

## Wādī al-Kharrār Archaeological Project (al-Magħṭas)

### Introduction

Wādī al-Kharrār, is the modern name for Saphsaph, which is depicted on the Mādabā Mosaic Map. This is a dramatic site situated near the eastern part of the Jordan River, west of al-Kafrein Village and not far away from the famous site of Jericho.

The archaeological remains are located along the southern edge of Wādī al-Kharrār. The sites are scattered over small hills and barren terraces of marl and limestone, the Palestine grid coordinates for this area are 203,770 E 138,460 N. The UTM coordinates are 742,960 E 3525 N. The map for this area of Jordan is numbered 3153,4 SW 13, and the elevation approximately -335 below sea level.

The limits of the archaeological sites are still not determined, since much of the area is subject to alluvial action and is under cultivation. Prior to our survey and excavations, the only architectural features visible on the surface of the area were tumbled stones and hills of sand, which covered all the remains (FIG. 1). Occasionally Pottery shards and mosaic tesserae were found scattered on the surface.

The archaeological survey of the eastern side of the Jordan River was initiated in 1997 as part of the Jordan Cultural Resources Management (CRM) Project and was sponsored by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan. Fieldwork was done in cooperation with Saad Hadeddi, inspector of Salt office.

In addition to the survey excavations were carried out at sites of al-Magħṭas. The main goal of the DAJ team has been to study ar-Rāmāh and al-Kafrayn plateaus near the Jordan River, north of the Dead Sea.

The Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MTA), The Ministry of Water and Irrigation (MWI) and the Jordan Valley Authority (JVA) are planning to construct tourism facilities near al-Magħṭas on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Following a series of discussions with MTA, MWI and JVA representatives, the Department of Antiquities planned to conduct an emergency survey, which was followed by excavations in the selected areas at al-Magħṭas,



1. Tall al-Kharrār before excavation (Elijah Hill).

prepared a final report with the result of the survey and excavations in addition to recommendations which would included within the master plan

For a preliminary culture resources impact assessment, the area was visited several times during March 1997 by the author and engineers of JVA staff. Several solutions were discussed and appropriate measures for the protection of the archaeological sites were adopted.

### Methodology

What follows is a list of sites identified in the course of the survey.

The references, which follow the site number, are the Jordan 1:25,000 series map sheets, by sheet number grid coordinate, together with height below sea level in meter. If known, the modern Arabic site name is also given. Appended to each description in most cases is a summary of the number and period of artifacts recovered from the site.

Pottery shards are listed in chronological order, from earliest to latest. The absence either of shards or of lithics from a site means that non were found. The dating of artifacts from a site to a specific period does not necessarily imply that architectural or other features of the site may be dated accordingly.

The survey was conducted on foot, with survey members walking distance between 20-50 meters from each

other. Sample collections were taken at all sites and features were recorded.

### Previous Research

The Wādī al-Kharrār Archaeological Project was by no means the first intensive survey in the area. More than a century ago, in 1881 Conder mentioned a site called (Ain al-Kharrar) or (Murmuring Spring) which is a small spring close to Jordan. He stated that the site is "in the jungle at the edge of Zor near the lower bed of the Jordan River" (Conder 1882: 9).

The site and the spring of Wādī al-Kharrār were visited several travelers, among them was Abel who identified four archaeological sites in and near the area of Wādī al-Kharrār. He believed that these sites which he numbered 2, 3, 5 and 6 were among the most important remains in the area. Regarding site No. 2 he saw foundations of a church built over an arch system near the Jordan River. At site No 3 he identified remains of a modern house built upon the foundations of an older structures. He recorded the existence of three fallen columns on the ground near this site.

He provided the following additional details:

1. At site No. 5, Tall al-Kharrār with some related cisterns located on slopes of the *tall*, he described a vault system used in building the cisterns.
2. At site No. 6, he described a church apse with well-dressed stones and columns bases among the other remains scattered over the site (Abel 1932)
3. Morton visited the area of Wādī al-Kharrār and similarly emphasized its importance stating; "The place I discovered among the tamarisk and the willows is that which has been hallowed by cisterns of pious pilgrimage" (Morton 1934: 104).

In his unpublished report, Harding described his visit to Wādī al-Kharrār as follows "there is a discernible mound, the surface of, which is, strewn with Byzantine shards, to the east of the Wādī Kharrar and close to the left bank of the Jordan is what appears to be a masonry bricks each side of which terminates in a vaulted arch". (Harding n.d.: 9). Recently three cisterns were discovered during the excavations of Tall al-Kharrār.

During their survey, Ibrahim, Sauer and Yassine visited Tall al-Kharrār, which they numbered Site 201 and dated it to the Early Roman/ Late Roman/ Early Byzantine and Late Byzantine Periods (Ibrahim *et al.* 1988: 193).

### Sites Assessment

Several sites were located as result of the survey at Wādī al-Kharrār and the presence of more archaeological remains can be inferred under certain alluvial terraces which may will cover some small and medium sized sites especially south, east and west of Tall al-Kharrār. Un-

fortunately some of these sites have been and continue to be damaged:

- \* Alluvial derbies deposited by water running through the area, which covers and cuts through the cultural layers. The extent of the disturbed cultural layers cut by the water is difficult to determine.
- \* A bulldozer cut at the southern side of Tall al-Kharrār, separated the archaeological deposits into two parts; north and south, and exposed the cultural layers in sections up to 1 m high and over 30 m long. Several architectural remains were exposed as a result of this bulldozing.
- \* Modern architectural activities have dislodged ashlar from ancient buildings, revealed that well cut stones pits. Robbers have dug all over the sites. These pits, disturbed several walls and some bones were scattered on top of the *tall*.

