



CENTER FOR
NEAR EASTERN
ARCHAEOLOGY
LA SIERRA UNIVERSITY

La Sierra Digs

Newsletter of the Center for Near Eastern Archaeology | HMS Richards Divinity School | La Sierra University | Vol. 14:3 Fall 2026

18th Annual Archaeology Discovery Weekend

People & Places of the New Testament World



In-person & online
Find out more at:
lasierra.edu/archaeology

Caiphas Ossuary, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (Dawn Acevedo)

Nov. 14–15, 2026



CENTER FOR
NEAR EASTERN
ARCHAEOLOGY
LA SIERRA UNIVERSITY

SPONSORED BY:



Archaeology Discovery Weekend 2026

CNEA is pleased to present the 18th annual Archaeology Discovery Weekend! The weekend lectures are free and open to the public, thanks to our sponsor Versacare and many supportive co-sponsors. Moreover, the presentations can be viewed both in-person and online, though we hope to see all who can make it to campus since there are additional components that are only available in-person (reception, artifact display, hands-on labs, and kids' activities).

ADW 2026 will focus its lectures and exhibits on archaeological and historical figures, sites, and artifacts and relics from or related to the first century AD, including topics such as the city of the apostles, controversial ossuaries and burials, Paul and politics, historical biographies of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus, and the geography of the Gospels.

Presenters include Drs. Bruce Chilton, Jodi Magness, R. Steven Notley, and James Tabor as well as cameos by the archaeologists of La Sierra University and special guests from Madaba, Jordan. You won't want to miss this year's stellar line up!

Sat. | 14 November
3:00-6:00pm with
reception to follow

Sun. | 15 November
1:00-4:00pm with
lab activities and
open house to follow

ADW Extra	2
Mosaic Workshop	2
Project Updates	3-5
Scholarships	4
Museum Board	5
Winter Lecture	5
Display Case	5
Recent Discoveries	6

Inside

ADW Extras: Reception, Kids' Program, and Labs by Dawn Acevedo

In addition to a fantastic group of speakers and presentations available via a hybrid format, there are also several extra perks for participants who will be attending Archaeology Discovery Weekend in-person:

On Saturday evening, 14 November, following the first afternoon of lectures, join us in the atrium of the Zapara School of Business (ZSB) for a special reception showcasing "The New Testament... In Jordan." Meet a variety of guests from the Madaba region of Jordan, enjoy authentic Middle Eastern cuisine, and learn about the numerous archaeological sites and cities throughout the country of Jordan that date back to the first century AD or that figure prominently in Christian history in the region.

On Sunday afternoon, 15 November, parents and guardians are invited to drop off their kiddos at ZSB for the Kids' Adventures in Archaeology program featuring an archaeology-themed animated movie, snacks, and [safely] breaking and restoring pottery! Feel free to join your child for these activities, or head on into the Troesh Auditorium and enjoy a kid-free afternoon filled with archaeological presentations and discussions.

After the Sunday lectures and kids' activities, CNEA will open its doors to all our guests for artifact displays and a variety of hands-on lab activities, including mosaic-making, digital ancient facial reconstruction, XRF and colorimeter readings, artifact identification, and more, as well as snacks in our authentic Bedouin tent (weather permitting).



All aforementioned events are free, but there is also a unique experience to participate in a Mosaic Workshop on Friday, 13 November, with specialists from the Madaba Institute for Mosaic Art and Restoration (MIMAR) for a small fee – see next article for more details. And please be sure to register for all of these events in advance to help us ensure we have adequate food and supplies for all our guests.

Don't delay – register today! Go to <https://lasierra.edu/cnea/discovery-weekend/>.

SPECIAL EVENT: ADW Mosaic Workshop by Douglas Clark

As part of this year's Archaeology Discovery Weekend (ADW), the planning committee has engaged administrators and mosaic specialists from the Madaba Institute for Mosaic Art and Restoration (MIMAR) in Madaba, Jordan, to hold a six-hour mosaic workshop in the CNEA Collections Lab. This will take place at 10 AM–4 PM on Friday 13 November, immediately preceding ADW (14–15 November).

