

PRELIMINARY REPORT RHETORIUS MONASTERY BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN

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Introduction

Rhetorius monastery is considered one of the most important sites in Bethany Beyond the Jordan chronologically and historically speaking. Since it is related to Elijah the prophet “with whose spirit and power John the Baptist came to the site from where Elijah ascended to the heavens to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”. According to the description of some pilgrims and travelers. (Fig. 1).

As a result of continued cooperation between the Department of Antiquities (DoA) and the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR) in the documentation and preparation of restoration plans for the Baptism site, the second phase took place in January – February 2005 concentrating on the monastery, where Engineer F. Ishaqat of the Hashemite University carried out the survey of the entire site.

The present study focuses on some pilgrims’ accounts, descriptions of monasteries next to memorial churches, and the architectural remains of the monastery.

Pilgrims Accounts

Pilgrims and historians visited the site throughout history and carefully described what they saw, leaving us with their precious notes.

Among them were Theodosius, Antoninus, John Moschos, Willibald, Abbot Daniel, Theo-

derich and Abel.

Theodosius (530AD), said “ ... Where the Lord was baptized beyond Jordan there is a little mountain called Hermon. There holy Elijah was caught up ... It is 5 miles from where the Lord was baptized to the place where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea”.

Antoninus (570AD), added “ ... On the far side of Jordan is a spring where St. John baptized. It is 2 miles from the Jordan. Elias stayed in this valley when the raven brought him bread and wine ... one and quarter miles from the river is the mountain of Elias. ... A host of hermits in the vicinity of the valley”.

John Moschos (619AD), said “ ... A monk called John wanted to set off from Jerusalem and visit Sinai. After he had crossed the Jordan, a fever gripped him and he was forced to rest in a cave. John appeared to him in this place, exhorting him not to continue any further on his journey, for this cave is greater than the whole of Mount Sinai. Our Lord often walked in it when he visited me. The monk obeyed and transformed the cave into a church, and gathered brethren about him. The place was called Sapsas, and to the left of it was the brook Chorath (Cherith) where Elias lived during the drought in Israel. So much for the story. Sapsas is an abbreviation of Sapsaphas of the map of Madaba, which marks this place and the monastery of the Baptist ...”.

Willibald (754AD), said “ ... the Monastery of St. John the Baptist, where there are about twenty monks. One night they remained there, and then went on above a mile to the Jordan, where our Lord was baptized ...”.

Abbot Daniel (1106AD), said “ ... not far from the river, a couple of bow-shots to the east, is the place where the prophet Elias was carried to heaven in a chariot of fire; and here, too, is the cave of St. John the Baptist. 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



1. Rhetorius monastery from north west (Rustom Mkhjian / 2005).

he inhabited this sacred cavern”.

Theoderich (1172AD), visited the place on the banks of the Jordan where our Lord was baptized, and went back to Jericho. He said “ ... more than sixty thousand men standing thereon, almost all of them carrying candles in their hands. ... there was a still larger number of pilgrims in Jerusalem who had recently visited this place. ... In the very place where our Lord was baptized by John there is a great stone”.

Abel (1932AD), visited the site carefully describing it, leaving us with precious notes and pictures; such as his picture on Elijah’s hill (Fig. 2).

Monasteries Next to Memorial Churches

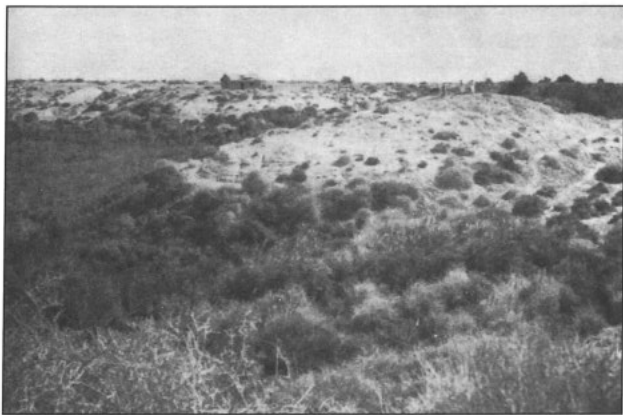
Various types of monasteries are noted in the Holy Land, such as the *Laura*, the *Coenobium*, the *Fortress Monasteries* and the *Monasteries next to memorial churches*.

