



CENTER FOR  
NEAR EASTERN  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
LA SIERRA UNIVERSITY

# La Sierra Digs

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BRAP team photo, 2022.

## In The Fields of Moab: BRAP 2026

by Kent Bramlett

After cancelling our fieldwork seasons for the summers of 2024 and 2025 due to regional conflicts that closed airspace or threatened regional stability, we are excited and soon to fly out to Jordan for five weeks of excavation and field school (18 June-23 July). The project has been investigating the history of this site north of

Karak in central Jordan for several years and has focused excavation on four areas of interest: the fortifications, residential buildings, and a monumental structure all associated with the Iron Age history of the city dating to the early-to-mid first millennium BC, as well as an Islamic-era caravanserai from the 13th-15th centuries AD.

High above the dramatic canyons and wadis of central Jordan, on the northern edge of the Karak Plateau, lie the ruins of Khirbat al-Balu'a, one of the most intriguing archaeological sites in the ancient kingdom of Moab. For decades, archaeologists recognized Balu'a as an important Iron Age settlement. But recent excavations and renewed analysis are raising a much larger question:

### *Could Balu'a have been a royal city?*

That possibility is at the heart of ongoing research by the Balu'a Regional Archaeological Project (BRAP), a collaboration involving scholars from La Sierra University, Walla Walla University, and international partners working in Jordan. Recent discoveries suggest that Balu'a was not merely a fortified town, but perhaps one of the principal centers of political authority in ancient Moab (forthcoming book chapter submitted for publication by K. Bramlett and M. Roddy).

What exactly defines a "royal city" archaeologically? Ancient royal centers often reveal a combination of characteristics: strategic location, monumental architecture, large-scale fortifications, administrative activity, elite symbolism, and evidence of centralized planning and investment. Increasingly, Balu'a appears to fit that pattern remarkably well.

The city occupied a commanding position overlooking routes that crossed the Wadi Mujib, the biblical Arnon River, and connected northern and southern Moab. Anyone traveling across the plateau likely passed through or

*Continued on pg. 2...*



Students, staff, and local workers excavate in the "House" field at Balu'a in 2022.

Homecoming Recap	2
Foundation Board	3
MA Graduate	3
MPP 11 New Release	3
Loma Linda X-rays	4
Shaffer Collection	4
Display Case	5
Recent Discoveries	6

near Balu'a. Its location allowed control of movement, trade, and agricultural resources along the major north-south corridor referred to as the "King's Highway."

The scale of the settlement itself is striking. Surveys and excavations indicate that Iron Age Balu'a expanded to approximately 28 acres, making it one of the largest known settlements on the Karak Plateau. Excavations reveal substantial domestic structures with thick stone walls still preserved several meters high. The city was heavily fortified with massive defensive walls extending nearly two kilometers around the settlement. Such large-scale construction required enormous labor investment and organizational capacity, something usually associated with centralized political authority.

Perhaps the most visually impressive structure at the site is the enormous *qasr*, a monumental square building constructed from massive basalt and limestone blocks. Rising dramatically above the surrounding ruins, the *qasr* has fascinated visitors since the early twentieth century. Although its precise function remains uncertain, its scale and prominent location strongly suggest either an administrative or ceremonial role.

One of the most important discoveries connected to the *qasr* is the famous Balu'a Stele, discovered nearby in 1930. The stele depicts what appears to be a local ruler standing before an Egyptian-style deity in a scene of royal investiture. Although the inscription itself remains undeciphered, the imagery reflects a fascinating blend of Egyptian royal symbolism and local Transjordanian identity. Most scholars now date the stele to the Late Bronze Age, perhaps between the fourteenth and twelfth centuries BC, indicating that Balu'a already held regional importance centuries before the rise of the Iron Age kingdom of Moab.

Recent excavations have added new pieces to the puzzle. Archaeologists have uncovered inscriptions in Moabite script, seal impressions, stone weights, and symbolic imagery associated with elite or administrative activity. One inscription may even reference a "house of the king." Lion imagery, often associated throughout the ancient Near East with kingship and royal authority, has appeared both on seal impressions and in sculptural fragments from the site.