Madaba, Jordan is known as the City of Mosaics, given the scores of mosaic floors filling at least 13 churches from the 6th century AD and other structures as well. Perhaps the best known of these churches is St. George's Greek Orthodox Church in historic downtown Madaba which contains on its floor the famous Madaba Map, an extensive mosaic of sites in the Holy Land from Syria to Egypt, normally thought to guide pilgrims to sites of religious significance. Modern Madaba has developed this ancient theme, not only conserving ancient mosaics but also creating new ones. And at the heart of this enterprise is MIMAR which teaches conservation and artistic creation.

During the 2025 ADW event, MIMAR and CNEA officials signed an MOU of cooperation with each other to broaden the footprint of MIMAR in Jordan and beyond and to enhance CNEA's connections and offerings. As an outgrowth of this MOU and the ongoing relationship between CNEA and the city of Madaba, we have invited five MIMAR staff members, including the Dean and Deputy Dean, as well as three specialists, to direct the workshop.

ADW Mosaic Workshop

by the Madaba Institute for Mosaic Art and Restoration
at the Center for Near Eastern Archaeology

Friday 13 November 2026

10 AM–4 PM

High school age and up

Limited to 20 participants

Fee—\$25.00

To reserve a spot in this once-in-a-lifetime mosaic workshop, register now at:

<https://lasierra.edu/cnea/discovery-weekend/>



MIMAR students working on mosaic projects, courtesy MIMAR

Madaba Museum Project Building Momentum by Douglas Clark

Friends of CNEA and readers of *La Sierra Digs* know of the long history of research, conservation, community archaeology, and promotion of the Madaba Regional Archaeological Museum Project (MRAMP) in Madaba, Jordan (<https://madabamuseum.org/en> in English and <https://madabamuseum.org/ar> in Arabic). Having worked for over a decade to build community relations, train staff, prepare the future museum site in the Madaba Archaeological Park West (II), create safe

storage and a small display area for 14,000 artifacts, MRAMP's joint American-Italian-Jordanian venture benefitted from over \$900,000 in grants, many from the U.S. Department of State, and contributed significantly to preserving the region's cultural heritage.

The major challenge for the project has long been financial resources. The museum cost of \$5 million rises like an almost insurmountable hurdle in our pathway. However, as of my last trip to Jordan in early September, two factors have given us hope. The first is a sizeable grant from the Madaba city budget council to renovate one of the early 20th-century buildings in the park into an Introductory/Timeline Hall which will introduce the proposed new museum but can stand alone for the short term with static and digital interactive displays.

The second involves contacts with several international ambassadors/embassies in Jordan who share MRAMP's commitment to protecting Jordan's legacy and helping enhance the economy through increased tourism. At present, these include the U.S., Italian, EU, and Vatican ambassadors who are all aware of our project and who to varying degrees have signaled positive engagement.

One event, on 12 September, provided the opportunity to meet almost all of them in a single place: Mukawir/Machaerus, famous as the place where John the Baptist was beheaded. The Hungarian national orchestra and choir, along with several Jordanian soloists, performed Handel's Messiah in the open air at sunset overlooking King Herod's famous fortress, set against the backdrop of the Dead Sea. I was one of 3,000 people who attended, and I sat on the second row in the middle, right behind the long row of dignitaries, all close enough for me to meet either before or after the performance. The performance was absolutely magical; the chance to talk with and get contact information from ambassadors representing the EU, Italy, and the Vatican providential. We are now on their lists for ongoing discussion and potential support.

As noted elsewhere in this newsletter, the unifying event for all of these foreign embassies, along with the entire Jordanian government, is a major push led by the Vatican and Jordan's parliament to celebrate the 2000th anniversary of the baptism of Jesus which took place at "Bethany beyond the Jordan," this to increase Christian tourism and pilgrimage.

Our project is proud to be part of these efforts to protect and preserve Jordan's heritage, while at the same time working to enhance the country's economy with benefits to hundreds, perhaps thousands.



Hungarian National Orchestra and Choir
at Mukawir, courtesy European Union

BRAP 2026 -- Report

by Kent Bramlett

The Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP) returned to Jordan for a productive field season from 18 June to 23 July, 2026. Excavating in three areas of the ancient settlement, our team explored monumental architecture, traced the beginnings of an Iron Age household, and uncovered new details of life in Balu'a's Islamic village. Despite regional tensions that complicated logistics and resulted in a slightly reduced team, this season's research objectives were successfully achieved.