Monasteries next to memorial churches were all coenobia, and were generally situated along the pilgrims’ route intending to serve the needs of pilgrims coming to holy places from all over the Byzantine Empire.

The monastery of St. Peter’s Church (Qaṣr ‘Alī), the monastery of St. Adam’s Church (Khān Ṣalība), the monastery of Galgala (Ghallghals) and the monastery of St. Thon the Baptist (Qaṣr al-Yahūd) were all situated on the pilgrims’ route from Jerusalem to the traditional site of Jesus’ baptism. The distance between these monasteries being 5 to 10 kilometers.

The dominance of the church building and its separation from the other elements of the monastery is noted. And it is important to note that they also served as resting stations for pilgrims.

The Rhetorius monastery is one of the most important monasteries on the pilgrimage route, being the closest to the memorial churches where Jesus was baptized on the eastern part of the river Jordan.



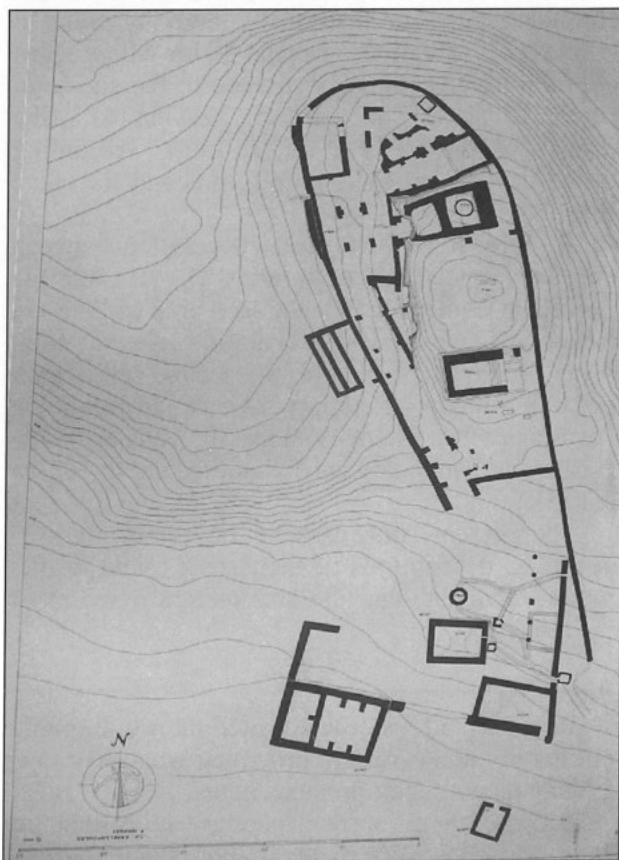
2. A picture of Abel on Elijah’s hill from the west /1932.

Rhetorius Monastery (Figs. 3, 4)

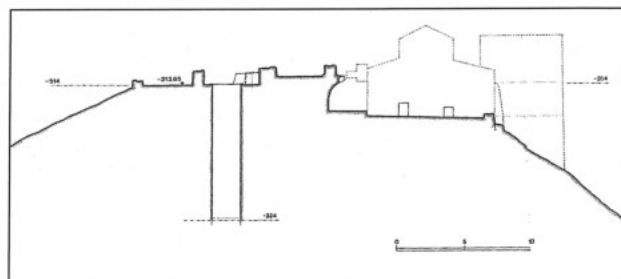
The monastery was named after Rhetorius the abbot who headed it. The inscription was found at the apse of the northern church at the monastery.

