

## RECENT DISCOVERIES IN BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN IN JORDAN VALLEY

*Mohammed Waheeb*

### Geographical Location

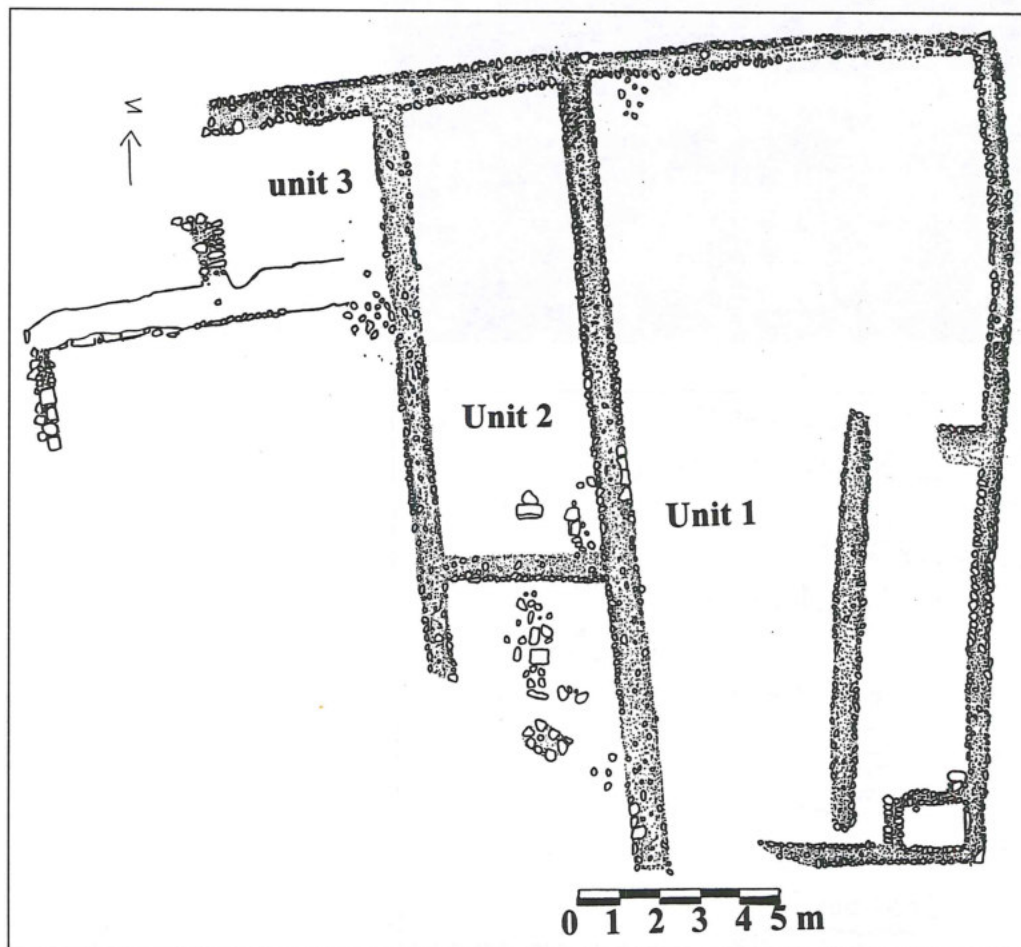
The recovered architectural remains are situated on the eastern bank of the Jordan River about 150 meters from the river and 100 meters from the so-called large Baptism Pool on the edge of the az-Zūr (الزور) area (see Waheeb 1998A) (Fig. 1).

The John the Baptist Church is located about 100 meters northwest of the site. The structural complex was built in the so-called az-Zūr sedimentary plain, which was formed by the flooding of the Jordan River. The site is surrounded on its northern and eastern sides by plants including tamarisk and

palm trees. The water of al-Kharrār (الخرار) spring is still flowing along the northern part of the archaeological site in winter seasons, but disappears in summer.

The recovered structural complex is characterized by:

1. Its closeness to the mouth of the Jordan River, which is considered as its main traditional access.
2. Its location at the mouth of al-Kharrār spring.
3. The density of natural vegetation in its sur-



1. Location map of Bethany Beyond Jordan/ Wādī al-Kharrār.

rounding which adds to the attraction in the environment.

4. Its contiguousness to some other archaeological sites, which reveals its relevance to the surroundings (Waheeb 1998B: 601).