Another intriguing discovery is the presence of a Proto-Ionic capital, a distinctive architectural element often linked elsewhere in the Levant with royal buildings and elite administrative centers. Similar capitals are known from sites such as Jerusalem, Samaria, Hazor, and Amman. Its appearance at Balu'a may indicate that the city participated in a broader tradition of royal architecture during the Iron Age.

All of this raises a historical question that remains unresolved:

### ***What was the ancient name of Balu'a?***

Some scholars, including members of the BRAP team, are exploring the possibility that Balu'a may actually have been Ar-Moab, one of the principal royal cities mentioned in biblical texts. Biblical passages associate Ar-Moab with the Arnon region, precisely where Balu'a is located. Meanwhile, other major Moabite sites such as Dhiban are more securely identified

with different ancient names. While the identification remains hypothetical, the geographical and archaeological evidence makes Balu'a an increasingly compelling candidate.

Archaeology rarely provides simple answers. Instead, it builds historical understanding piece by piece, wall by wall, inscription by inscription, season by season. At Balu'a, the accumulating evidence points toward a settlement of exceptional political and symbolic importance within ancient Moab.

Whether future excavations ultimately confirm Balu'a as a royal capital or reveal an even more complex story, one thing is already clear: this remarkable site is emerging as one of the key locations for understanding the political landscape of Iron Age Jordan.

And in the years ahead, the stones of Balu'a may yet reveal the royal history they have guarded for nearly three thousand years. You can follow our excavation week-by-week with our field newsletter "BRAP Beat" at: <https://lasierra.edu/centers/near-eastern-archaeology/projects/balua-regional-archaeological-project-brap/brap-beat/>

### **A Look Back at Homecoming 2026**

*by Kent Bramlett*

For La Sierra University's Homecoming Weekend 2026, the CNEA hosted an open house reception, themed displays, and a lecture titled, "Rolled on Clay: Mesopotamian Cylinder Seals in the Cohen Family Collection at CNEA." Attendance was high and the program was also streamed live, and is available for viewing from the CNEA website (<https://lasierra.edu/centers/near-eastern-archaeology/homecoming/>).

The illustrated lecture featured the interpretive work of MA students, Sarah Watson and Ryan McKee, who presented their work on deciphering the text and iconography of cylinder seals in the Cohen Family Collection which they had initially produced for Dr. Bramlett's Akkadian class during the winter term. These artifacts are small, intricately carved stone cylin-



Kent Bramlett, Sarah Watson, and Ryan McKee share their research at CNEA's 2026 Homecoming event on 18 April.

ders (approx. 1 inch tall) used as personal signatures, administrative stamps, and protective amulets. When rolled onto wet clay tablets, jars, or doors, it created a unique, continuous, and detailed relief image, identifying the owner and securing property. Many contain Akkadian (Babylonian) inscriptions. Ryan and Sarah's research demonstrated the challenges and fascinating history revealed when working with these artifacts.

This year's CNEA Archaeology Award was presented to Doug and Carmen Clark. The plaque was inscribed with the

words, “In recognition for years of visioning, directing, and generous support for the archaeology program at La Sierra University, the Lawrence T. Geraty & Douglas R. Clark Center for Near Eastern Archaeology proudly honors you with this achievement award.” Congratulations and thank you to the Clarks for their significant contributions to CNEA!



Kent Bramlett presents the 2026 Archaeology Award to Douglas and Carmen Clark at CNEA.

### CNEA Special Feature at La Sierra Foundation Board

by Kent Bramlett

The La Sierra University Foundation Board is an advisory group drawn from local community leaders, doctors, lawyers and businesspersons, which meets quarterly, and provides collaborative support to the university. Retiring Executive Director of the University Foundation, Dr. Lawrence Geraty asked Dr. Kent Bramlett to present an archaeological special feature lecture. Bramlett’s presentation, “The Cyprus Nexus: And the Making of the First International ‘World’ Order” explored how the ideas of Adam Smith, the 18th century Scottish Enlightenment thinker and author of the seminal work, *The Wealth of Nations*, could be applied to the Mediterranean and Near Eastern trade networks of the Late Bronze Age (1600-1200 BC). Tying together shipwreck archaeology, Cypriot copper production, and maritime and overland trade networks, insights can be gained into the transformative, and sometimes fragile, basis of our modern world.