The monastery is located on a little hill about 5 miles north of the Dead Sea, constructed at the western edge of Wādī al-Kharrār that connects the monastery with the place where Jesus was baptized just east of the river Jordan today, at a distance of a mile to the west.

It is also on the pilgrimage route from Jerusalem and Bethlehem to Mount Nebo through Bethany beyond the Jordan, providing services to the visitors of the place where Jesus was baptized and many important biblical events took place.



3. Plan of Rhetorius monastery (Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos / 2005).



4. Section of the Rhetorius monastery EW (Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos / 2005).

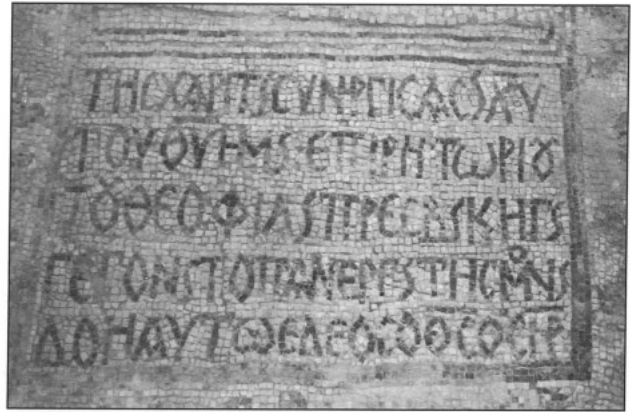
The Construction

As in the case of many archaeological sites, material available at or near the site were utilized for its construction; fields stones, sandstone ashlar, mud brick were used as the foundations and walls of the structures whereas reeds, bamboo and willow was likely to have been used in some cases as the ceiling of a structure.

A lime mortar was used between ashlar and to join the fieldstone used as foundations. It was also used as a base of mosaic floors and plaster of the inner walls and floors of some architectural elements (churches, cisterns, pools, etc.).

The monastery that was built in the fifth century AD on a small, low hill is surrounded by a wall from its eastern, northern and western sides and it consists of important archaeological and architectural elements:

- *The monks' living quarters:* that covers most of the northern area of the monastery and was badly damaged through natural causes.
- *The northern church:* is well preserved consisting of a rectangular apse (4.60m long x 4.22m wide) and a nave (9.65m long x 4.00m wide getting narrower at its western end). It has two entrances, in the northern and western walls leading into the nave. A colored mosaic floor includes geometric designs with the cross marks at their corners and center, within a surrounding frame. A Greek inscription set in the apse area reads: "By the help of the grace of Christ our God the whole monastery was constructed in the time of Rhetorius, the most God-beloved Presbyter and Abbot. May God the Saviour give him mercy" (Figs. 5, 6). The cave church: the cave church consists of two parts. A semi-circular apse was cut into the natural rock of the north-western edge of



6. The inscription in the apse of the northern church (Rustom Mkhjian / 2005).

the hill. Two lamp niches carved in its southern and eastern walls can be seen today with a chancel screen in front of the apse (2.30m wide x 1.85m long). The second part of the church consists of a nave and two aisles (9.65m long x 14.55m wide), separated by columns. Still in place are only the four column bases built of well-dressed, square-cut sandstone blocks, a few tesserae of the colored mosaic floor found *in situ* are well preserved and protected until today (Fig. 7).