**Description of the Structure**

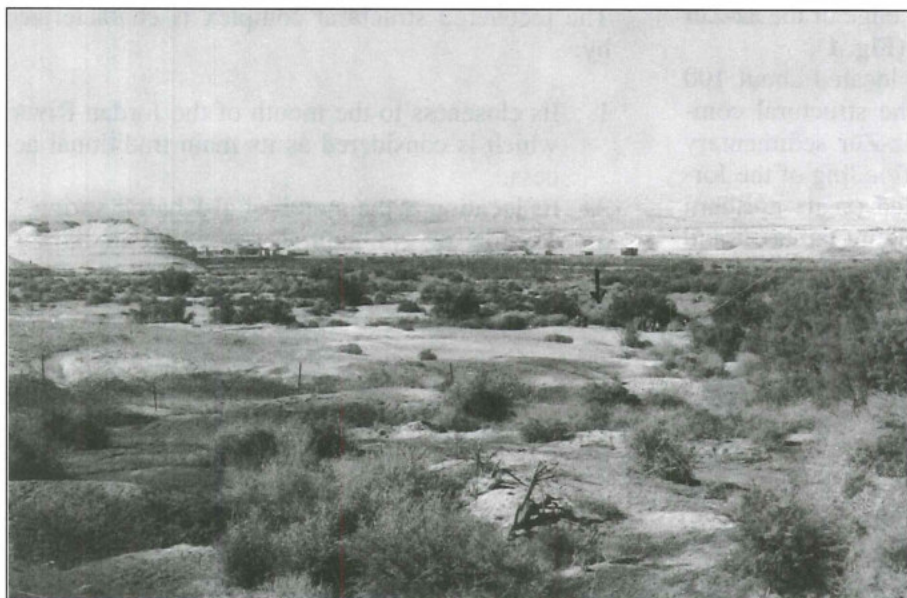
It is 20.5 meters long from north to west, 24.5 long from west to east. The only remaining architectural features are the stone foundations. The structure can be divided into three architectural units (Figs. 2, 3):

*First Unit:* It consists of a complex 20.5 x 2.8 meters in area surrounded by four main walls built of small cobbles. Mud and stone were used. The re-

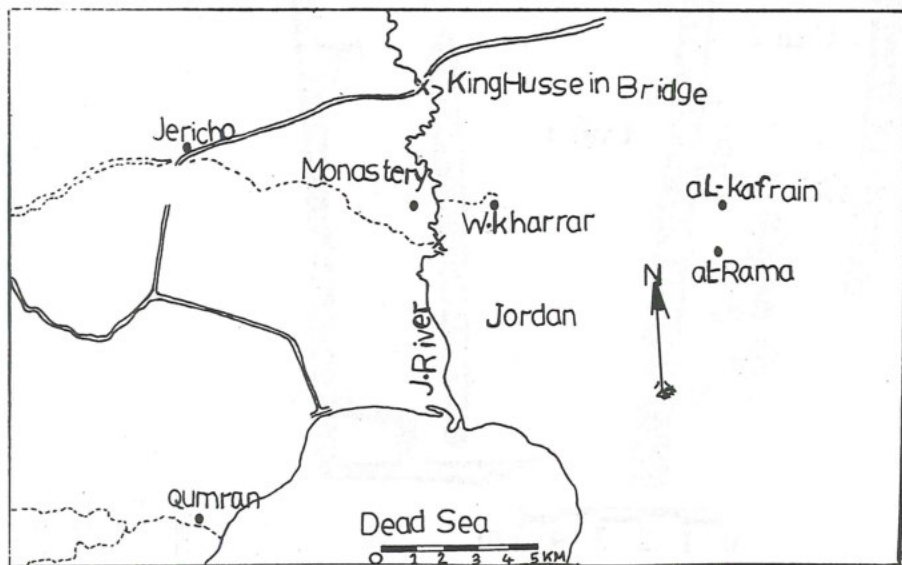
mains are 20 centimeters above ground level.

In the southeastern corner of the structure, there is a small square installation 1 x 1.5m in area. An inner wall extends from the southern side towards the north meeting another one protruding from the eastern side, thus constituting a rectangular structure (10 x 280 meters in area). Two rows of stones filled in between with mud-bricks were made to build these walls.

A canal, 2 meters to the southeast of the eastern wall, was recovered. It extends in a southward direction and its remaining part is 4.5 meters long. The water from al-Kharrār must have been driven to this canal to supply the building with its needs. The wastewater would flow through a channel located to the south of the building.



2. Top plan of the discovered architectural remains.



3. General view showing the location of the discovered remains.

*The Second Architectural Unit:* It is adjacent to the first architectural unit from western side. It consists of a rectangular structure (20.5 x 3.9m) and can be divided into a northern and southern part:

The northern part: it is bigger than the southern one (11.5 x 3.9m). Remains of an installation around the southeastern corner, built from dressed sandstones, was recovered.

*The Southern Part:* Is about 7 x 4 meters and irregular in shape, especially in its southern part which tends to be inclined and might have been greatly damaged by the flooding of water. The low watercourse to the south of it might be the reason for the destruction and the drift of the southern wall. This can be interpreted as the inclination of the southern wall, which was built to replace the original one. A number of scattered stones were found in the center of the southern part, these might have fallen from the upper courses of the wall.

