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RECENTLY DISCOVERED BYZANTINE CROSS HELPS MCC PROFESSOR EXAMINE DEVELOPMENTS IN JORDAN

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CHARIS HAYWARD | MESA COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Mesa Community College Religious Studies Professor Elizabeth Ursic's article, Sustainable Tourism and the Cross at Umm el-Jimal, appears in the current American Centers of Research (ACOR) *Insights* publication.

"It was an honor to be selected for the ACOR faculty seminar in Jordan and I am delighted to have my article published," said Ursic. "Faculty seminars such as these enrich and enhance classroom teaching."

The article summarizes her experience as a participant in a faculty development seminar exploring the opportunities and challenges Jordan is facing as one of the most water-poor countries in the world, with a growing population and a fragile economy. Ursic was one of 12 faculty members selected from colleges and universities across the United States to participate in the two-week program in Jordan.

Ursic's interest in religion and art led to her research on a recently discovered Byzantine cross at the Umm el-Jimal archaeological site in rural Jordan. "I am fascinated by the way people of all cultures express their sacred understandings through art," said Ursic. "Jordan is a country with a complex and rich history. This 6th – 8th century cross offers new information about the people who lived in this region of the Middle East during the Byzantine era."

The article highlights Jordan's efforts to develop sustainable tourism. The archeological site of Umm-el-Jimal provides economic opportunity for residents so young people do not have to leave their hometown to find work. Sustainable tourism means preserving local culture and customs and sharing these experiences with others through food, art, and desert experiences, while also being mindful of limited water resources. "I am impressed that the Umm el-Jimal project seeks to understand the ancient history of the region while also actively helping those who live there now," Ursic added. She hopes to assist the project by developing a tourist souvenir of the Byzantine cross design using the local basalt carving techniques native to the region.

Ursic holds a Ph.D. in religious studies from Arizona State University and a Master of Divinity from the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. She is the author of *Women, Ritual, and Power* and her other research about sacred art appears in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Religion and Art*.

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