Several factors have been considered in a work plan for al-Maghtās:

1. The size and nature of the area are to be examined (a military area with numerous mine-fields).
2. The depth of the archaeological deposits goes down to 2 meters.
3. The fact that the site may be very important for the early history of Christianity (during the period of John the Baptist and Jesus).

The following is a preliminary report of the first season of archaeological exploration in the area of al-Kharrār (al-Maghtās).

None of the statements contained in this report can be considered conclusive. They are rather a first assessment of the type of archaeological features found in this area and of the periods of occupation they represent. Simply stated, the aim of the project is to reconstruct phases of human occupation in the region, by identifying the relationships between man and his environment during different historical periods.

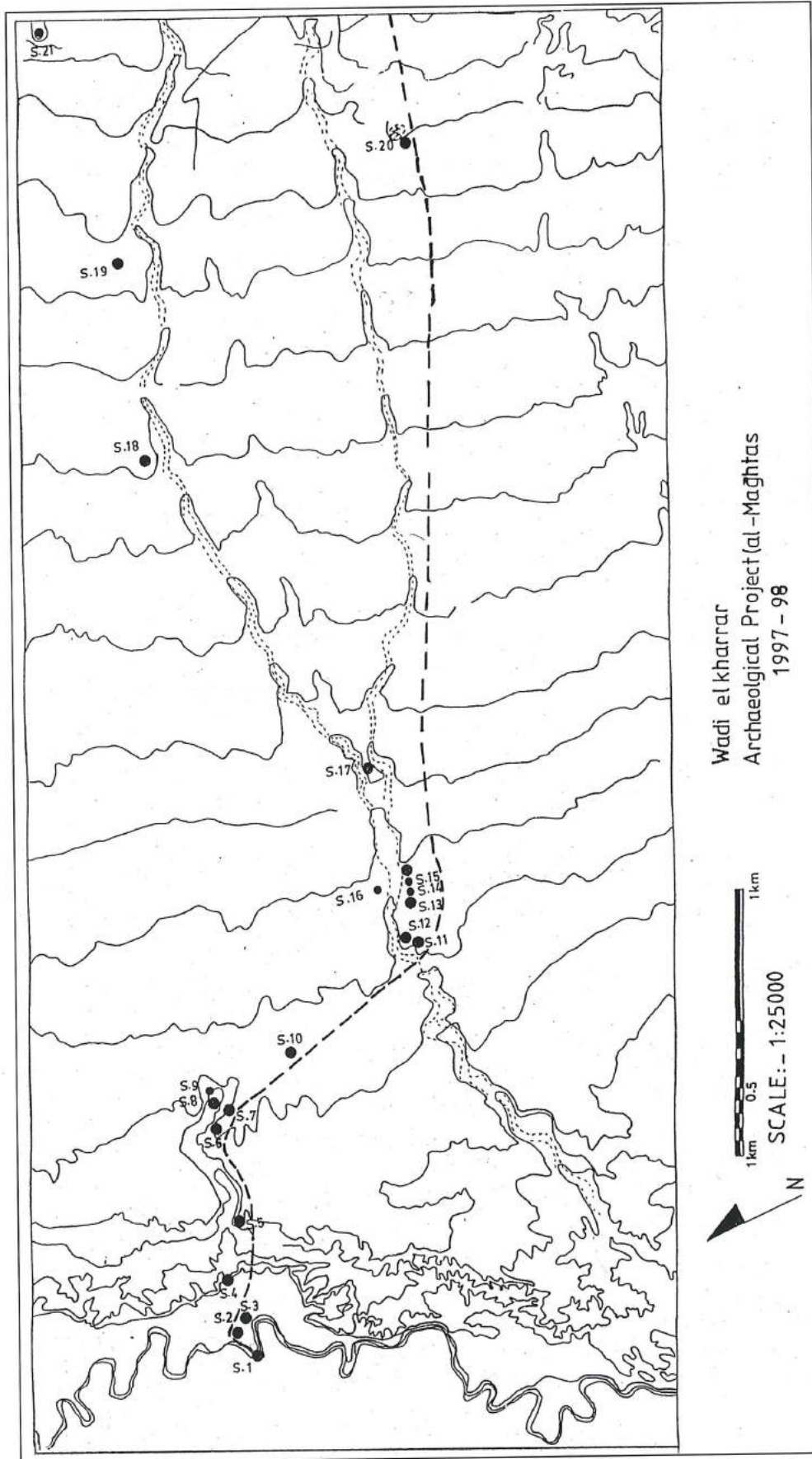
The discovered sites on both sides of Wādī al-Kharrār and its vicinity mainly belong to the following archaeological periods (FIG. 2):

1. Chalcolithic-Early Bronze Age such as site No. 17, P.G. coordinates 206.2, 137.4
2. Iron Age I-II periods such as site No. 18, P.G. coordinates 203.7, 138.4.
3. Early and Late Byzantine periods, such as site No. 3, P.G. coordinates 202.2, 138.4.
4. Islamic (Umayyad) period such as site No. 12, P.G. coordinates 205.1, 137.

### Survey Results

The survey has located 21 sites.

The periods represented are the Early Bronze Age (1 site), the Iron Age I-II (1 site), Roman (2 sites), Byzantine (8 sites) and the Umayyad (1 site).



2. Archaeological sites discovered during the survey of 1997-98.

The Roman and Byzantine periods combined are represented at the two sites on the basis of this survey alone, it is not possible to speak without “gaps” in the record of human occupation, in and around Wādī al-Kharrār, because of the limited area surveyed. However, It is important to stress an almost total absence of pre-historic sites and materials, while the periods between the first century BC and the seventh AD mark the “high point” of human occupation and exploration of the limited resources of the area.

The sites go under five main categories:

1. Agricultural sites (No. 17).
2. Religious (No. 8) (FIG. 3).
3. Habitation sites (No. 20).
4. Water installation (No. 15) (FIG. 4).
5. Shards scatters (No. 16).
6. Other unspecified sites (No. 19).