- *The western part:* the western side of the hill, that is formed of lisan marl, was cut and the foundations of a retaining wall can be seen. A long corridor (4.0m wide x 28.0m long) extended from the south to the northern area leading into the cave church from the south. Part of the area found between the corridor and the retaining wall might have been used as a storage area.
- *The pools:* two pools rectangular in shape (3.80m x 3.00m and 4.30 x 2.30m) from the Late Roman period are located on the top of



5. The nave of the northern church from the east (Rustom Mkhjian / 2005).



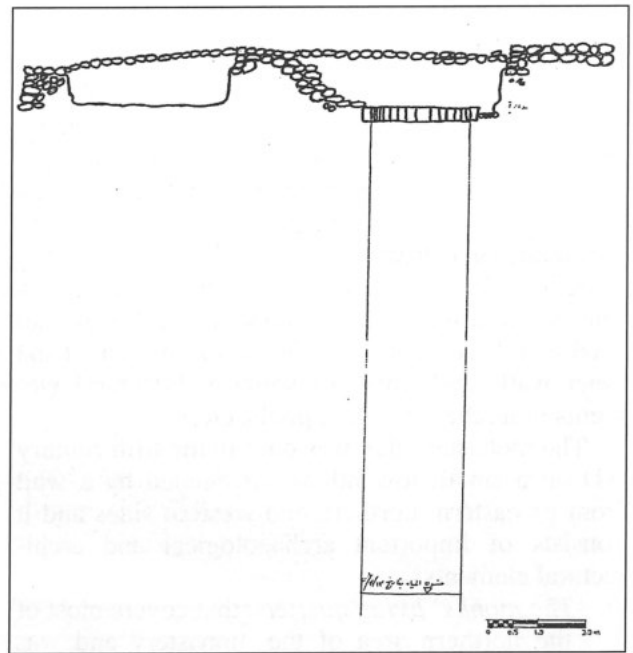
7. The cave church from the west (Rustom Mkhjian / 2005).

the northern edge of the tall overlooking the northern church. Excavations under the damaged floor of the north-eastern pool revealed a well dating from the Early Roman to Late Byzantine periods. Circular on top (2.10m in diameter), it is built of well-cut sandstone ashlars, having a depth of 10 meters, hence arriving at the aquifer of the holy valley (Figs. 8, 9).

A third pool on the southern slope is rectangular in shape (5.30m long x 3.70m wide) has a staircase on its eastern side extending the full width of the pool (Figs. 10, 11).

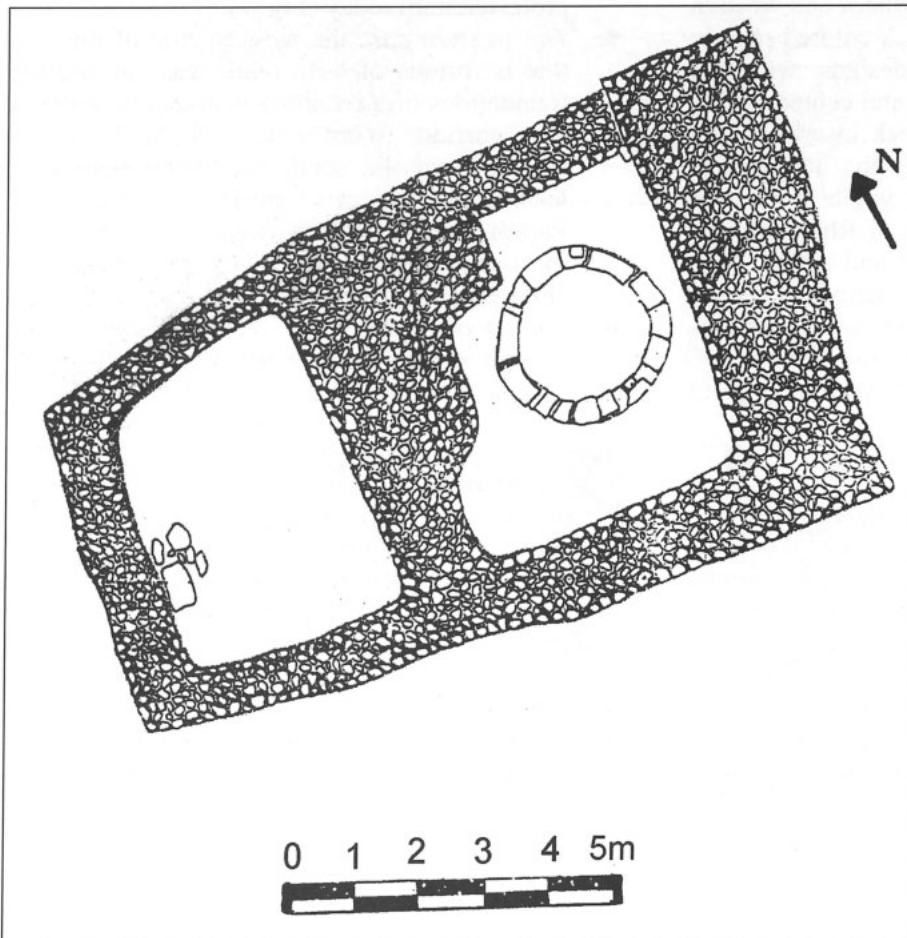
The southern part of the monastery consists of a water system, a chapel and a prayer hall:

