

The Hermit Caves in Bethany Beyond the Jordan (Baptism Site)

Introduction

The core of the ancient settlement of Bethany beyond the Jordan was located on a small low hill located on the southern bank of Wādī al-Kharrār, immediately at the start of the wadi at the point where several freshwater springs emerge from the surrounding arid valley plains. This rather striking starting point for the wadi gives the site much of its special atmosphere.

From the midst of a rather dry, barren landscape, suddenly one finds this beautiful oasis of tamarisks, palm trees and reeds around the hill, and from there the Wādī al-Kharrār stream makes its way for about two kilometers to the Jordan River, with its entire route defined by the sound of flowing water and the sight of thick, green vegetation and an assortment of wild animals and birds. The unique and rather exciting ecology of the site may have played a role in giving it a spiritual dimension in antiquity.

The same hill that forms the heart of modern Tall al-Kharrār and Roman-Byzantine Bethany beyond the Jordan has also been identified for a long period of time (since the fourth century AD) as the spot from where the Prophet Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind and horses of fire.

The Jordan River ford nearby is also said to be the place where Joshua crossed the river, and where Elijah and Elisha stopped the waters and walked across the river. The recent excavations have revealed a walled monastery that includes at least three churches, a prayer hall, and a sophisticated water conveyance and storage system, in addition to three pools, and a surrounding protective wall.

The Architectural Remains

The main hill of Tall al-Kharrār (Bethany Beyond the Jordan) is made of white Lisan marl mixed with brown-red earth, with its eastern, western and northern slopes dropping sharply into the valley. The only easy approach to the hill is from the south. The protective wall was built around the ancient monastery, along the middle slope of

the hill, mainly to prevent erosion rather than as a defensive measure. Extensions of the wall to the south reached other associated structures, such as the prayer hall and a church (Waheeb 2001).

The main hill accommodated three churches. The larger and better preserved church was built on a platform cut from the marl on the north side of the site. It measures some 14 x 4m, and still shows the remains of its chancel area and nave, and entrances in its north and west walls. Its mosaic floor has been well preserved in parts, including a five-line Greek inscription near the altar area that reads "By the help of the grace of Christ our God the whole monastery was constructed in the time of Rhotorios, the most God-beloved presbyter and abbot, may God the savior give him mercy".

The main nave mosaic included cross motifs and geometric designs within a surrounding frame. Pillars along the north and south walls held up the roof, and the internal walls were covered with smooth white plaster. A few associated buildings north of the church were partly destroyed in antiquity. The church is broadly dated to the Byzantine period (fifth–sixth century AD).

A second slightly smaller church was located around the corner. On another platform a retaining wall was erected amidst the natural rock and Lisan core of the hill. The apse of the church was cut into the hillside, and was actually a cave located underneath some of the water pools. The nave and two side aisles extend to the west, with only some arch bases left from the original Byzantine church.

The floor was once covered with colored mosaics, though only fragmentary remains reveal some of the original small cross motifs. The question here is why this one was badly damaged while the other nearby mosaic was much better preserved.

On the northwestern corner of the *tall*, a small mosaic platform was built of square shape. The outer wall of the *tall* served as the western wall of the mosaic floor.

A doorway was built near the northern wall of the hill with mosaic platform and a staircase that is still *in situ*

served to link the *tall* with the spring area in the valley. The colored mosaic floor possibly functioned as a prayer hall during the Byzantine Period.

Another church is located south of the main *tall*, on a saddle of land connecting the *tall* with the surrounding plain. This was a rectangular structure measuring about 13 x 9m, but little of the original building remains other than some foundation walls, floor patches with cross-decorated colored mosaics, and some stones from walls resting on a lime-plastered surface above a carefully prepared rubble stone and mortar base. Arches once supported the roof. This seems to have been a small chapel with an associated courtyard. Its main entrance may be in the north side. The pottery suggests a date during the fifth-sixth centuries AD.

