

MOSAIC FLOORS IN THE BAPTISM SITE (BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN)

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Interest in the Baptism site started in 1996 when the Jordanian team with direct support of the General Director of Antiquities started archaeological survey on the eastern side of Jordan River, so as to protect the archaeological sites along Wādī al-Kharrār from direct and indirect threats of destruction caused by human and natural factors. Limited excavations conducted in selected locations during 1997 revealed the presence of more than 10 archaeological sites scattered in the area. The significance of the finds was properly understood by the team and early schemes were submitted to develop the site as tourist a destination (Waheeb 1997).

The Discovered Architectural Remains

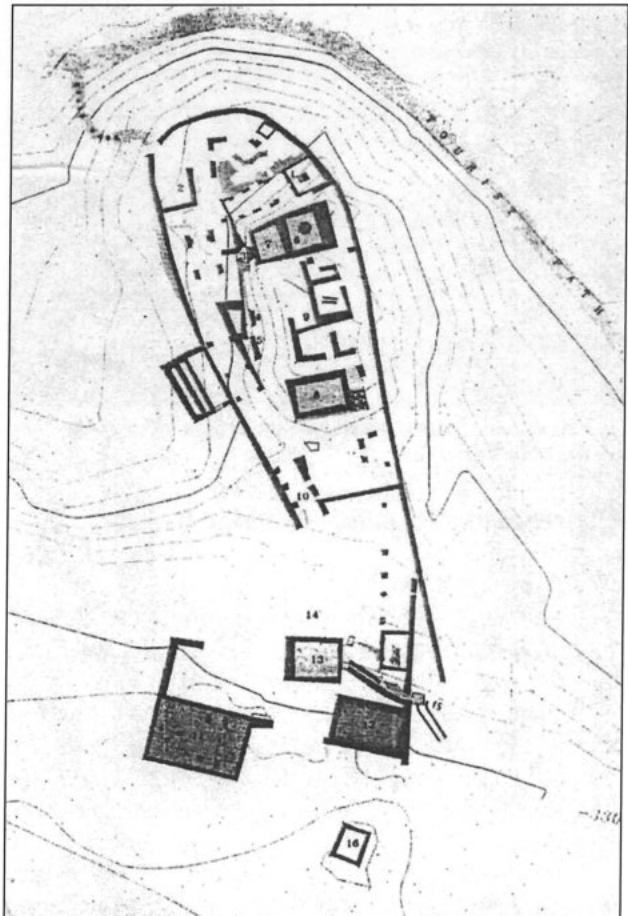
The following architectural remains were discovered during the systematic excavations between 1996-2002:-

- Tall Mār Ilyās: Churches with mosaic floors, water cisterns, pools caves of the monks etc. (Waheeb 1998, 1999) (Figs. 1, 2).



1. General view of Tall al-Kharrār with its churches.

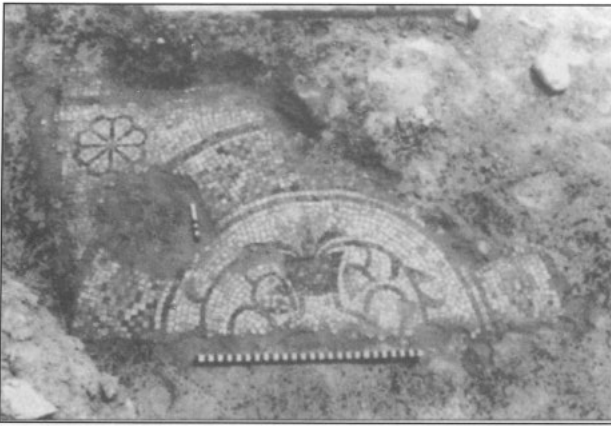
- The Zur Area (Eastern Bank of Jordan River): Churches with mosaic floors, staircase, caves of the monks, large pool etc. (Waheeb 2001, 2002) (Figs. 3, 4).



Key

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|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. North church | 9. Monks house |
| 2. Prayer Hall | 10. Gateway |
| 3. Church of the Cave | 11. John paul II church |
| 4. Second cave | 12. Prayer hall |
| 5. Third cave | 13. Water Cistern |
| 6. North eastern pool | 14. Cylendricall well |
| 7. North western pool | 15. Water System |
| 8. Southern pool | 16. Small Room |

2. Plan of the Tall al-Kharrār.



3. Remains of mosaic floor found in John the Baptist church – Jordan River.



4. Fallen stones rested directly on the mosaic floor of the John the Baptist church.

Churches and Mosaics (Tall Mār Ilyās)

The Northern Church

The church consists of two sections: the chancel screen, which measures 4.20m N-S x 4.15m E-W, and the nave which measures 8.85m E-W x 4.15m N-S. The chapel has two entrances, one located in the northern wall, measuring (70cm wide) and the other located on the western side. What distinguishes this church is the Greek inscription found inside.