- **Water system:** The water system is located between the prayer hall and the nearby small chapel. The water was carried to the system in ceramic pipes through settling basins before emptying into a cistern and a well connected with water channels. The cistern (6.30m long x 4.30m wide with a total capacity of approximately 100m cube) was dug out of the natural lisan marl rock, it is the largest reservoir discovered at the site, built during the

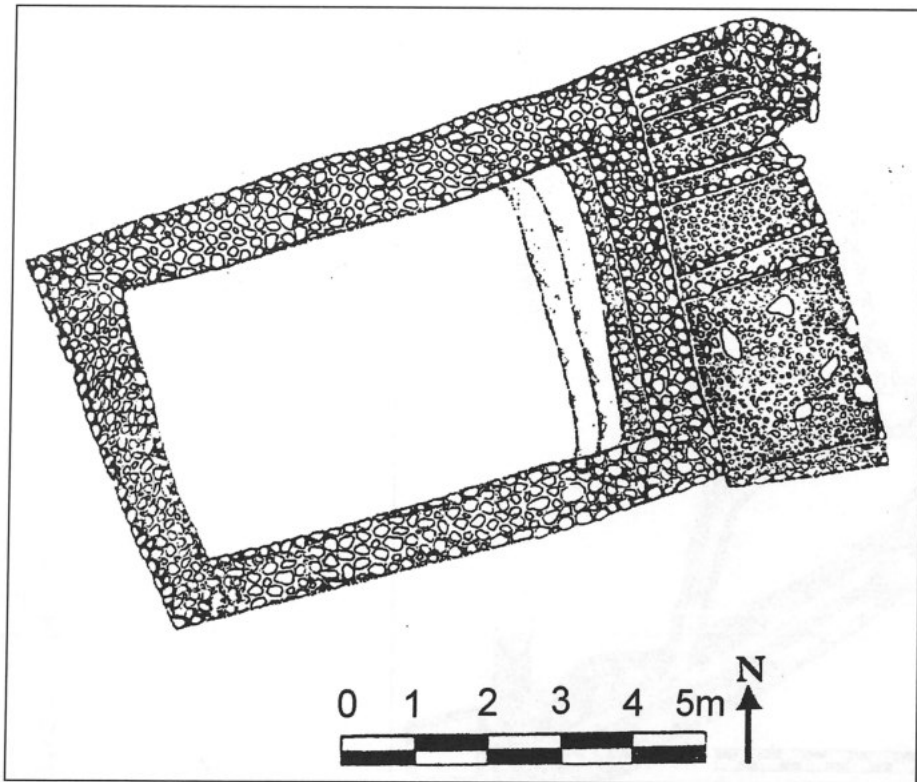


9. Section of the northern pools (Rustom Mkhjian / 2002).

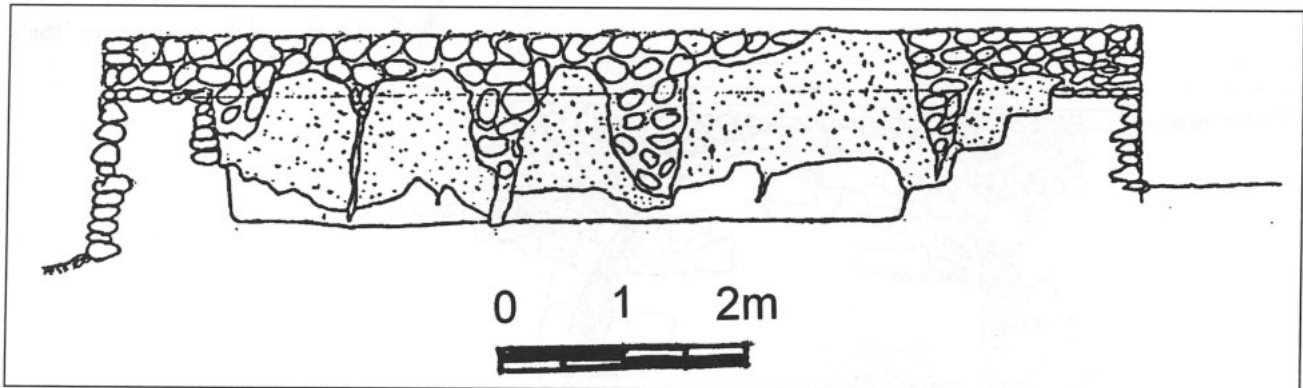