In this same area, south of the main *tall*, the excavations identified another rectangular building made of undressed field stones, measuring nearly 12 x 8m in size. The simple white mosaic floor of the building was slightly disfigured by the remains of ashes from the structure's final destruction — probably burnt roof beams — which interprets this as a "prayer hall" rather than a chapel, on the basis of its location and style of construction. The evidence from the excavations suggests a slightly earlier date for this structure than the other parts of the site, depending on the pottery sherds, white mosaic floor and way of construction, the prayer hall with its two rooms associated with the northeastern corner of the building dated back to third-fourth centuries AD.

Bethany Beyond the Jordan is the sole place where churches were built continuously regardless of earthquakes and floods. In addition, the monks who dwelt the area carved their places in the rock. These small caves became places for prayer, where the monks relived the lives of the first believers. We should not disregard what the travelers and pilgrims said about the existence of Elijah's and John's caves in the spot where many saints and prophets have passed.

About 300m east of the Jordan River and Just beyond the thick belt of tamarisk trees and bushes called the "Jungle of the Jordan", the landscape suddenly changes into a soft chalky and stark whitish marl (Lisan marl formation), as a result of sedimentation at the bottom of a freshwater lake in ancient times. This barren area is called the "wilderness" in the Bible.

The archaeological survey and excavations in the area revealed the presence of five caves that had been dug and transformed into hermit and monk cells or sometimes chapels.

Two caves were discovered near the Jordan River while remains of the other three caves were found during the excavation seasons conducted on Elijah's Hill in 1999.

The Two Caves near the Jordan River

The two caves were dug in the upper part of the Lisan marl cliffs, which overlooks the thick vegetation area (Zawr area), located about 300m east of the Jordan River (FIG. 1).

The location of the two caves reflects the aims and functions served during the early periods. The monks led their monastic life in the location of the caves in the upper parts of the white cliffs, and they were able to control the whole surrounding area especially the crossing ford on the Jordan River that lies directly opposite to the caves. In addition to that, the monks tried to avoid the floods of the river in winter and spring, and be safe and far from the threats of the wild animals, some of which are depicted on the Mādabā mosaic map.

The comprehensive study made on the area showed that there was one type of caves, which is the artificial cave, carved out of the rock by the monks. It is clear that much use was made of artificial caves formed in the soft Lisan marl formation during the Pre-Byzantine Period. Depending on the available evidence, the monks of Bethany Beyond the Jordan used the caves in the rocks as lauritic cells.



1. The two caves east of the Jordan River.

The two caves are located 10m above the ground. The monks would climb down to the complex from the flat area at the top the cliff, and in order to ease their decent, they carved several steps in the natural rock — none of them is in existence now — using a rope ladder to facilitate climbing up. Wood is available in Wādi al-Kharrār, especially on the Jordan River banks, and gathering it was an easy job. Manufacturing ladders, windows and doors for the caves were jobs for the monks and might be considered daily routine in Bethany Beyond the Jordan.

The First Cave/ Jordan River (FIG. 2)