*Third Architectural Unit:* It is situated in the north-western part of the site and measures 15 x 8.5m. This building was greatly destroyed, especially in the south, by the flowing of water behind it. The second unit and, to a greater extent, the third unit, were in fact more exposed to water and therefore they lost many of their architectural features. Two thirds of this building is lost and one can infer that this unit was rectangular in form with an entrance in the western side. The stones used for constructing this unit were cobbles of medium size. It can be noted that the upper courses of the walls of the three units are no longer there due to weathering. The location of windows and doors can not be identified.

*The Floors of the Building:* The floors of the building consist of fine compact sandy soil and rests on red soil formed by the looseness of mud-brick and some untrimmed stones falling from the ceilings. Evidences for stony pavements and marble floors were not recovered. However, some mosaic pieces were found among the ruins, which may have been brought from other neighboring sites.

The absence of paved surfaces might reflect the function of the structure, in that it did not require a special pavement.

#### *Construction Materials*

1. Untrimmed lime-stone of medium and small size.
2. Worked sandstones, and some stones used in the courses might have been brought from

neighboring buildings.

3. Mud-bricks, which were used especially for the upper courses.
4. Clay and mortar were used to fix the stones.
5. Wood from tamarisk, and palm trees, as well as sugar canes were used to build the ceilings and perhaps the doors.

#### *The Function of the Building*

According to what has been excavated till now, the building seems to have a certain function during a certain period. Before identifying the function the following points should be noted:

1. The simplicity of construction in which materials like untrimmed stones, mud-bricks and woods were brought from the surroundings of the site.
2. The absence of complicated architectural methods like decorations.
3. The sand floors must reflect a certain nature of use.
4. The largeness of architectural units, which occupied large spaces.
5. The existence of small installations in the corners of architectural units, which reflect certain functions.
6. The closeness of the building to water sources and the number of channels found inside it reflect a certain function.
7. The location of the building at the closest point to the water station and pools reflects a certain function related to the river itself

From the above mentioned, we can conclude that the building has to do with the movement of people across the Jordan River from both sides. Its exact location on the eastern bank close to the Byzantine barrier, in addition to the system of inner divisions of the building, the large spaces, and the small installations in the corners, all these exclude the use of the building for human residence. On the contrary, it was used as an enclosure for animals.

The building was in use at the time the eastern bank of the river was prospering from visitors to the holy places such as the churches and the Baptism pools mentioned by pilgrims (Waterhouse and Ibach: 1975).

One cannot forget the fact that the eastern bank witnessed some limited agricultural activities practiced by priests and monks as attested by the records of historians and travelers describing the eastern bank of the river. The need of these people for domesticated animals especially for transportation was great. These animals were especially needed to reach the Pilgrimage station, Mar Elyas Yas Hill and other holy places such as Mount Nebo. No

doubt there were people who took care of these animals, arranged their accommodations, fed them, and had them prepared for visitors especially those from the western bank. This place may therefore have served as a stable for the gathering of animals. The place must have been looked after by priests and other religious men from the Byzantine era (between the fourth and the seventh centuries). The visit from Saint Hilana to the place is an indication of its significance during Byzantine period.

#### *Dating of the building*

As attested by the archaeological remains, especially pottery, the building must be dated to the Byzantine period. However an exact date cannot be given because the site lacks objects such as inscriptions, which might indicate more specific information.

The reuse of some mosaic stones that were brought from the John Baptist Church cannot give us an exact date. However, the use of mud-bricks for foundation and upper courses was usual during the Byzantine period. A preliminary date between the fifth and sixth centuries AD can be given. This period witnessed prosperity in constructing cultic places and water systems that received a special treatment from the Byzantine State.

#### **Conclusion**

The discovery of this construction can be associated with a series of other relevant archaeological sites recovered in the same area and referring to the same period, namely the Byzantine era. This building is related to the movement of people across the Jordan River since it constitutes the traditional crossing point. Therefore a series of buildings were constructed there to serve travelers and

pilgrims.

The records and writings of travelers and historians emphasize the significance of the eastern bank of the river where a number of cultic structures, churches and pools were built and used during successive chronological periods. The plentiful water and its flow down the Jordan River, the neighboring valleys (particularly the Wadi which flows in front of the mentioned building) and the minor active streams in the area all caused great damage to the thin building.

A great part of the building led to a complete drift of the southern parts of the building, not to forget the earthquakes that caused a great damage in the area.

It should be mentioned that human factors also have an impact on the area and added to the destruction of the building especially in the upper courses. In addition to this, the climatic factors and high temperatures left the building in a bad condition.

This discovery emphasizes the significance of the eastern bank of the river the area known as 'Bethany Beyond the Jordan', which was rich in constructions for different purposes.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Dr Fardouse Ajlouni for her help and comments and also thanks to the entire team who worked with me in the field excavations.

#### **References**

- Waterhouse, D. and Inach, R.  
1975 Roman Road from livias to Edbus.
- Waheeb, M.  
1998a Wadi al-Kharrar Archaeological Project (Almaghtas). *ADAJ* 42: 635-638.
- 1998 Wadi al-Kharrar al-maghtas. *AJA* 102/ 3: 601.