fifth and sixth centuries AD. Well-cut sandstone ashlars were used to build its inner sides, while a thick layer of lime was added and cov-



8. Plan of the northern pools (Safinaz Kubagah / 2002).



10. Plan of the southern pool (Safinaz Kubagah / 2002).



11. Section of the southern pool (Rustom Mkhjian / 2002).

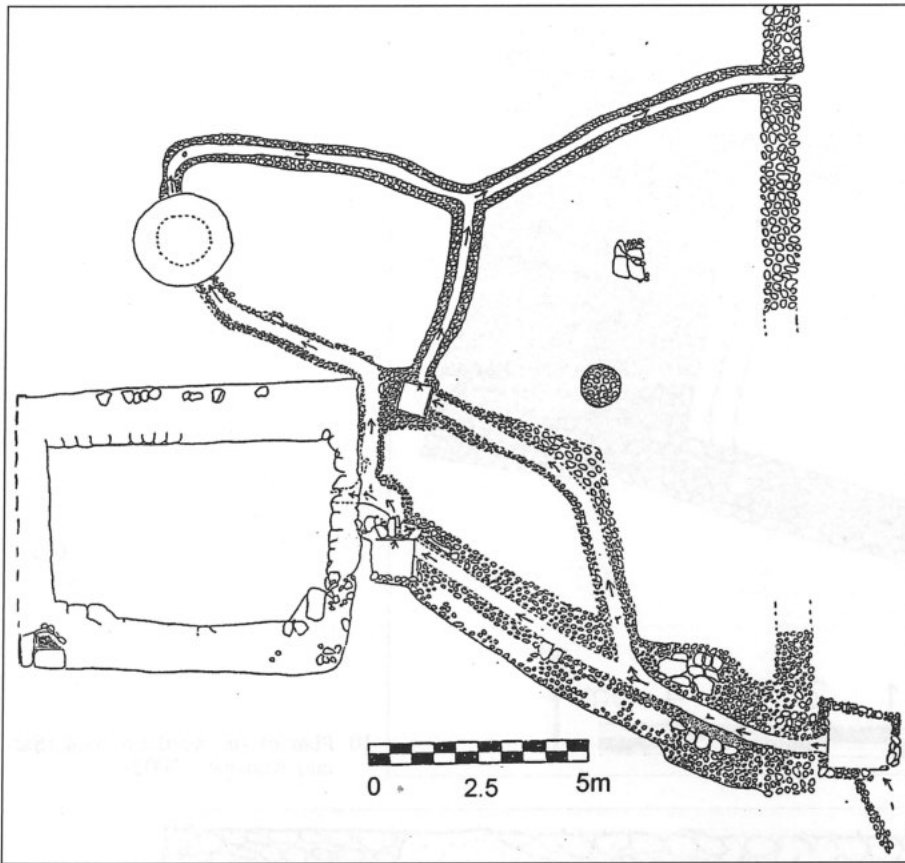
ered by a smooth layer of plaster to prevent any seepage. The cistern was roofed by a vault system and carried a white mosaic floor on top. A canal feeds a cylindrical well (3.25m in diameter x 5.40m deep with a total capacity of approximately 45m cube), is located near the northwestern corner of the cistern dating from the Byzantine period (Figs. 12, 13, and 14).