North of the monumental structure called the Qasr, we opened a new excavation area to investigate what may have been an Iron Age administrative complex. Here, substantial parallel walls, each approximately six feet thick, created a case-mate double wall system divided into smaller rooms that seem to enclose a large interior space with a plaster floor, possibly a courtyard. Surface wall lines suggest that the building measured roughly 80 by 160 feet. Its scale and strategic position overlooking the approach to the settlement make it an important addition to our understanding of Balu'a's public architecture and is suggestive of royal administration. Preliminary pottery readings place the building's construction and principal occupation in the Iron IIB period. Ash and the charred remains of collapsed wooden beams tell the story of its destruction, possibly in an earthquake or human-induced conflagration. Later inhabitants installed a water channel directing runoff toward a probable cistern. An Aramaic-inscribed potsherd found in the area's topsoil offers another intriguing clue to later activity, although its original context remains uncertain.

A second objective was to continue excavation at the area called the House, where we hoped to document earlier phases of the structure. Beneath previously exposed Iron IIB rooms, a carefully excavated probe revealed successive cobbled and beaten-earth surfaces belonging to an earlier Iron I occupation. Pottery, animal bones, ash, and plant residues preserved traces of everyday activities. These discoveries provide some of our clearest evidence yet for Balu'a's early Iron Age settlement. Samples of carbonized material and plant residues will help us investigate both its chronology and the lives of its inhabitants.

In the Islamic Village, excavations continued at the large courtyard building tentatively identified as a khan, or roadside inn. The biggest surprise of the season here was the discovery that beneath its medieval occupation, was earlier architecture dating to the Byzantine period. A complete Byzantine lamp of a type primarily produced at Petra was among the season's memorable finds. The medieval building incorporated portions of these earlier walls, revealing how successive generations adapted an existing architectural landscape.

Nearby, we began excavating the Bayt, a house selected to explore the relationship between the Islamic village and the khan. Beneath more than five feet of collapsed masonry lay plaster floors, a grain bin or trough, and a bread oven. A painted jug, glass bracelet fragments, and two unfired bowls brought the household into tangible view. The bowls may indicate small-scale pottery production at home, while succes-

sive floors record repeated maintenance during the medieval occupation.

Preserving these discoveries remains essential. With support from an Archaeological Institute of America Site Preservation Grant, our partners at Sela continued stabilizing vulnerable architecture and training local workers in conservation. The team also cleared visitor paths and documented the Qasr through photogrammetry as continuing looting threatens its surviving walls.

One of the season's happiest occasions took place in nearby Smakieh, where we joined local children for a reading of Rasha Dabaneh's new children's book about Balu'a. Hands-on weaving followed, connecting the story's ancient loom weights with an activity the children could experience themselves.

We are grateful to our Jordanian colleagues, especially Department of Antiquities representatives Wesal Ma'alta and Sattam Hijazeen, and to the institutions, supporters, and community partners who made this season possible. Their partnership helps us uncover Balu'a's history, protect its remains, and share its stories with the next generation.

For a glimpse into life on the dig and to meet many of this season's team members, check out the 2026 issues of the BRAP Beat newsletter located at <http://www.brapjordan.org/>.



Balu'a 2026 Team Photo

2026 Scholarship Award Recipients

by Kent Bramlett

Several individuals participating in the excavation at Balu'a as part of the BRAP team received scholarships and travel grants from archaeological institutions.

Zainab O. Hweij, Jordanian archaeology student with research focus on the Iron Age in the Southern Levant, received from the American Society of Overseas Research (ASOR) the 2026 Strange/Midkiff Families Fieldwork Scholarship for participation with BRAP. You can read her account of her summer experience here: "From Research to Reality: My Journey to the Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project" <https://www.asor.org/news/2026/09/fieldwork-report-hweij>

Omar Ibrahim, junior at Montclair State University, received a Jane C. Waldbaum Archaeological Field School Scholarship from the Archaeological Institute of America to assist in attending BRAP.

Jake Hill, graduate student in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles, is study-

ing social identity and state formation in the central Jordanian region of ancient Moab. Jake received the Lawrence T. Geraty Travel Scholarship from the American Center of Research (ACOR) in Amman, Jordan to assist with his participation in BRAP and also was awarded the Jennifer C. Groot Memorial Fellowship from ACOR to supported extended research in Jordan.



