

JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH AREA: ARCHITECTURAL EVIDENCE

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Introduction

Bethany beyond the Jordan is located in al-Kafrayn region, east of the Jordan River, about 8 kilometers north of the Dead Sea. Important architectural remains along the *Wādī al-Kharrār* (وادي الخرار) include memorial churches and monasteries, hermit cells, a caravanserai, a large pool and a site associated with Mary the Egyptian; these were excavated under the direction of Mohammad Waheeb of the Department of Antiquities (see Waheeb 2001; 2002). The Department of Antiquities requested assistance from the American Center of Oriental Research (ACOR) for the documentation phase of the project. In the first phase, Engineer Fawwaz Ishaqat of Hashemite University carried out a survey of the entire site, which made it possible to link all of the structures. The ground plans and elevations are in part based on material created by draftsperson Safinaz Kubagah. Her plans and sections were updated and connected following the results of the survey.

The present study focuses on the memorial churches 300 meters east of and 70 meters north of the present course of the river (Fig. 1). The site is called the “John the Baptist Church Area” (Fig. 2) and includes the following structures (the descriptions in parentheses are those used by M. Waheeb [2001]): Pillared Hall (the first church); Lower Basilica (the second church); Basilica (the third church); Room South of the Basilica (Mosaic Pavement); Staircase; four piers; Chapel (the fourth church); and Later Structures (Late Islamic Structures).

Pillared Hall (the first church)

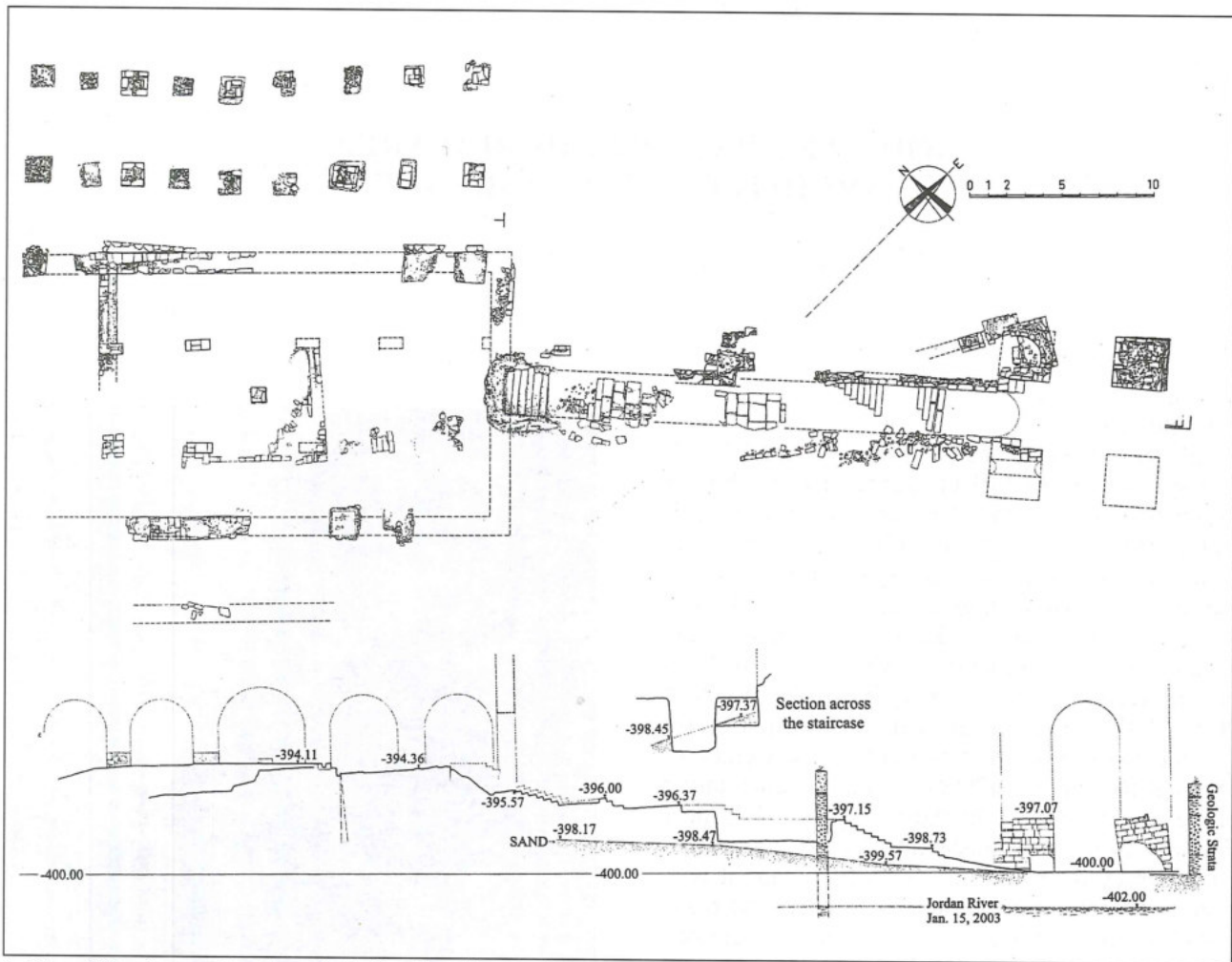
The pillared hall is built on sandy soil, at an absolute level of -394.810m, compared to -400.000m on the lowest floor of the site and compared to the level of the Jordan River on January 15, 2003, -402.000m. The remains of a set of stone pillars (Fig. 3) running EW and NS are evident. They consist of nine in the EW direction (total length of