- *The chapel:* A rectangular chapel (13.65m x 9.45m) is located south of the main site, connecting it with the surrounding plain. It was built during the fifth – sixth centuries AD. It had a mosaic floor with cross decorations and arches supporting the roof, of which one has been restored (Fig. 15).

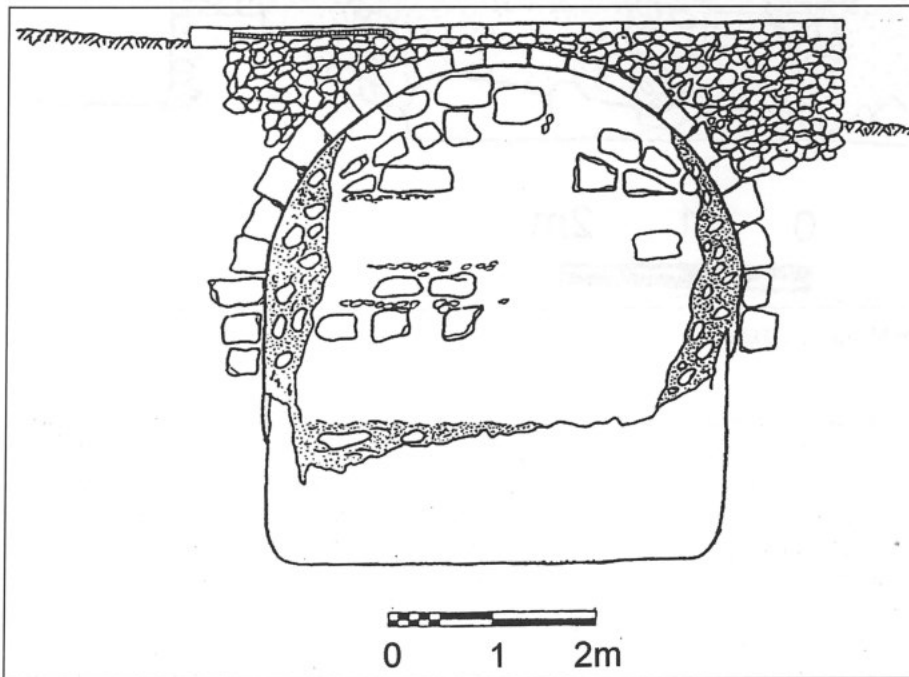
- *The prayer hall:* (10.70m x 7.40m) this presumed prayer hall dates from before the fourth century AD. It is a rectangular structure built of undressed fieldstones, a plain white mosaic pavement covers a large part of the floor. The ceiling was probably wooden (Fig. 16).