Students (left to right): Zainab Hweij, Omar Ibrahim, and Jake Hill

New Clark Student Scholarship at ACOR

Having benefitted from more than five decades of association with the American Center of Research (ACOR) in Amman, Jordan, Carmen and Douglas Clark have made a concrete effort to pay back... or better, pay forward... through the establishment of a new ACOR scholarship for student research in Jordan, beginning in 2027. The purpose of this scholarship fund is to support students from outside Jordan to travel to and do research in Jordan, with a preference for archaeological research (including excavation). Funded students should be engaged in partnership with Jordanian researchers and/or communities on projects that help discover, document, preserve, understand, or celebrate Jordan's rich cultural heritage. Awardees will be the rising stars in a long-term collaboration among Jordanians and other nationalities that supports local efforts to protect and share Jordan's history. Recipients must be actively enrolled in a graduate or undergraduate program. A second Clark travel scholarship for archaeological research in Jordan will be established through CNEA next year for La Sierra students, with funds becoming available in 2028.

Around the Temple: Ataruz 2025-26 Report

by Chang-ho Ji

The 2025–26 seasons at Khirbat Ataruz shifted the excavation away from the eastern slope, the focus of work for the past five years, where the team had uncovered the monumental staircase leading to the city's early Iron II temple. Attention shifted instead to the acropolis's eastern and northern edges, the hilltop on which the temple stood. A short season in August 2025 opened new areas on the east side (Field E), near the Moabite sanctuary and the temple's outer courtyard, and to the north (Field F). In Field E, the team exposed a large room divided in two by a stone wall and filled with heavy ash deposits. In Field F, we uncovered a building complex with its own stone staircase where people had reoccupied its rooms centuries later during the Hellenistic period.

The 2026 season built on these discoveries. In Field E, the team continued excavating the ash-filled room down to bed-

rock and uncovered six vertically stacked Iron II floors, recording continuous use and renewal from the early 9th through the 8th century BC. Extensive burning, abundant charcoal, numerous grinding tools, and complete vessels suggest the room served as a specialized workshop rather than a dwelling. Workers there may have processed natural bitumen, a tar-like substance found in the Dead Sea region, along with other materials now undergoing laboratory analysis. Nearby, a nearly 6-foot-high wall faced a row of three upright standing stones, and a carefully laid 9th-century BC plaster floor ran up to the base of the stones. Given its proximity to the temple, this feature may have served a religious purpose. In Field F, excavation continued in rooms used for storage and food preparation, likely supporting the temple, and opened a new area linking them to the temple precinct. Together, these finds suggest that the temple at Ataruz anchored a carefully planned complex in which workshops, craft production, and storage were closely interwoven. The team will return in 2027 to continue the work.

Ataruz in *Biblical Archaeology Review*

by Kent Bramlett

The Summer 2026 edition of *Biblical Archaeology Review* carried a feature article on the CNEA-affiliated excavation at Khirbat Ataruz led by La Sierra's Chang-ho Ji (Ji, Chang-Ho, and Aaron Schade. "Sacred Center: The Iron Age Temple at Biblical Ataroth," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 52.2 (2026): 36–45.). The article focused on the excavated temple complex and a reconstruction of the variety of cultic activities that likely occurred in the sacred spaces that comprised the complex. The authors explore Moabite connections with King Mesha and the significance of the site for understanding Iron Age religious practice. The article is accessible at: <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/sacred-center-the-iron-age-temple-at-biblical-ataroth/>



"Sacred Center: The Iron Age Temple at Biblical Ataroth" with Ataruz aerial image in *Biblical Archaeology Review's* Summer 2026 issue.

La Sierra Museum Board Update

by Lawrence Geraty

Friday, 2 October, saw the reconvening of La Sierra University's Museum Board—this time under the capable leadership of University Provost Leslie Martin. It has become clear that we have not been able to raise enough funds to build the beautiful museum envisioned for the university entrance, across from the Zapara School of Business. After considerable and full dis-

cussion, it was voted to proceed with a more modest, staged, structure, perhaps in another campus location, starting with a badly-needed storage facility to adequately house natural history, Stahl Center, and archaeology artifacts that currently exist in several inadequate places on and off campus, to be followed by modern exhibition facilities to house our unique and precious specimens and artifacts that deserve to be visited and studied by both campus students and off-campus visitors who have waited too long for the emergence of such an up-to-date museum.