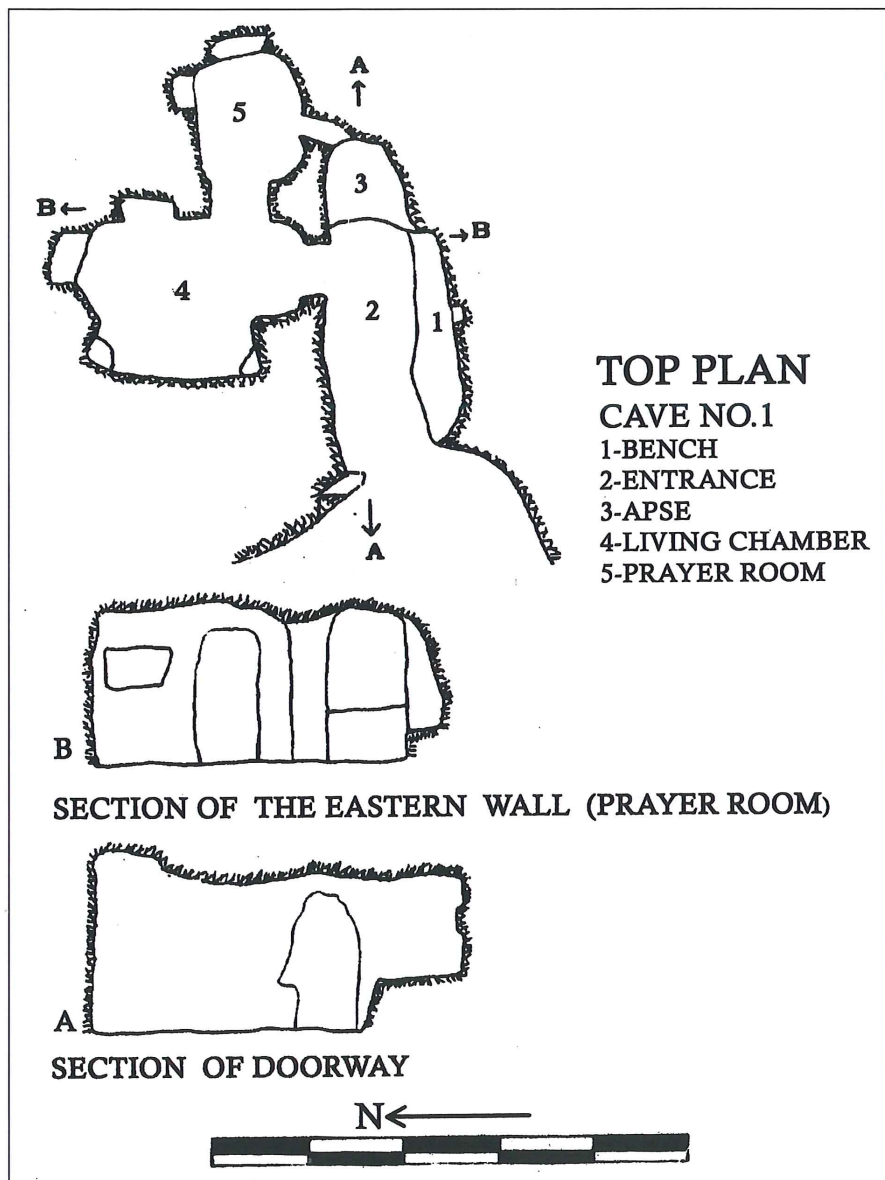
The cave measures about 5m east-west and 4m north-south with an average height of 180-200cm.

The interior of the cave is divided into two chambers. Inside the cave, to the right of the entrance, is a low bench measuring 3m east-west and 1m wide carved in the natural rock, which was probably used for sitting. The eastern wall of the entrance was carved in an apse-shape.

The largest chamber is the living area which is accessible through a doorway measuring 60cm wide and 170cm high. The chamber measures 2m east-west x 2.70m north-south.

The second chamber represents the prayer hall. The chamber is accessible through a doorway also measuring 60cm wide and 170cm high. The chamber measurements are 1.10m east-west x 2m north-south, its clear that the prayer room occupied the inner section of the cave.

Openings for windows were carved out in the Lisan



2. Cave no. 1 (Jordan River).

marl rock whenever possible, window small recesses for oil lamps have been found in the living room and the prayer hall. More light for the prayer hall came through an opening in the southern wall of the prayer room through the entrance area. It is clear that doors and windows of the monks' caves, such as this cave, were cut along with the cave to ensure air and light.

The Second Cave/ Jordan River (FIG. 3)