An important result of the survey is the discovery of several archaeological sites in an area, which today looks totally inhospitable. As the evidence has shown, people were able to adapt the harsh environment.

Adaptation was possible by a number of factors, of which were the areas link with the plateaus in Ghawr al-Kafrayn, ar-Rāmāh and the Jordan River. It seems that this links was mainly exploited during the Roman-Byzantine periods.

During our inspection of the southern side of Tall al-Kharrār in 1997, the team decided to choose this section for excavation. Four areas were established (A, B, C and D) (FIG. 5), their locations were in use over a long period and clearly have a complex construction history. In the course of excavation, structures were discovered in areas D and C, which can be described as follows:

#### Area D/ Structure 1

Excavations in Area D revealed the presence of a rectangular building of undressed local limestone (FIG. 6). Approximately 11.50 m EW X 7.30 m NS, it was located near the southeastern corner of Tall al-Kharrār. The floor of the structure was already in a very bad state of preservation before the latest use of building during the late Byzantine period. The ashes of the final destruction rest directly on the extant parts of the white mosaic. The structure broadly dated to the Roman period (FIG. 7).

#### Area C/ Structure 2

Excavations conducted in area “C” uncovered a structure built of well-dressed limestone blocks (FIG. 8). The general shape of the structure is rectangular, its dimensions are approximately 13.50 m E-W and 9 m N-S. Many parts of this building are disappeared only limited portion still preserved. What remains is a few stones resting on a lime plastered surface overlying carefully prepared rubble stone and gray to dark ashy mortar which resembled



3. Jordan River place of Baptism.



4. Southern stepped cistern of Tall al-Kharrār.

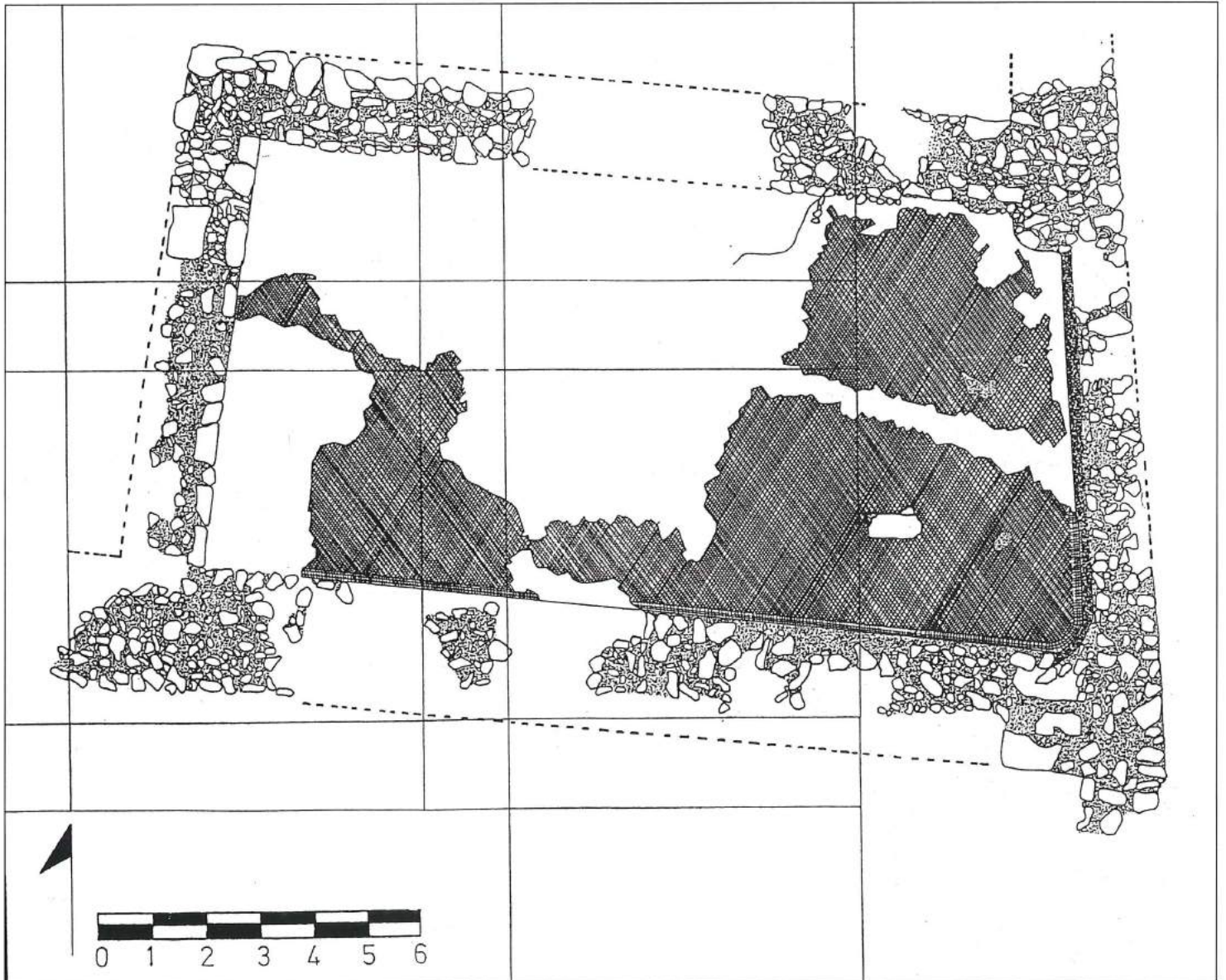


5. Part of the excavated area south of Tall al-Kharrār.

the bedding cement of the Byzantine period construction.