1. Aerial photograph of the area of the John the Baptist Church (center of picture) and the meandering river (Photo produced by the Royal Geographic Centre).

25.15m), and possibly six in the NS direction (total length 25.80m). The existence of that many pillars is evidence by: 1. The remains of foundations for two pillars along the south wall of the “third church” (B6 and C6 in Fig. 3); 2. The distances between the NS piers; 3. The material and mortar used; 4. The dimensions of the foundations; and 5) The level of the extant foundations.

The foundations vary in size (A, C, E, G, and I



2. Plan of the site; section through the Basilica (the third church), staircase, and the structure with four piers (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).

are larger than B, D, F, and H), but they are constructed of fieldstone of average size bound together by a cementing material of gray color with plaster remains noticed at the surface of some of the foundations. The pillars also vary in size. Sandstone ashlar were used in building the outer sides of the pillars, whereas the core consisted of fieldstone and cementing material. The pillars were raised to a minimum height of 2.5m judging from the remains of one of them (E2).

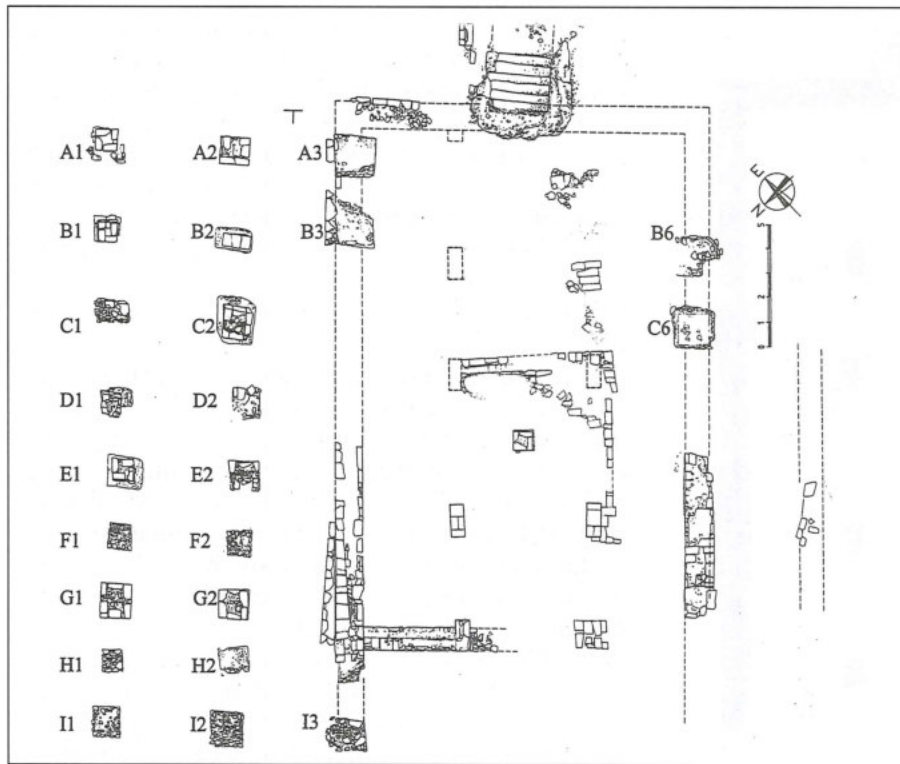
A large number of sandstone ashlar were found between the set of piers E and F, 1 to 3; some of these ashlar were covered with a whitish plaster. Some fragments of white, medium-sized mosaic tesserae were also found just to the east of piers A2 and A3.