CNEA's 2027 Winter Archaeology Lecture

by Kent Bramlett

Mark your calendars for 10 February 2027. At 7pm in the ZSB, CNEA will present the 6th Annual Winter Lecture with guest speaker Zachary Dunseth, Associate Professor of Anthropology and the Kershaw Chair of the Archaeology of Ancient Israel and Neighboring Lands at the University of California, San Diego. Dr. Dunseth specializes in geoarchaeology and explores the long-term trajectories of human-animal-environmental interactions in desert regions. His work in the area of chronology and biblical archaeology is also noteworthy. Stay tuned for more information.



Dr. Zach Dunseth, UCSD

Display Case

by Raúl Zanatta

An *ossuary*, in the ancient Near East, was a box meant to hold human skeletal remains. A corpse was allowed to decompose in a tomb for roughly a year, after which time the dry bones would be gathered and placed in a stone ossuary. This had the functional benefit of providing room for future burials in a tomb, and it was common practice in Judea during the Second Temple Period, primarily from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD.

The Center for Near Eastern Archaeology is honored to house one such ossuary: CNEA008821 of the Lawrence T. Geraty Collection. This particular 'bone box' was carved from a block of limestone and, given its size (14.4 in. long, 6.5 in. wide, and 8.9 in. tall), we can assume that it was made for a small child.

The Jewish custom of utilizing ossuaries for secondary burials declined after the destruction of the second temple.



CNEA008821, photographed by Raúl Zanatta



La Sierra Digs

Editors: Kent Bramlett and Dawn Acevedo

Photographs: Dawn Acevedo, MIMAR, European Union, BRAP, Friedbert Ninow, Monique Roddy, Christine Asquith, Zach Dunseth, Raúl Zanatta

La Sierra University
4500 Riverwalk Parkway
(951) 785-2632 (CNEA)
archaeology@lasierra.edu
www.lasierra.edu/archaeology



www.facebook.com/lasierracnea
www.instagram.com/lasierra_cnea
www.youtube.com/@lasierra_cnea
www.linkedin.com/groups/14302248



CENTER FOR
NEAR EASTERN
ARCHAEOLOGY
LA SIERRA UNIVERSITY

2026 Calendar of Events

13 November	ADW Mosaic Workshop
14-15 November	ADW 2026: New Testament People & Places
9 December	Giving Day Event
10 February	Winter Lecture
17 April	Homecoming Event

THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING CNEA

As you can tell from this issue of La Sierra Digs, the Lawrence T. Geraty & Douglas R. Clark Center for Near Eastern Archaeology at La Sierra University is on the move, and we need your support for ongoing operations, students support, research, and more! Please go online to <https://lasierra.edu/donate> and click on “Center for Near Eastern Archaeology” to make your contribution, or contact the University Philanthropy Office at (951) 785-2500.

La Sierra University
Center for Near Eastern Archaeology
4500 Riverwalk Parkway
Riverside, CA 92505

Recent Discoveries

Assembled by Dawn Acevedo

So Long, Scaffolding!

After eight years of renovation work, the infamous scaffolding surrounding the western façade of Athens’ Parthenon came down this summer, revealing a view of the temple “not seen in more than 200 [sic] years.” The edifice was largely destroyed in 1687 during the ‘Great Turkish War’ when gunpowder stores inside the structure were struck, causing a massive explosion. <https://tinyurl.com/parthenonrestored>

Great King, Strong King, King of the World

Archaeologists in a joint Iraqi-American project discovered a roughly 6-foot-high Assyrian stele at Shamash Gate in ancient Nineveh. The 7th-century BC stele touts the building programs carried out under the reign of Ashurbanipal and is currently undergoing conservation and restoration by the University of Chicago’s Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC). <https://tinyurl.com/ashurbanipalstele>

The Vesuvius Challenge – Completed

Centuries after its discovery, a carbonized papyrus scroll from Herculaneum named PHerc. 1667 has been unrolled and deciphered... virtually. With the use of computerized tomography (CT) technology and advanced artificial intelligence, layers of the scroll were uncurled and ink shapes identified and translated. The scroll is one of the most ancient in the Herculaneum collection. <https://tinyurl.com/pherc1667>

Confessions of an Everyday Assyrian

After roughly 180 years of neglect, the common folk of the ‘lower city’ of Nimrud, the ancient Assyrian capital, are getting their moment in the spotlight. The Nimrud Lower Town Archaeological Project (NiLTAP), “combin[ing] cutting-edge technology with classical survey methods,” has presented a “high-resolution topographic map” of the walled area spanning approximately 840 acres. <https://tinyurl.com/nimrudlowertown>