The colored mosaic floor of this building was largely destroyed. The fill contained fragments of lime with some mosaic tesserae still adhering to it. Impressions on the mortar bedding indicate that an arch system was used to support the roof of building. It is clear that the building was destroyed intentionally and the stones were removed. In any case, we have to be aware of possibility that the systematic removal of the stones continued even after the Byzantine period. The preserved small section of the mosaic floor shows geometrical and floral designs (FIG. 9).

In the absence of inscriptions, the date of the building can be determined, mainly, by the examination of strat-



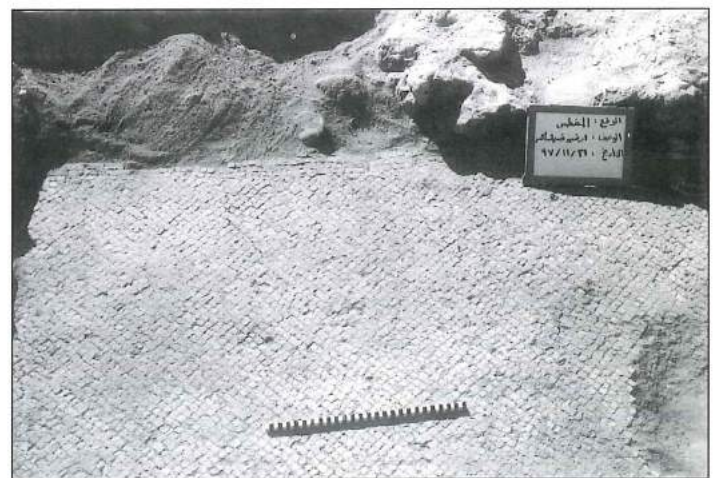
6. Structure No. 1.

igraphic evidences and stylistic criteria.

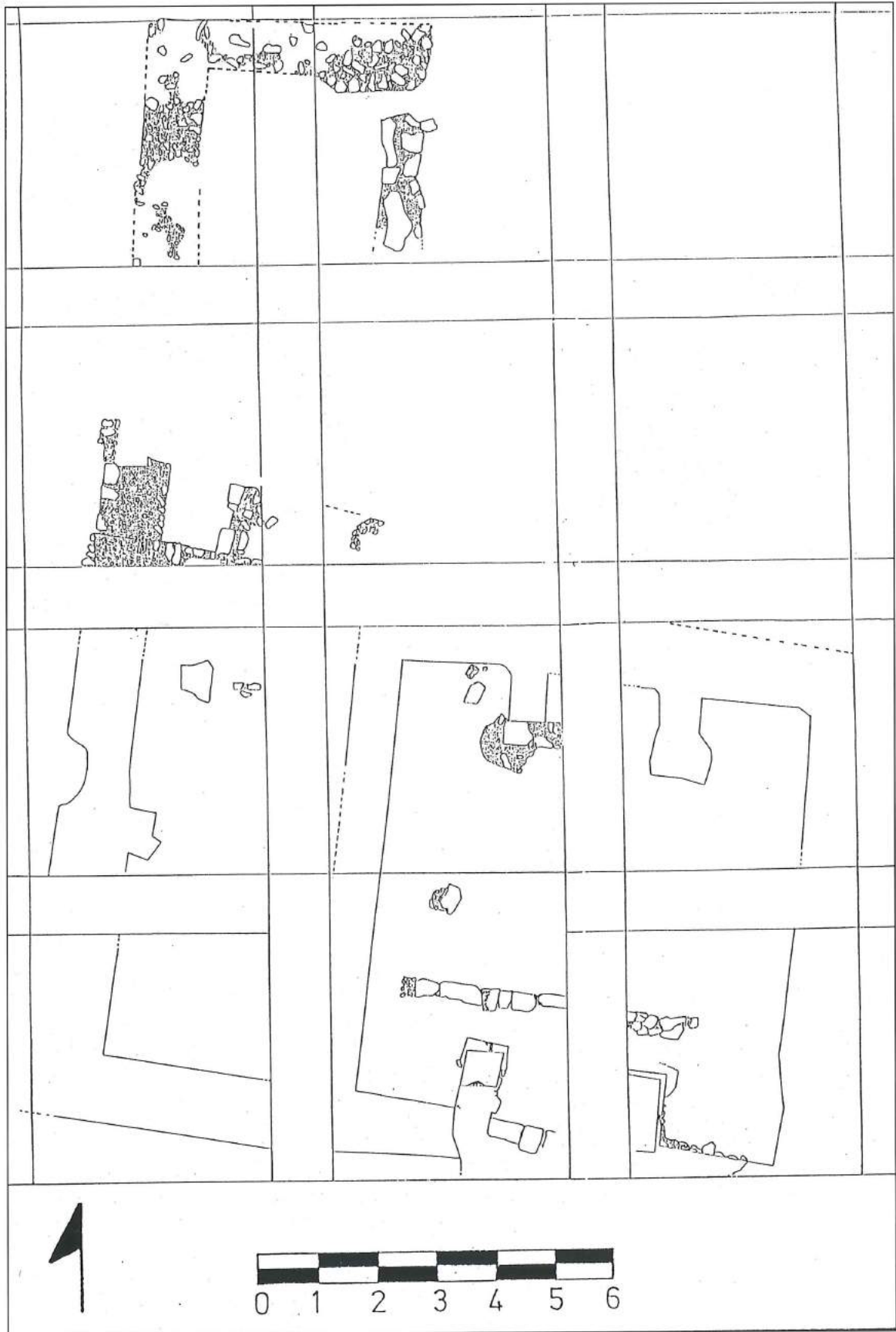
The structures built in the early phase constitute the core of the site. The medium sized structure (No. 1) and three pools with the drainage system are attributable to this phase. The buildings erected in the early phase were scattered around the *tall*, especially at the southern part; with no clear signs of an overall plan.

The preliminary assessment of the architecture and material discovered in the field suggests continued use from early Roman up to late Byzantine period.