We can therefore conclude that these sets of pillars were designed to carry or support a large platform that, in turn, might have supported or formed the elevated floor of a monastery, basilica, or any other structure. The lack of a floor supports

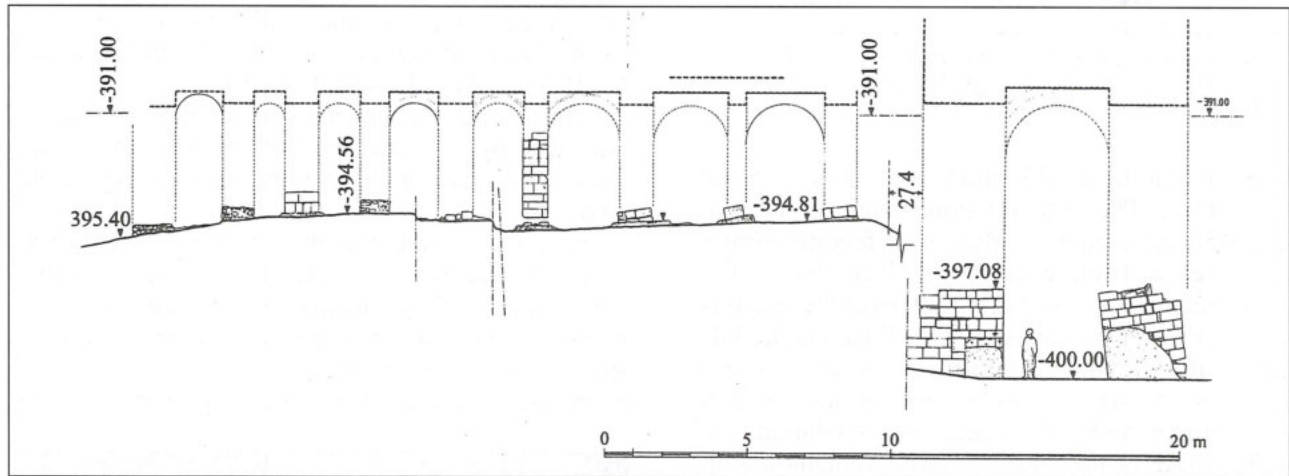
the identification of the set of pillars as the infrastructure for an elevated building.

Lower Basilica (the second church)

Test trenches in the western parts of both the northern and southern aisles of the Basilica uncovered marble floors of various geometrical shapes and colors (Waheeb 2001: 421, fig. 4), generally tilting towards the west with fallen ashlar directly over the SW part of the marble pavement. Parts of the southern wall of the Lower Basilica could also be seen in those trenches. Since the sections formed by the difference in height between the floor levels of the “the second and the third churches” — about 2m in its westernmost parts — included mixed material such as marble fragments, ashlar, pottery, etc., and since the walls of the Basilica were partly built of the remains of the Lower Basilica, it can be assumed that the Basilica overlaid the remains of the Lower Basilica and made use of those remains to strengthen its foundations.



3. Plan showing the remains the Pillared Hall (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).



4. Section through the Pillared Hall and (omitting the staircase) the structure with four piers (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).