Kent Bramlett presents to the La Sierra University Foundation Board.

### 2026 Graduation

by Kent Bramlett

Sarah Watson will march during the 14 June Commencement ceremony. Work on her thesis will continue as she completes the thesis track for her Master of Arts in Near Eastern Archaeology.



### New Madaba Plains Project Volume Released

by Douglas Clark

#### Eleven archaeological volumes down... and only ten to go!

While attending graduation celebrations last week at Penn State University where our grandson finished his architecture program, I took the opportunity to visit Eisenbrauns, an imprint of the Penn State University Press, to discuss the many archaeological volumes they have published for the Madaba Plains Project in Jordan and those planned for the future.

It was great to see their newly remodeled digs and meet several of their remarkable staff members, people I had only known by email address previously. I knew that *Madaba Plains Project 11: The 2008 Season at Tall al-'Umayri and Subsequent Studies* (MPP 11) was set for release on 12 May, just a couple of days following my visit, so that was exciting. But what I did not expect, and neither did most of the press staff, was that 75 copies had been delivered to the press the day before my visit.

At 579 pages plus 46 pages of color plates, the book is substantial; each weighing nearly 4.5 pounds. I was given the contracted number of copies (ten) to carry home, a feat accomplished only with the purchase of an additional piece of luggage, a bright orange little thing that I bought for \$2.99 at the State College, PA Goodwill store. Home safely, these comped copies will be conveyed to the editors, a couple to CNEA, one to Suha and Gary Huffaker to whom the volume was dedicated, then two to Jordanian institutions and one to the Albright Institute in Jerusalem. Offprints of individual chapters will be sent to the authors.

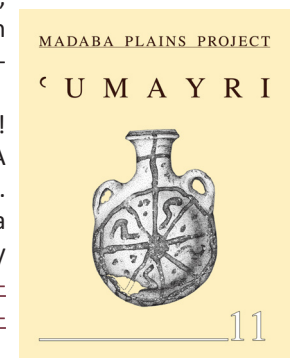
Representing the eleventh “seasonal” volume, it contains two summary chapters and articles on six excavation fields, followed by seven specialist reports. Several CNEA-connected archaeologists appear in the volume as editors (Larry Geraty, Monique Roddy, and me, under the lead editorship of Larry Herr from Burman University) and/or authors (Kent Bramlett, Monique, and me, as well as several research colleagues, including Bob Bates who taught archaeology at La Sierra before CNEA was invented).

Following MPP 11, come MPP 12 (2010 season), MPP 13 (2011 and 2012 seasons), and MPP 14 (2014 and 2016 seasons). And then ... seven final reports organized for the most part by archaeological periods represented at the site.

From the Eisenbrauns publishers of MPP 11, on the back cover: “This report, eleventh in the series, marks a mature stage in the project’s development, reflecting large-scale collaboration and systematic integration of decades of accumulated data.

Congratulations are in order! And to all of us who support CNEA and its research projects, thank you.

Learn more about the Madaba Plains Project at Tall al-'Umayri by visiting the webpage at <https://laserra.edu/centers/near-eastern-archaeology/projects/umayri/>.



**Loma Linda School of Allied Health X-ray Collaboration**

by Kent Bramlett

Archaeological research frequently involves utilizing various forms of technological analysis. Many of these require complex and expensive equipment which our center cannot provide, such as nuclear accelerators for 14C dating or neutron activation analysis, CT scanners for artifact tomography, or X-ray equipment to examine the construction techniques and repair histories of composite objects.