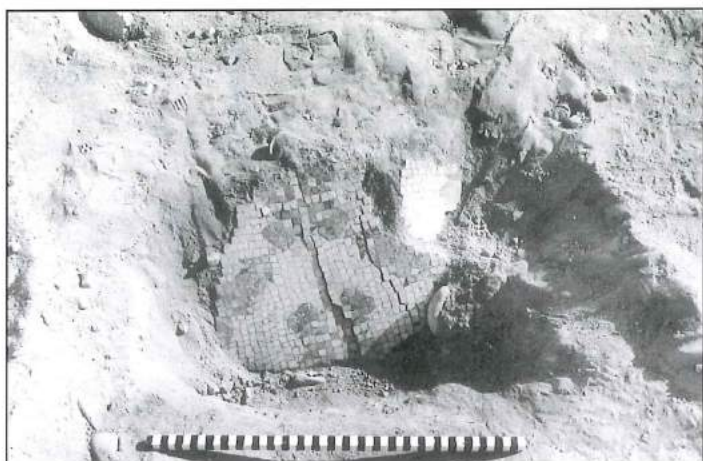
Systematic excavations continue at sites No. 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8, where numerous wall of different directions were recovered. The architectural remains in addition to the recovered material will shed light on the importance of this area.



7. Remains of a plain mosaic floor of Structure No. 1.



8. Structure No. 2



9. Fragments of a coloured mosaic floor of Structure No. 2.

The Romans often brought water over considerable distances to cities, towns and buildings. Through aqueducts from Wādī al-Kafrayn and ar-Rāmah, water was distributed to different parts of the area especially the three cisterns of Tall al-Kharrār.

It is possible now as a result of these finds to follow the pilgrim's route, which would start from Jordan River. (Baptism site No. 1), then passed beside site no. 3. Then following the southern bank of Wādī al-Kharrār near site No. 5. Reach the main site No. 8 Tall al-Kharrār and the adjacent constructions of (Bethany Beyond the Jordan). After resting in this area, the pilgrims could continue their journey to another place 2 km to the south where sites No. 11/12/13/14/15/16 were located. To the east of site No. 12 is Tall ar-Rāmah or ancient Livias. A test trench dug there revealed the remains of a colored mosaic floor with several Byzantine shards and architectural remains to the eastern side of the *tall*. An earthquake that devastated the whole of the Jordan Valley damaged the Kharrār buildings.

The buildings and the pools suffered the worst of the shock, especially on the *tall*. Following the earthquake (presumably in 31 BC), the site continued to be used as a holy place. Wādī al-Kharrār deserves not only excavation and preservation, but also some degree of aesthetic and archaeological development, so that it can become again a focal point in the whole area of the Jordan Valley.

Recent discoveries in the Southern Ghawr area will help in studying the importance of several sites related to our area, such as excavations at Tall Nimrīn (Flanagan *et al.* 1996), Tall Iktanū (Prag 1971), Tall al-Ḥammām (Prag 1990), Wādī al-Kafrayn (Waheeb 1997: 463-68), as-Suwayma ('Amr 1996), az-Zāra (Clamer 1986), Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzanṭī (Holmgren *et al.* 1997) and Dayr 'Ayn 'Abāṭa (Politis 1988).

As noted before, the area of Wādī al-Kharrār is well depicted on the Mādabā Mosaic Map (Avi-Yonah 1954).

A lion, mostly damaged, chasing a gazelle and two unidentified buildings or villages. Where Betharaba and the little hill were expected to be found, an inscription was depicted reading "Aenon Now Sapsaphas". No religious buildings are shown at this site on the Mādabā Map (which symbolically depicts it with a tree and a representation on the left side, which could stand for a cave).

Both the Pilgrim from Bordeaux (AD 333) and Theodosius (AD 530) stated that the place of the baptism of Jesus had some connection with the hill from which Elijah was taken up to Heaven and located this place on the east side of the Jordan River. John Moschas writing in the seventh century, mentions Sapsaphas (Wādī al-Kharrār), also says that the Patriarch Elias of Jerusalem (AD 464-518) built a church and monastery there (Fingan 1969: 8-10).

The idea that al-Kharrār is the area described in these texts is supported by the fact that it is located at a point near the river to which the old roads came together at the Jordan River.