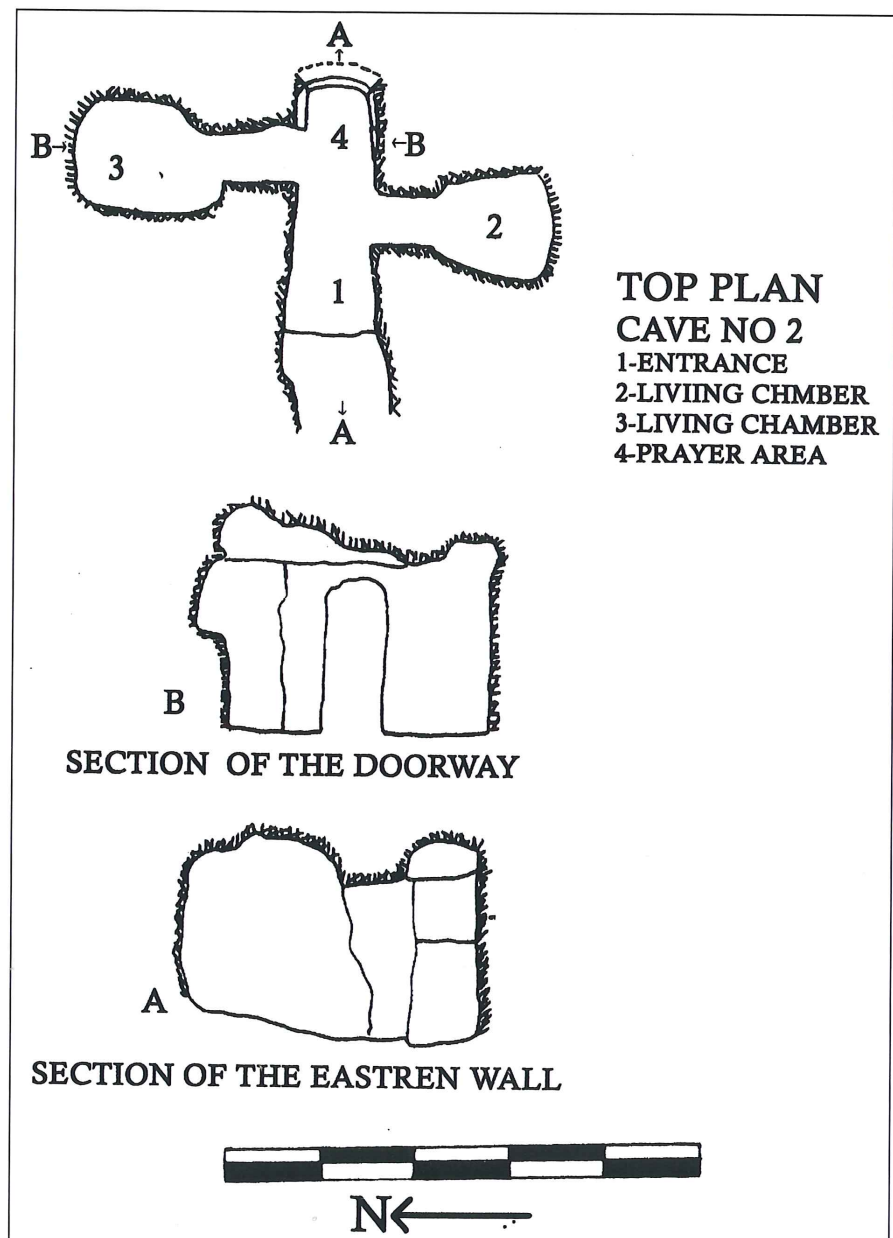
The second cave is located at the same level of the first cave, to its north. The cave measures 5.20m north-south x 2.70m east-west. It consists of two chambers and an entrance. The entrance of the cave faces the Jordan River

and measures 2.50m long x 1m wide and 1.60m high.

The entrance leads to two chambers and the apse-shaped wall that is carved in the eastern side of the cave.

On the right side is the first chamber that is almost rectangular. The doorway of the room measures 1m wide and 1.60m high. The southern wall of the room is carved in an apsidal shape. The room measures 1.30m east-west x 1.10m north-south.

The second chamber is located on the left side of the entrance, the way of carving this room is identical to the first room. The doorway of the chamber is carved slightly away and not opposite to the doorway of the first chamber, the doorway measures 1m wide and 1m high, the



3. Cave no. 2 (Jordan River).

chamber measures 1.60m north-south x 1.10m east-west.