The floor of the church was covered with a colored mosaic floor composed of a frame and crosses depicted with geometrical designs. Pillars along the northern wall of the church were designed to support the roof. No roof tiles were recovered from the excavations, and possibly the roof comprised of wooden beams which were washed away. The internal walls of the church were covered with a smooth white plaster layer. Other buildings associated with the church near the northern wall were severely damaged by natural factors during later periods. The available recovered material sug-

gests a late Byzantine date.

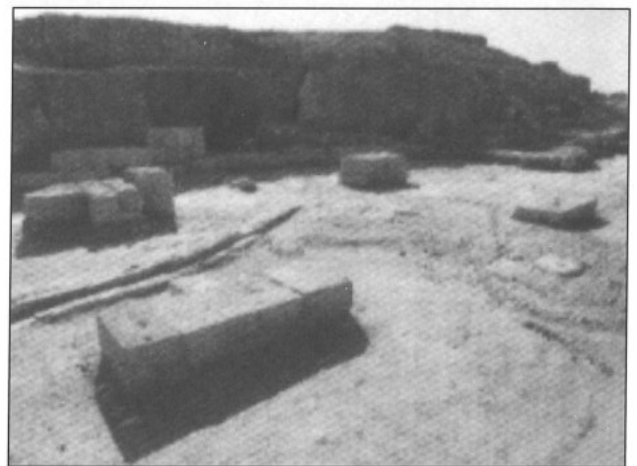
The Western Church

After cutting the western Lisan marl slope of the hill, a retaining wall was built, and afterwards the church which measures 13m x 13m was constructed, consisting of two parts. The apse (old cave) was cut in the natural rock and located under the northwestern pool. The apse was well prepared and a lamp niche was dug in its southern side. The remains of the door of the chancel screen are still visible. The other part of the church consisted of four bases built of well-dressed sandstone ashlar creating a nave and two aisles (Basilica type). The roof and the arch system were demolished, where only remains of arch springs were found.

The floor was covered with colored mosaics that were unfortunately totally destroyed. Only fragments with remains of gray lime mortar were found during the excavation. Some of these fragments show cross signs which decorated the floor (Fig. 5). It is vital to understand the reasons behind this destruction, since the nearby mosaic floor of the northern church was still preserved. Pottery sherds indicate a late Byzantine date.

The Mosaic Floor

The excavations uncovered a small building, which measures approximately 6m x 6m located north of the second church and west of the northern church. What remains from the site is the colored mosaic floor, decorated with floral designs, but in a poor state of preservation due to natural factors and erosion. The walls of the structure were built of fieldstone. Unfortunately, only the foundations are still *in situ*. The function of this structure should probably be interpreted in association with the nearby churches.



5. Fragments of mosaic floor (Church of the Cave).

The Prayer Hall

Excavations revealed the presence of a rectangular building of undressed fieldstones, measuring approximately 11.75m E-W and 7.30m N-S, located near the southeastern corner of Tall al-Kharrār. The floor of the structure was already in a bad state of preservation before the latest use of the building during the late Byzantine period. The floor was paved with a white mosaic pavement, while the ashes of the final destruction rested directly on the extant parts of the white mosaic. The ashy layer possibly represents the remains of fired wood beams, which were used in roofing the structure. The manner of construction and location of this structure supported our suggestion that the structure functioned as Prayer Hall for Christians, rather than as a chapel.

The available material recovered during the excavations gave the structure an earlier date, which is the late Roman period.

Two medium rooms were located adjacent to the north-eastern corner, and possibly served as service rooms related to the structure, the floors were paved with cobble stones, and fieldstones were used in building the walls. The rooms suffered severe destruction during the construction of the aqueducts in the Byzantine period (Figs. 6 and 7).

The Church of the Arch

Excavations conducted in area "C" to the south of Tall al-Kharrār uncovered a structure built of well-dressed sandstone blocks. The general shape of the structure is rectangular, its dimensions are approximately 13.5m E-W and 9m N-S, many parts of this building have disappeared, especially the upper courses, the walls and part of the floor, with only limited portions still preserved. What remains are a few stones resting on a lime-plastered surface overlying carefully prepared rubble stone and gray to dark ashy mortar which resembled the



7. White mosaic floor of Prayer hall southeastern of Tall al-Kharrār.

bedding cement of the structure. The colored mosaic floor with cross marks depicted on it was largely destroyed and removed, and only a small portion in the south-eastern corner of the church is still in situ. The fill contained fragments of lime with some mosaic tesserae still adhering to it. Impressions on the mortar bedding and the springs of arches indicate that an arch system was used to support the roof of the structure. It is clear that the structure represents a small chapel located near the southwestern corner of Tall al-Kharrār. The chapel consisted of two parts, with three arches to support the roof. Courtyard remains were recovered near the northwestern corner of the structure. It is difficult to locate the doorway of the chapel, but the location of the courtyard suggested that the door was possibly located in the northern wall, especially the northwestern corner just opposite Tall al-Kharrār. The recovered material dated the structure from the fourth to the sixth century (Fig. 8).