### Conclusions

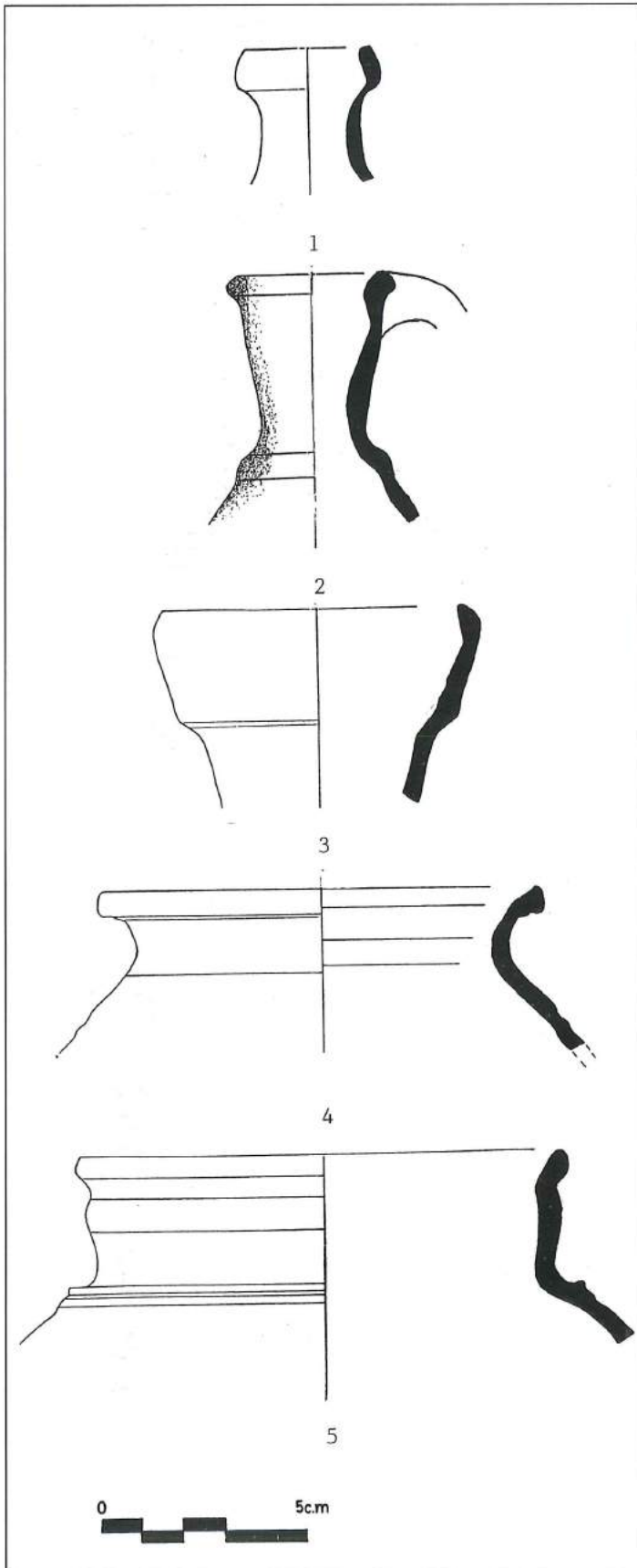
The survey fieldwork in al-Maghtas was completed by the area between Jordan River to the west and the al-Kafrayn and ar-Rāmah villages to the east this included mainly Wādī al-Kharrār and Wādī Gharaba. Only 21 sites were listed and investigated during the first season of the survey.

By examining these sites, the history of material culture and its development could be traced from the Early Bronze Age which means the early farming communities and through the major periods Iron I-II, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic.

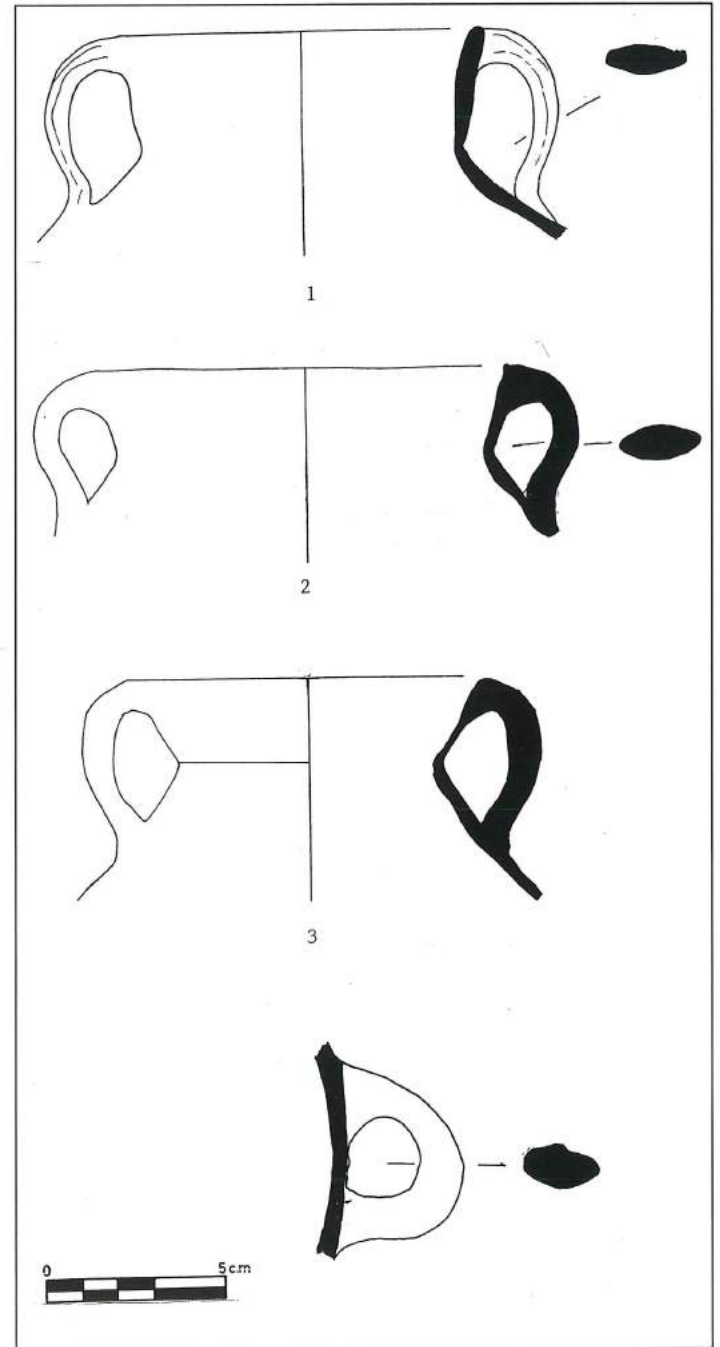
The sites were disturbed in all parts along the banks of the above mentioned wadis.

The sites were mainly constructed along primary wadis and near water sources. The Early Bronze Age site was well represented at the junction where Wādī al-Kafrayn joins Wādī ar-Rāmah and the settlement of this period were found on defined hills which have a defensive character such Tall as-Sadd west of al-Kafrayn dam. Our site here possibly a kind of seasonal camp built near the water sources. The scanty evidence for the middle and late Bronze Ages is not puzzling since the surveyed area was limited. A major site was established during the Iron I and II near the Early Bronze Age settlement. The Persian and Hellenistic periods were not existed. Roman remains were weakly represented in contrast with the strong Byzantine occupation, which reflects a considerable number of buildings and structures, located mainly near Wādī al-Kharrār, and the Jordan River (FIGS. 10-14).