Caves of Elijah's Hill (FIGS. 4-6)

A complex of three artificial caves that are carved in Lisan marl rock was discovered on the western side of Elijah's Hill (Tall al-Kharrār).

The three caves were carved in the western cliff that faces the west toward Wādī al-Kharrār. The location of the caves at the bottom of the cliff is reasonable, and is linked with a staircase built of local field-stones, only two steps of the staircase are still *in situ* leading down to the valley and the springs that are still running. The spring that descends for two kilometers toward the Jordan River comes from the area near Elijah's Hill and not far away from the Monastery of Rhotorius.

The three caves were carved at the same level and extend north-south in a linked series.

The First Cave

Located near the southwestern corner of Elijah's Hill, this cave is approached from the south by the arched entrance that was built later during the Byzantine Period.

Most of the cave architectural elements were destroyed by natural factors such as seasonal erosion, what is left is only the eastern apsidal wall of the cave. It is difficult to

assume what the general shape of the cave was depending on the available remains.

Two courses of well-cut ashlar were added to the inner eastern side of the cave to prevent more erosion during the Byzantine Period.

The Second Cave

Located about 2.50m to the north of the first cave, this cave also severely suffered from destruction caused by natural factors such as seasonal erosion and earthquakes.

The apsidal inner eastern wall of the cave is the only remains still *in situ*. It measures about 2.50m north-south, indicating that the cave consisted of more than one chamber. The height of the cave measures about 1.80m.

The Third Cave

This cave is located on the northwestern middle slope of Elijah's Hill, near the entrance to the Byzantine monastery (Rhotorius Monastery). The cave is approached by the steep stone steps built on the northwestern slope. This route links the cave with the valley and the springs that are still watering the plant cover today.

The location of the cave at a junction of footpaths, suggests its connection with either monks in the Roman period or pilgrim traffic in the Byzantine period.

This cave is located 6m to the north of the second cave. It has a rounded shape, its width at the opening comes to 1m, its maximum depth is 2.25m and its height is approximately 2m.

What distinguishes this cave is that a church was built around it in the Byzantine period, and the cave became the apse of the church. Two niches found carved into the interior north and south walls of the cave probably held oil lamps.

A wall with a door was built in front of the cave, forming the typical Byzantine era chancel screen that separated the apse from the nave of the church.

The church measures 13 x 13m, the excavation has also clearly identified the square bases of the stone arches that held up the roof of the nave. No mosaic floor remains were found in this church except for little portions that are still *in situ*, representing a part of the destroyed floor.

An intriguing piece of evidence that was discovered during the excavation is a man-made water channel that starts in front of the cave, and extends for about six meters until it empties into the south bank of Wādī al-Kharrār. It is 66cm wide and 20cm high, and in some places is still covered with stone slabs.

The water channel was cut into the natural marl formation, and plastered with a lime layer that is distinctively Byzantine in style and color. The water channel was built beneath the floor of the Byzantine church and seems to have been built at the time of the church's construction.