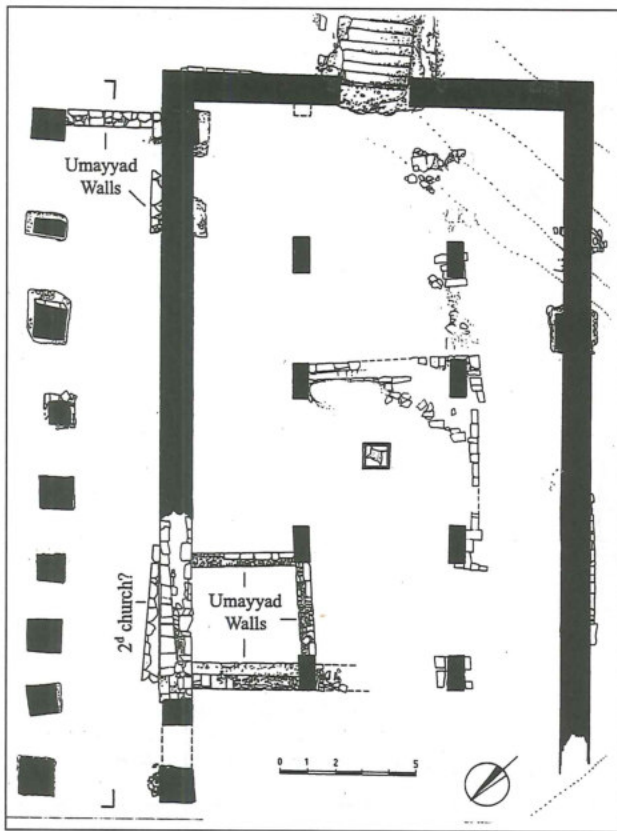
Since the floor tilts to the west, floods from the west must have caused the destruction of the Lower Basilica, undermining its foundations. This is an indication that the main course of the river was probably just west of the Lower Basilica. Floods would also be the cause of the destruction of the Basilica itself since most of its western parts have vanished. Because it would have been inappropriate to excavate through the floor of the Basilica to expose the complete remains of the Lower Basilica, not much more can be said about it.

An oblique wall (see Fig. 5) against the north

wall of the Basilica (the third church) incorporates a reused pilaster capital with a cross. This wall is identified by Waheeb (2001: 420, fig. 3) as a feature of the second church. This oblique wall is founded on high ground, is almost deprived of foundations, and could be attributed to a later phase of development.

Basilica (the third church)

Although it was built at a ground level higher than the surrounding remains, relatively little remains of the Basilica. The building (Figs. 2, 5) had a minimum length of 27m and a width of 15.80m



5. Plan of part of the Pillared Hall and of the Basilica (black sections) with the remains of the Umayyad walls noted (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).

(interior width of 13.38m); the floor was at -394.11m . The interior dimension of 15.80m equals 50 standard early Byzantine feet measuring 0.315m each (Underwood 1948; Chen 1989: 203). Since the basilica was partly built over the remains of earlier structure (the Lower Basilica and the Pillared Hall), its construction made use of these remains as foundations, especially for its northern and southern walls. Elsewhere, the foundations are of fieldstone of medium size, well cemented with a grayish lime mortar, the height varying according to the original topography. The existing external walls indicate that these were built of sandstone ashlar forming both the inner and the outer skins, with a mixture of fieldstone and sandstone pieces cemented together forming the core of the walls. These have an average width of 1.10 meters. Rectangular piers with section dimensions of 1.30 x 0.58m and 1.42 x 0.58m supported the roof. The westernmost, standing piers are spaced 3.42m apart. Certain blocks at foundation level can be interpreted as infrastructure for more piers. The clear width of the nave is 5.12m and that the south and north aisles are 3.45 and 3.63m respectively.

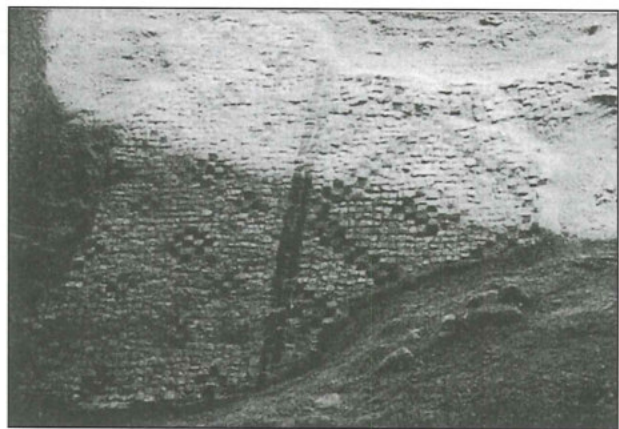
Features in the central aisle include the sandstone foundations for the chancel screen, a rectangular apse measuring 7.6m long (N-S) and in its center the altar ($= 0.80\text{m}^2$), made of sandstone (remaining marble slabs on both its western and southern sides indicate it was revetted with marble). West of the altar are the remains of a mosaic floor of medium size, colored tesserae; among the motifs, a vase with two handles and flowers can be noted. On the east corner of the vase a rosette is depicted.