During The Byzantine and Umayyad periods, the area



10. Roman pottery: 1-3. jugs; 4-5: cooking pots.



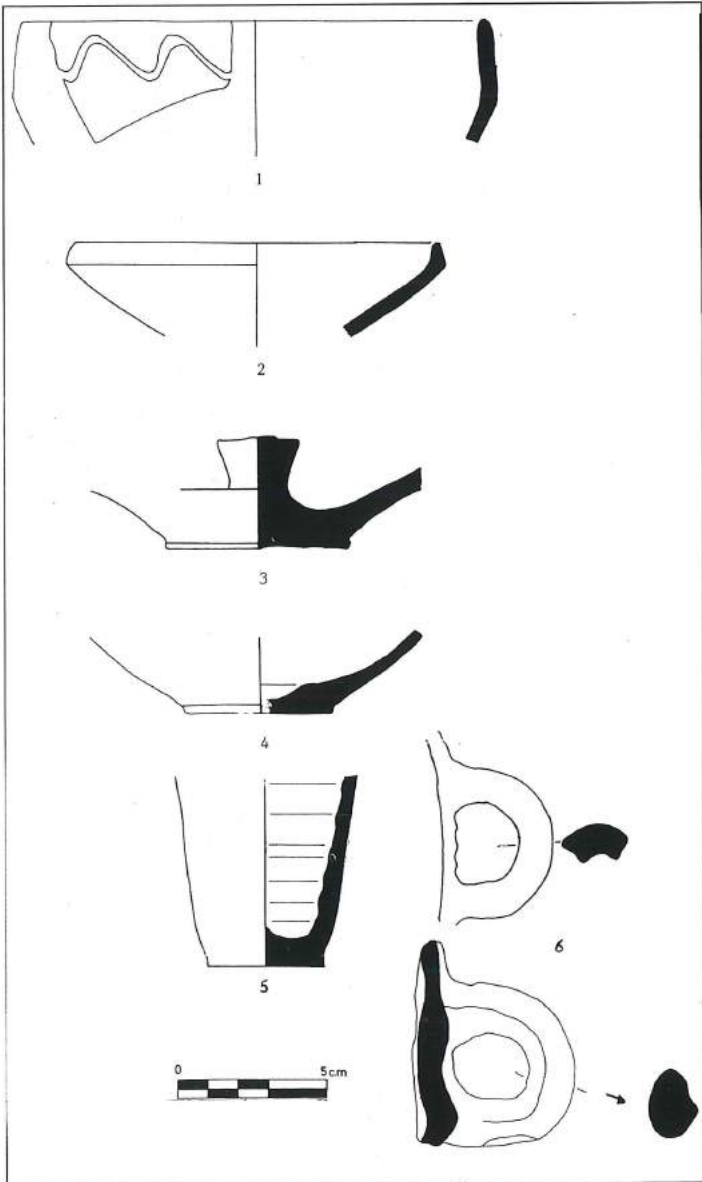
11. Roman pottery: 1-3. cooking pots; 4. jar handle)

showed more efforts in building water installations such as cistern, pools, aqueducts and pipes (FIG. 15). This reflects the reliance on water in a dry area.

The survey results revealed the importance of Wādī al-Kharrār east of the Jordan River, several sites were registered containing architectural features, mosaic floors, cisterns, pools, caves, etc.

To the west of the northern part of the Dead Sea, archaeologists have identified and excavated several — supposedly monastic — settlements near the place where the scrolls were found. Among these excavated sites were