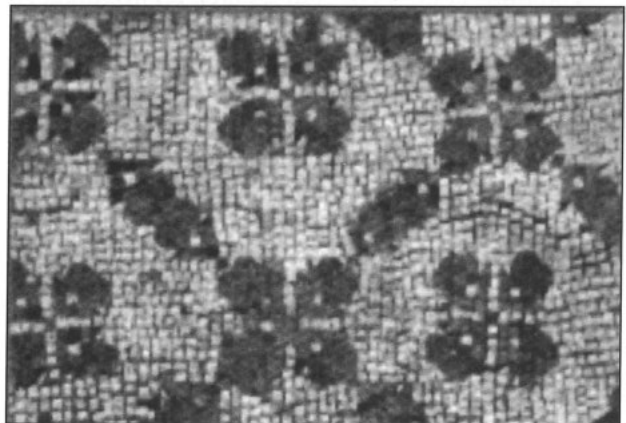
Churches of the Zur Area

The First Church

The excavations revealed several well-cut ash-



6. Mosaic of Prayer Hall (North West of Tall al-Kharrār).



8. Mosaic Floor related to church of the arch.

lars fallen and scattered between the foundations of the church, mixed with Byzantine pottery sherds and some coins. It is difficult to find standing pillars in the church although one of these pillars was found intact, fallen on the floor and consisting of well-hewn sandstone ashlar. Some plain white mosaic fragments were found scattered.

Unfortunately, the stones of the other fallen pillars and the church were removed and used to build other nearby structures.

A layer of dark ash was noticed under this pillar indicating a destruction phases. It is reasonable to assume that a high structure (church) using the arch and vault system was standing at the site. Many well-cut keystones were recovered scattered all over the site, indicating remains of fallen arches.

Judging from the available evidences it is clear that these arches were designed to support a church, which is later destroyed by the river, the water from the spring and by the earthquakes.

The Second Church

A marble floor of square, triangular and octagonal shapes is most likely part of a church built directly beside the first church.

When the first church collapsed and was destroyed, the builders decided to build another church, this time without pillars and vaults to carry the body of the church, the second church was built directly on the natural ground (the alluvial sand of the river) while the pillars of the first church to the north functioned as a protection wall against the threats of the floods of the river. Despite this, it is clear that the marble floor and the whole church were affected by the floods and the earthquakes, destroying the second church and giving the builders a reason to build the third church on the top of the second one.

The Third Church

The third church covered an area approximately 20 x 20m. The builders of the church used several materials to construct a unique church east of the Jordan River. Among the recovered materials were well-dressed sandstone ashlar, marble pavement of different kinds and colors, mosaic floors with floral and geometrical designs, which reflect high standards of skillful techniques.

The church consists of three aisles the northern aisle was built directly on a part of the first church while the central and the southern aisles were built on the top of an older structure possibly another church that was partly excavated.

The altar of the church was located in the midst of the central aisle and surrounded by marble pave-

ment from the east side.

The floor of the church was paved with colored mosaic. Part of this mosaic is *in situ* in the chancel screen area which represents floral designs and rosettes. The western section of the church was partly damaged and removed, possibly by the flood of the river in the past. The builders of the church raised the level of the ground to keep the body of the church away from threats of the river flood. The thick layer of fill was added to the lower (former) church so as to raise the level of the ground.

The northern and southern aisles were paved with colored mosaic and are still *in situ*, especially in the southwestern corner of the southern aisle where the fallen stones of the church still rest on this floor.

General Description of the Mosaic Floors

Strengths

- 1- The mosaic floors in the Baptismal site are still subject to continue and intensive preservation works.
- 2- Wooden fences and shelters were built around and over the mosaic floors so as to protect it from natural threats.
- 3- The Baptism site has been declared on archaeological and natural park. This status affords protection to the site and establishes power of control for the relevant regulatory authority.
- 4- The primary asset for the Baptism site are the archaeological finds/churches, mosaic floors, pools, caves etc.
- 5- The remains of mosaic floors of the Baptism site are the only mosaics located close to River Jordan (east bank) in southern Ghawrs in Jordan valley, which may attract visitors to the whole area.
- 6- Awareness exists among key stakeholders regarding the importance of mosaic of the site and should have the highest priority.

Weaknesses or Threats

The baptism site is fragile (Lisan marl formation) and this affected and will affect mosaic floors causing more destruction to its foundation.

- 1- Frequent flashfloods occur during the rainy season in the Baptism site Area and this presents a direct threat to the safety of excavated and restored archaeological mosaic floors.
- 2- The current built wooden shelters over the mosaic floors cannot prevent seepage during rainy season.
- 3- There is no tradition associated with tourism or the concepts of sustainability in the local area,

and amongst the local people, especially in mosaics as traditional crafts.

- 4- Danger of fire is expected and up till now there is no mitigation measures adopted to reduce this threat.

Opportunities

1. The establishment of a mosaic school in the area since the Baptism site has the potential to become one of the most popular stops on the regional Holy land tourism circuit.
2. Enhancement of local community involvement in protecting the mosaic floors in and outside of the Baptism sites (field investigations revealed the presence of several mosaic floors surrounding the site in Roman, Kafrayn, Swayma etc.).

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