hellenistic period, a platform was constructed followed by the actual temple. By the mid 2nd century AD, the Sanctuary was extended onto the upper part of the hill to rival the construction of the new Temple of Artemis sanctuary. To allow access to this new part of the Zeus Sanctuary from the lower terrace, a monumental staircase was built.

The pagan Temple of Artemis also remains standing for the most part with 11 of its original 12 Corinthian columns spiraling upward. Artemis, the daughter of Zeus and sister of Apollo, was Gerasa's patron goddess. The sacrificial temple was dedicated to Artemis and built in 150 AD.



(9) Jerash remains of nymphaeum
(10) Temple of Artemis
(11) Temple of Zeus

At least 15 Byzantine churches have been discovered with more believed to remain buried under the site. Among other Roman monuments worth exploring are the Nymphaeum, a second century AD ornamental fountain dedicated to the Nymphs, Macellum (marketplace) with its 211 AD inscription on the adjacent lion's head fountain, the Temple Esplanade and its monumental staircases leading gracefully through a colonnade of 22 Corinthian columns, two massive Roman baths extolled for their therapeutic virtues lying where they fell from the January 749 AD earthquake, and four major Christian churches.

A visitor's information center is located near the southern gate across from a restaurant.

If you visit, you will certainly want to spend time browsing the large marketplace brimming with indigenous handicrafts, local artwork, and traditional clothing and textiles.

The layered history of Jerash's remote wonders spanning 2,000 years and encompassing various well-preserved architectural styles and three major religions is simply unimaginable.