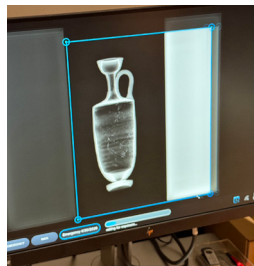
On 30 April, CNEA staff took select artifacts to the Loma Linda School of Allied Health Professions where Christian Roath, instructor in Radiation Technology, X-rayed them for us as we explained our objectives and questions. By varying the kilovolt (kVp) and milliamp (mA) strength of the exposure, Roath was able to penetrate each artifact to the optimal depth to resolve our questions. We were able to identify a recent repair on one ancient object. Another image allowed us to see the construction technique of a musical rattle from the 1st millennium BC. X-rays of a carved humanoid bust confirmed the object was solid limestone and not composed of plaster layers. And images of a Greek lekythos vessel, a type that held perfumed oil for funerary rituals, revealed its interior outline and fine craftsmanship. Both teams value this collaboration and plan to work on future projects together.



X-raying the Greek lekythos at the Loma Linda School of Allied Health.



Christian Roath of Loma Linda University reviews radiographic images of CNEA's Greek lekythos with Curatorial Assistant Raúl Zanatta.



sive collection of rare artifacts from all over the world. Following her passing in 2025, many of her precious objects found a new home here with the CNEA Collections.

Among the artifacts donated to the Center are some beautiful specimens of ancient Roman glass, including the two ornate unguentaria (small bottles meant to contain perfume, scented oils, and substances used as make-up) as well as a delicate pitcher for pouring wine.



Left and middle: Glass unguentaria from the Roman era.  
Right: Glass wine pitcher from the Roman era.

Her interest in ancient oil lamps is shown by her ample collection of unique lamps spanning different eras and showcasing a variety of shapes and materials, including ceramic, bronze, and stone.



Ceramic lamps from the Audrey Shaffer Collection.



Stone (left) and metal (right) lamps from the Audrey Shaffer Collection.

Another stunning piece in the collection is a large lion mosaic dating to the Roman period and found in Israel. It is currently in the process of being carefully conserved so that CNEA can display it in all its glory.



Roman-era lion mosaic from the Audrey Shaffer Collection.

**The Audrey Shaffer Collection**

by Raúl Zanatta and Dawn Acevedo

Audrey Shaffer lived in incredible life, part of which included her experience as an amateur archaeologist who, during her life, participated in more than forty archaeological excavations across several countries. Audrey was also a faithful friend of and long-time volunteer at the Lawrence T. Geraty & Douglas R. Clark Center for Near Eastern Archaeology (CNEA) at La Sierra University.

Over the course of her amazing life, Audrey's far-reaching travels resulted in her acquisition and compilation of an exten-

Audrey also bestowed upon us two “torpedo” jars – elongated ceramic storage jars used in maritime trade throughout the Mediterranean, similar to Roman amphorae. One of the two complete jars arrived in multiple pieces but has since been reconstructed by CNEA’s Curatorial Assistant, Raúl Zanatta.



Ceramic torpedo jars from the Audrey Shaffer Collection, during (right) and after (left) reconstruction.

Icons are paintings or mosaic images, often partially gilded, of Christian figures such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary, angels, and/or saints displayed in Orthodox churches or people’s houses meant to inspire reflection and deep spiritual feelings. They come in varied sizes and designs or motifs, and may also include inscriptions. The two pictured are examples of some of the ornate icons donated by the Shaffer Estate.



Two three-sectioned icons from the Audrey Shaffer Collection, featuring images of Christ, Mary, and angels.

Thanks to the vision and generosity of Mrs. Audrey Shaffer and her family, we now are the proud and grateful stewards of her collection of artifacts that not only enhance CNEA’s Biblical Life Collection, but also serve as part of the important teaching material the Center uses for the instruction of students in its archaeology classes.

### Archaeology Discovery Weekend 2026

by Kent Bramlett and Dawn Acevedo

Mark your calendar for 14-15 November, when we will be hosting our 18th annual Archaeology Discovery Weekend. Some of you may be aware that we initially planned a theme focused on the ancient Phoenicians and their contributions to the world of ancient Israel and Mediterranean cultures. However, we discovered that an international conference on the Phoenicians, which occurs every four years, coincides with our dates. To avoid competition for top scholars, we decided to postpone the Phoenicians topic a year and pivot to another interesting theme: People and Places of the New Testament. We are putting together a compelling lineup of scholars, authors, and archaeologists to discuss some of the significant people associated with events in the Christian scriptures and sites from the Jewish Second Temple Period. We look forward to present-

ing recent discoveries and research on topics such as the “historical Mary,” the Pool of Bethesda, the House of Caiaphas, Nazareth in the time of Jesus, and more. Watch for updates and advertisements on our website (<https://lasierra.edu/centers/near-eastern-archaeology/discovery-weekend/>) as well as our social media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube).