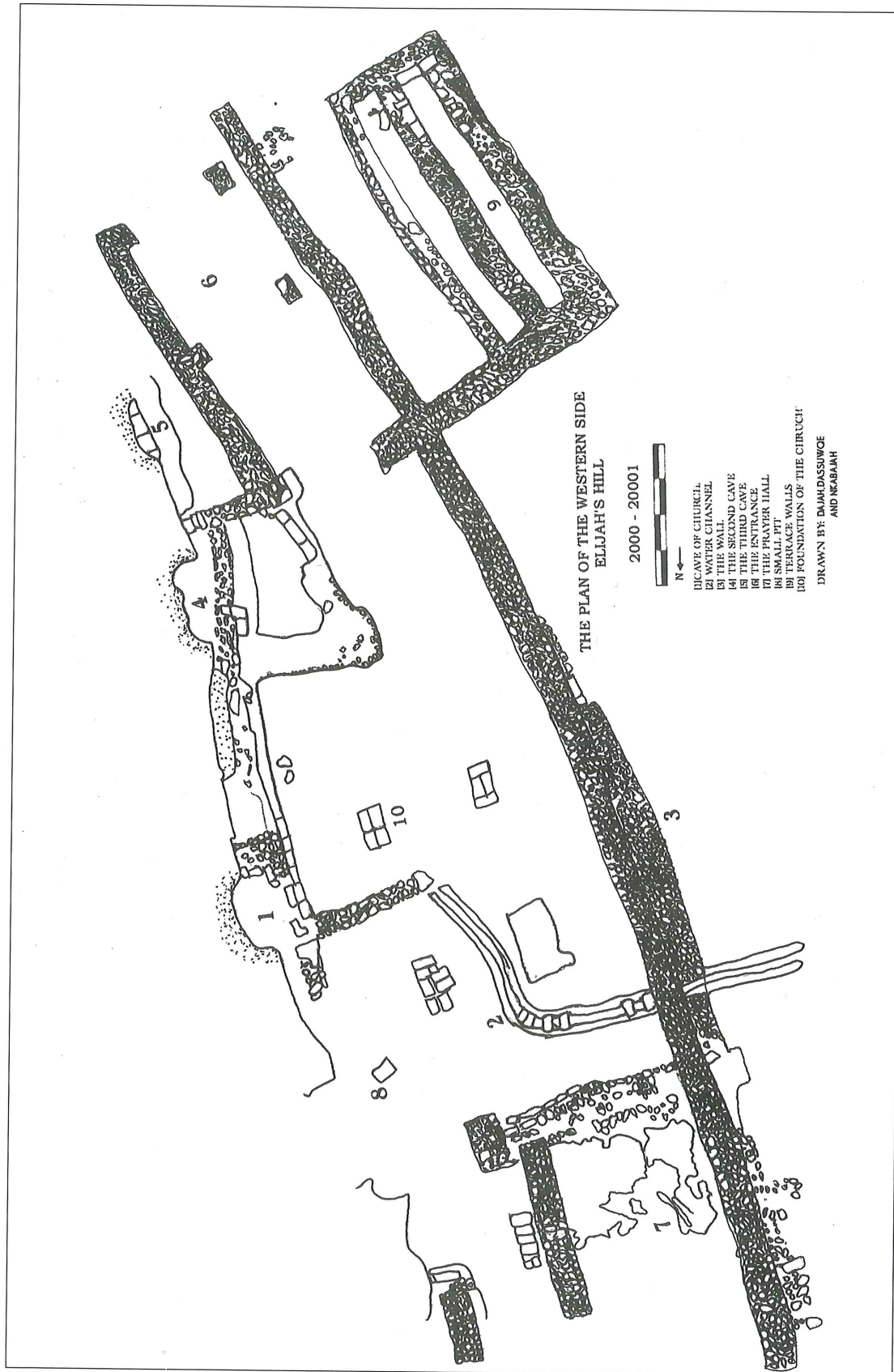
It is not clear if the water that fed the channel originat-



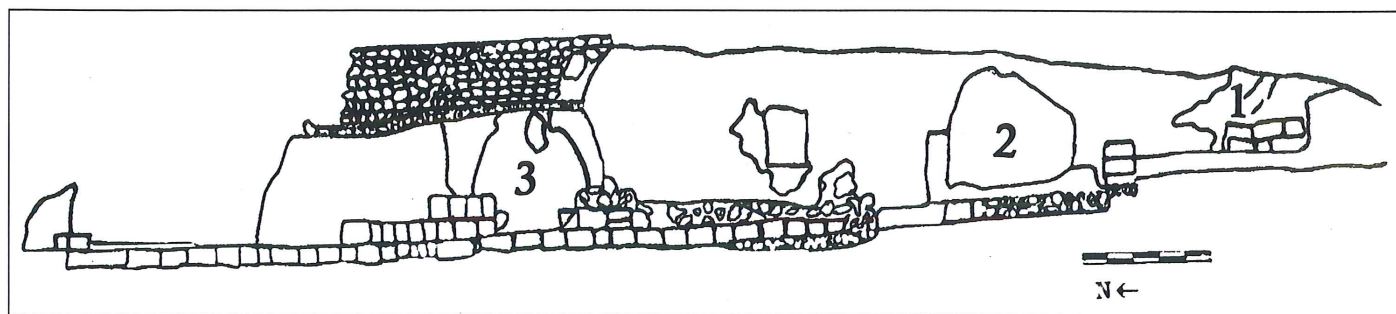
4a. General view of Elijah's Hill.