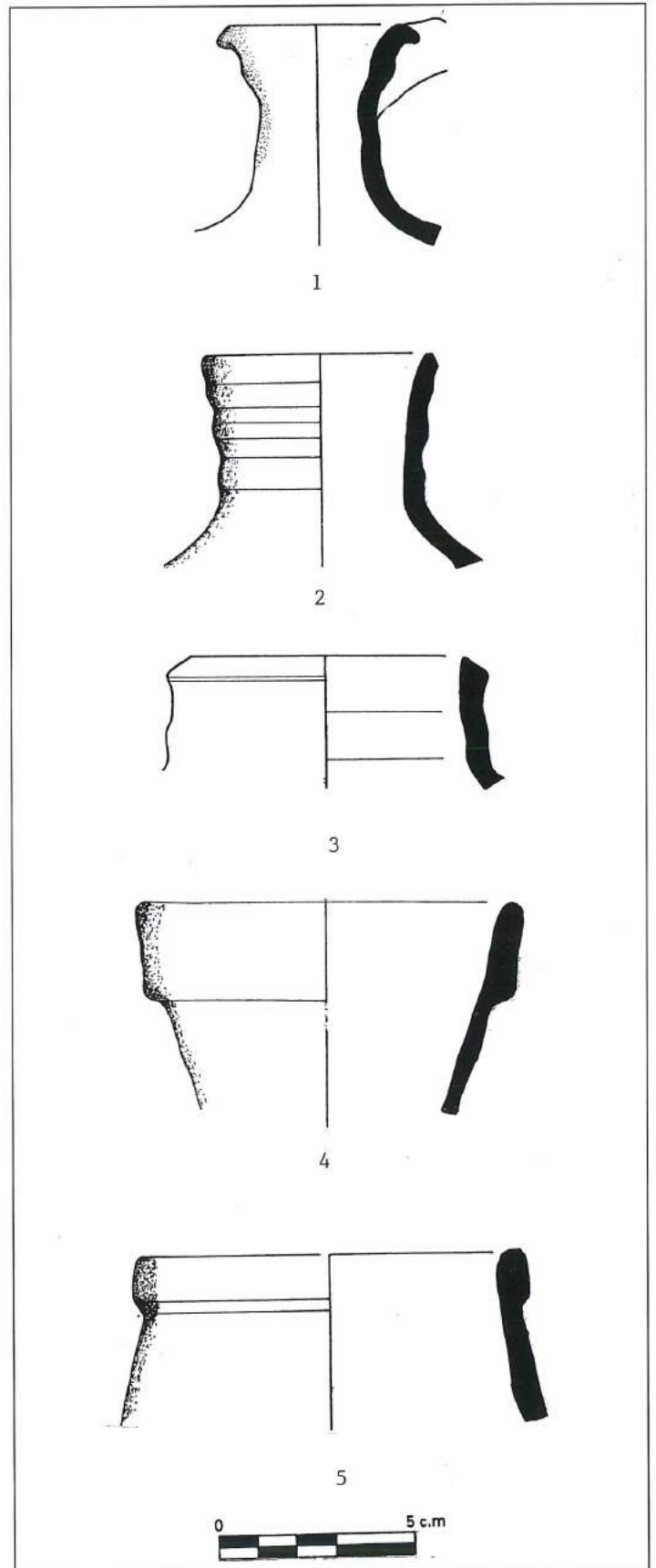




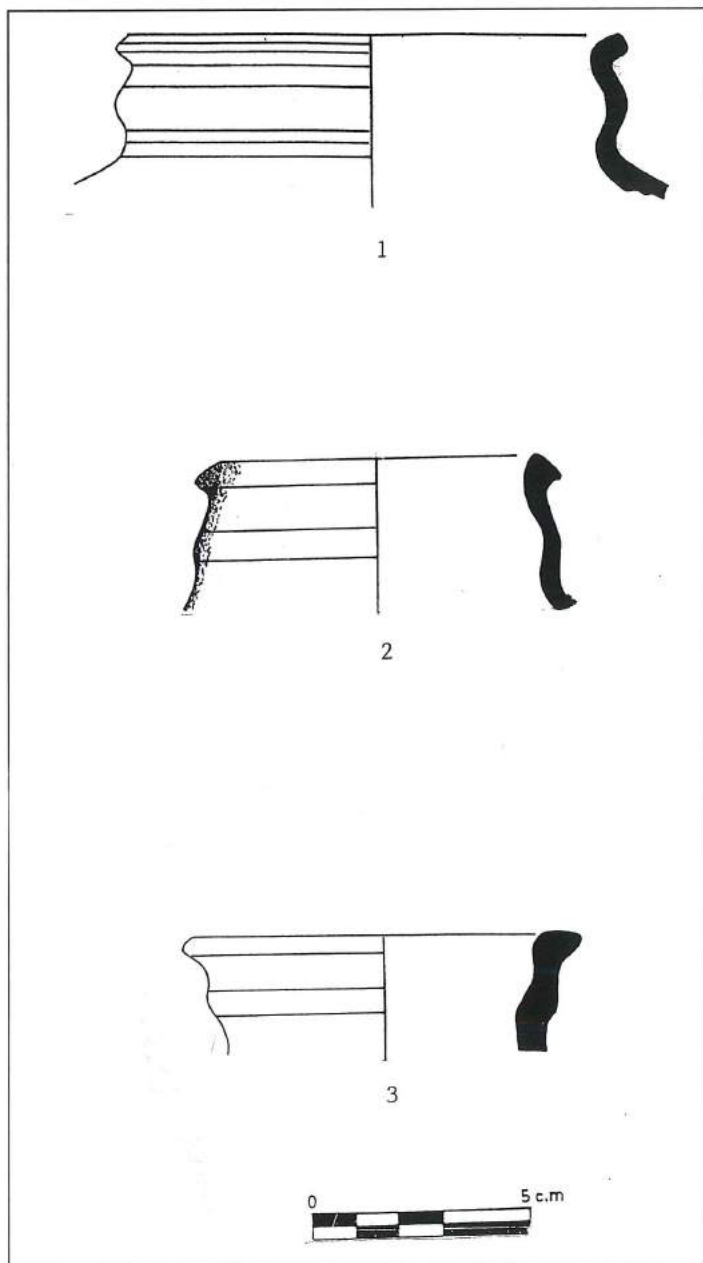
12. Byzantine pottery: 1-2. bowl rims; 3. stopper base; 5. chalice base; 6-7. jar handles.

Qumrān, 'Ayn al-Fashkhah and Mird.

The discovery of Roman and Byzantine remains at Saphasph (al-Kharrār), confirms what the pesher of gospel show, this site was an integral part of history. The buildings at al-Kharrār and its related outpost down the northern coast of the Dead Sea played a vital part in the events recorded. What supports our idea is that the area of al-Kharrār was at a point near the River to which old roads came down. What concerns us, is the road which was about four and one-half mile downstream where the monastery of St. John "stood", on a low hill, seven hundred yard west of the River. At the other side (eastern side), Wādī al-Kharrār comes in from the east. Both the circumstances of John's work and the archaeological discoveries, emphasis that his activity was in the eastern



13. Byzantine pottery: 1, 4. jug rims; 2, 3, 5. jar rims.



14. Byzantine pottery: 1-3. cooking pots.

side of the River, as well in (John 1:28 and 10:40) there is a clear reference to a specific for John's work. Where it is stated that he was baptized in Bethabara beyond the Jordan River.

**Acknowledgments**

This work could not have been possible without the commitment of the entire field team. I would like to thank Mr. Aqel Biltaji Minister of Tourism and Antiquities and Dr.



15. The two northern cisterns of Tall al-Kharrār.

Ghazi Bisheh Director General of the Department of Antiquities for their constant support and encouragement for the project, also thanks for S. Scham from ACOR for her help and Comments

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