Early draft poster mock-up for ADW 2026.



### Display Case

by Raúl Zanatta

A *pithos* (plural *pithoi*) is an ancient, large jar normally used to store goods in bulk. They range from about three to five feet tall. They are found in archaeological sites across the Near East and date from the Neolithic Age all the way to the Classical Period and beyond.

Pithoi have thick, clay walls and a mouth big enough to allow the entry of a hand holding a large ladle. Their bottom is usually round, and they were often partially buried in the dirt floors of storage rooms to prevent rodents from entering the jar and to keep their contents cool. They were used for storing liquids like olive oil, water or wine and for dry goods like grains.

Several pithoi are on display at the CNEA. This one was excavated by our team at Khirbat al-Balu’a in 2017 in one of the rooms of an Iron IIB (ca. 850-700 BC) house. It illustrates an intermediate stage in the development of this vessel type from having a high neck and everted rim several hundred years earlier, to a form with no neck and a “hole-mouth” rim. This vessel, reconstructed by archaeology students in the CNEA lab during the 2021 lab-intensive session for BRAP, has been on loan from the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and will be returned to Jordan as part of our commitment to study, preserve, and return the cultural material of that country in accordance with our excavation permit and current regulations.



Left: Archaeology students and instructors from BRAP’s 2021 summer lab intensive pose with the reconstructed Balu’a pithos. Right: An image of the reconstructed pithos at CNEA.



### *La Sierra Digs*

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#### 2026 Calendar of Events

14 June	Commencement
18 June-23 July	BRAP (Balu'a Excavation)
21 June-15 July	Ataruz Project
21 September	Fall Quarter Begins
14-15 November	ADW 2026: New Testament People & Places
9 December	Giving Day 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.

### Recent Discoveries

*Assembled by Dawn Acevedo*

#### Chalcolithic Cones

Conical ceramic vessels known as cornets, discovered "in abundance" at several Chalcolithic cultic sites in the Southern Levant, have long puzzled researchers as to their function. However, researchers from Tel Aviv University recently analyzed one of the largest collections of cornets from Teleilat Ghassul, Jordan. The methods, which included systematic analysis and experimental replication, identified 4 types of cornets and suggested that they served as beeswax-filled lamps during cultic ceremonies.

<https://phys.org/news/2026-02-ancient-cone-vessels-beeswax-lamps.html>

#### Rameses II... Revived?

Egyptian researchers working at the ancient site of Tell El-Faraoun have discovered part of a massive statue believed to depict Ramesses II. Scholars suspect that the statue, the upper half of which was found and measures roughly 6.5-foot-tall, originated in the ancient Ramesside capital of Per-Ramesses and was, in later antiquity, moved, for religious purposes, to ancient Imet, now called Tell el-Faraoun.

<https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/566489.aspx>

#### Augustine Athena in Laodicea

A "masterful," 6.5-foot-tall, white marble statue of Athena has been resurrected from rubble at Laodicea's West Theater. The naturalistic style of the sculpture places its creation to the time of Augustus, between 27 BC and AD 14. Moreover, the carved clothing adorning the goddess "represents a unique typology that increases the scientific value of the find." <https://tinyurl.com/turkishathena>

#### Plague of Justinian in Jerash

A group of interdisciplinary researchers from the University of South Florida have confirmed the first-proven mass grave of the world's first-recorded pandemic: the Plague of Justinian. The study into the Byzantine burials found at Jerash, Jordan, are providing better understandings of social and cultural impact, movement throughout the region during this pandemic, and the scale of death related to the illness.

<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2026/04/260423031540.htm>