4b. The western sector of Elijah's Hill showing the three caves.



5. Plan of the western sector of Elijah's Hill (drawn by Dajah, Dassuwqe and Kabajah).



6. The three caves at the western sector of Elijah's Hill (drawn by Dajah and Kabajah).

ed at the cave entrance itself, within the nature hill behind and above the cave, or from several man-made pools at the summit of the hill above the cave. In addition, several natural cracks and fissures in the cave interior may have been the source of water.

On the other hand, the two caves adjacent to this cave and the church were badly eroded (as mentioned above), but showed no evidence of water channeling or churches built around them.

Three possibilities regarding the presence of the water channel seem to be the most likely, the channel may have carried away: 1- spring water that was first used for baptism in the church; 2- spring water that flowed naturally from the cave and was used for baptism in or near the adjacent wadi; or 3- water that seeped down into the cave from the man-made pools located at the summit of the hill.

Not far from the entrance of the cave on the left side, a pit measuring 60cm square by 60cm high and covered with a limestone capstone was discovered during excavation. A human skull was found in the pit. The skull is that of a man aged around 20 years. The lower jaw is missing, and it was re-buried beneath the church floor during the Byzantine period. The skull is interesting because it has a rare natural condition whereby the lines of convergence of the plates at the back of the skull form the shape of a cross (Nabulsi 1998: 1-10).

The skull could have been that of Rhotorius or one of the many monks who lived in this area during the Byzantine period; i.e. the area that covers both banks of Wādī al-Kharrār and housed many hermit monk cells in the Byzantine period, as mentioned in numerous Byzantine and Medieval texts by pilgrims who visited the area.

Antoninus Martyr (AD 560), an early pilgrim who referred to this place, stated that it was east of the Jordan and about two miles from the river. He mentioned a small spring to the east of the river beside the low hill, and many hermits lived in the valley near the spring (Stewart 1896).

The Pilgrim of Piacenza (AD 570) after his description of the eastern bank of Jordan River, said "In that part of the Jordan is a spring where St. John used to baptize, and

which is two miles from the Jordan, the whole valley is full of hermits" (Stewart 1896).

John Moschus, in his seventh century book *The Spiritual Meadow*, mentions a monastic complex (or *laura*) in this area with many cells inhabited by hermits. He recounts the story of the monk John from the monastery of Abba Eustorgius near Jerusalem who was on a pilgrimage of Sinai via Aila (al-'Aqaba). The monk suffered a fever and took refuge in one of the caves east of the river. John the Baptist appeared to him in a vision and told him to cancel his trip and stay in the cave, saying that "this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself has come in here to pay me a visit" (Moschus 1992: 4-5). The feverish monk recovered and in gratitude converted the cave into a church for the hermits living in the area. John Moschus said that the area was called the Laura of Saphsaphas, or Sapsas. The sixth century Mādabā mosaic map gives the name of Bethany beyond the Jordan as "Ainon" and "Saphsaphas".

Epiphanius Monachus (around AD 840) said: "About three miles beyond the Jordan a cave in which lived the forerunner. There too is the bed on which he slept, a natural shelf in the rock of the cave, and a small chamber. Inside the cave a sound of water, and in the room is a spring in which holy John the forerunner used to baptize" (Wilkinson 1977: 121).

St. Helena built churches over caves or grottos such as the Church of Nativity and another church in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. According to the *Bios di Constantine* (ninth century), St. Helena crossed the Jordan and built a church over the cave that the Baptist had inhabited, and another opposite it upon "a higher place" where Elijah had ascended to heaven. The same arrangement appears from an eleventh century AD Greek manuscript, and was reported in an older source by Xanthopulos (see Wilkinson 1977: 203).