Conclusion

The Gospels verified Bethany beyond the Jordan as a site where many important prophetic actions took place, the pilgrims and historians visited and carefully described the site and its importance, the archaeological and architectural discoveries along with the mosaic map of Mādabā and the local community all together reassure the Holiness of



12. Plan of the water system (Safinaz Kubagah / 2002).



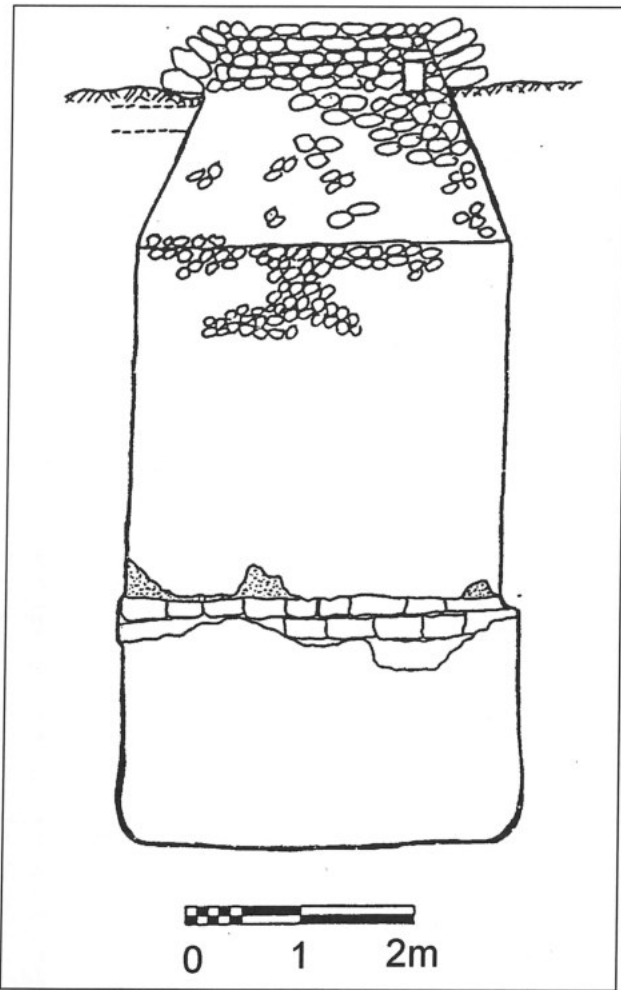
13. Section of the cistern looking west (Rustom Mkhjian / 2002).

this site.

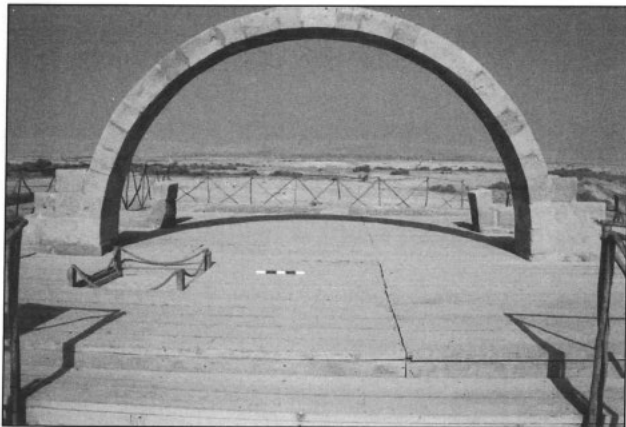
The Rhetorius monastery is unique in many ways too, although most of the pilgrims did not concentrate on its architecture, most of them linked it with the site from where Elijah ascended to the heaven and specified its distance from the place

where Jesus was baptized. It is one of the most important monasteries on the pilgrimage route, being the closest to the memorial churches where Jesus was baptized east of the river Jordan where large numbers of pilgrims arrived.

Although major parts of the monastery were de-



14. Section of the cylindrical well (Rustom Mkhjian / 2002).



15. The chapel from the east (Rustom Mkhjian / 2005).

stroyed through natural causes, enough architectural remains allow the reconstruction of the monastery on paper.

For all this it took the attention it deserves as a site of unique importance for humanity.

Acknowledgements

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16. The prayer hall from the east (Rustom Mkhjian / 2005).

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Figure 1