John Phocas (AD 1177) stresses the smallness of the cave, and said: "Beyond the Jordan, opposite to the place of our Lord's baptism is the grotto of John the Baptist" (Stewart 1896: 1-36).

The early 12th century traveler Abbot Danial mentions a grotto of St. John on the eastern bank "A beautiful

stream of water, which flows over pebbles into the Jordan is found here, the water is very sweet and very cold, and it was drunk by John, the forerunner of Christ, when he inhabited this sacred cavern" (Wilson 1895: 1-82).

Grethenios (AD 1400) heard that it was supposed to lie "on the far side of the Jordan" but he did not venture there "for fear of the Arabs". Only the cave is mentioned in the pilgrim accounts of AD 1512-20. Maurommitos (AD 1511-16), another pilgrim, says that the ascension of Elijah took place near it as well.

Aenon where now is Sapsaphas. It was situated in the Wādī al-Kharrār opposite the present baptism place on the east bank of River Jordan. The name Sapsaphas is derived from the Semitic word for willow (Arabic ṣafṣaf). The symbol underneath shows an enclosed spring and something shaped like a conch (Donner 1992: 38).

According to Kopp (1959: 128), who described Elijah's hill (Tall al-Kharrār), "the contours of the hill are constantly being changed by the caprice of wind and rain, the slopes are strewn with sand. I have seen a solitary stone sticking up on the edge of this hill, and pottery or pieces of mosaic from the Byzantine period. Perhaps to begin with they had been washed down by the rain".

Probably John the Baptist's cave was at the bottom of the mount of Elijah. Most likely he would not have lived at the top, where his model had ascended into heaven but rather modestly at the bottom in its shadow. Tradition may well imply the truth, in saying he lived at the foot of this hill. The foot of hill is a mixture of gravel and sand: it could contain a natural cave or made by hermit.

There are springs everywhere: hence the name Aenon "Bethany" for "Beth Anion" (house of spring) could have got into the Bible manuscripts at an early date. The original form of the name may have been lost forever in the destruction which afflicted the area, and the Byzantine monks arbitrarily named the place Aenon.

What supports our investigation is that the gospels stress that the Baptist wanted to act in the spirit of Elijah. For this reason he even imitated his dress, and probably felt himself obliged to live in the area.

Finally the area of the caves and the side of Wādī al-Kharrār have little resistance and they are subject to continuous changes. An exception to this is Elijah's Hill, as observed by many pilgrims and visitors. Here the ground is more consistent as it results from the ruins not completely disappeared after much destruction made by the time and man.

The Byzantine traditions place in the same location of Elijah's Hill a cave and a church to honor St. John the Baptist. Since there are up to now only five caves dis-

covered, three on the hill and two near the river, that could be taken into consideration.

It is reasonable to assume that the three caves discovered on Elijah's Hill were carved during the early Roman period (first century AD), as indicated by the recovered pottery sherds and coins.

These caves were known to the monks and believers who dwelt the area in the second and third centuries AD. When the Byzantines adopted this location officially in the fourth century AD, a campaign was organized to develop the whole site that includes the hill and the surrounding area down to the Jordan River, along the valley that was depicted on the Mādabā mosaic map and called Aenon, now Sapsaphas (in the fifth-sixth centuries AD).

The systematic excavations on the western side of Elijah's Hill under the direction of the author in 1998 revealed the presence of Byzantine artifacts and architectural remains, which indicate the importance of the caves and the great function conducted by them there.

The area of the caves was reshaped by the Byzantine architects, a retaining wall was erected to prevent any collapse or erosion, in addition to that a wide wall was constructed in front of the first and second caves to offer space for those who used the area, while the church was built on the third cave.

The entrance area was developed by building three arches and a wall that surrounded the whole hill, sometimes supported by buttresses especially on the western side opposite to the cave. The buildings around the caves from the south, north, west and on top of the hill over the caves represent a complete Byzantine monastery that was established in the fourth century AD and flourished during the sixth century AD.

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