North of the altar there was a marble floor of geometrical design (*opus sectile*). The marble has totally vanished but the underlying mortar (of grayish color) retains the impressions of the pattern. The remains of a wall foundation of an apse built of sandstone indicate the extent of the rectangular apse.

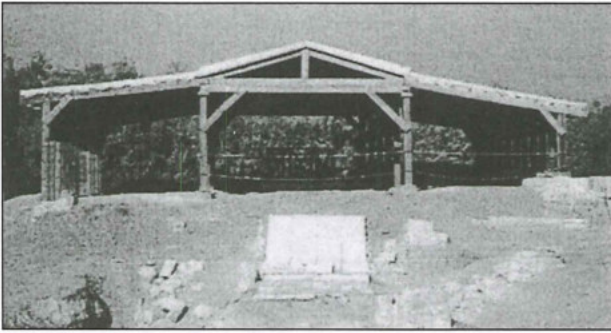
In both the northern and southern aisles, only the floor bedding survives, with some remains of a mosaic floor; in the eastern part of the northern aisle (Fig. 6) is a geometric motif with large colored tesserae. These fragile remains need special attention and that is one of the reasons why the eastern part of the northern wall has been restored; the western part of its southern wall has been restored; and the eastern part of the southern wall will be restored in the future. A reversible shelter to protect the Basilica was also installed (Fig. 7).

Most of the western parts of the Basilica are totally destroyed to the level of the foundations, an indication again of the continuous flooding in the area.

A hall, 4m wide and about 6m long, exists just east of the sanctuary wall. Its floor has settled to the west (just as the staircase has settled). The remaining fragments of marble of various geometric shapes and colors and the mortar underlayment exposed where the marble is missing show that the



6. Remains of the mosaic floor in the northern aisle of the Basilica (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).



7. The shelter protecting the remains of the Basilica (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).

hall was totally paved with marble.

The Basilica is in line with the staircase to the east that leads to the lower structure with the four piers.

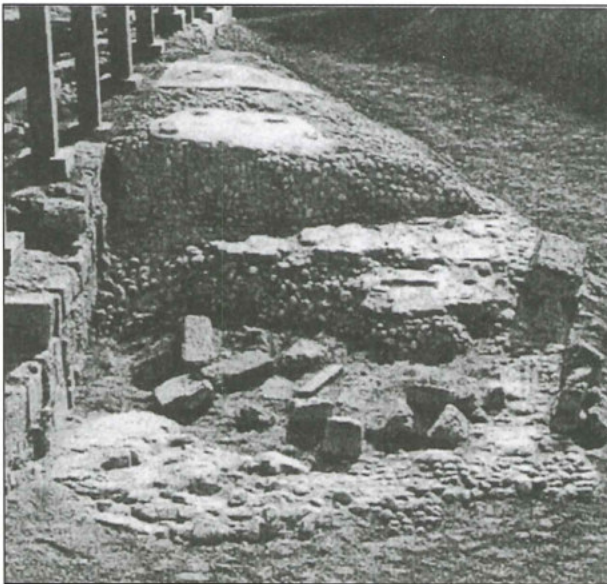
Room South of the Basilica (Mosaic Pavement)

A room, 3.60m wide, is attached to the south wall of the Basilica. The southern, eastern and western ends of the room are not defined, but it is paved with a mosaic floor. The floor has a geometric motif with large colored tesserae, similar to the remains in the northern aisle of the Basilica (Fig. 8).

It is important to note that the room suffered from settlement in its western parts; the settlement was probably caused by water flowing directly to the west, which undermined this room. The function of this room is not very clear, but it appears to be auxiliary to the Basilica.

Staircase

A staircase (Figs. 2, 9) with a total length of ca.



8. The mosaic pavement adjacent to the southern wall of the Basilica (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).

31m runs from the floor of the Basilica (the third church) and descends 5.89m eastward towards the lowest point uncovered, a pavement found among the four piers (the pavement is not shown on the plan). The width of the staircase is 2.4m, with side-walls 0.7m wide to the north and south sides. The whole staircase is settled in its western part by about 4 degrees (Fig. 10). The inclination of the entire staircase is roughly homologous to the original slope of sandy soil upon which the steps were built.

The stairs and sidewalls had a strong foundation about 1m thick in which average sized boulders were used with grayish lime cement. Well cut rocks (oil shale), dark gray in color and having relatively large dimensions, covered the foundations to form the steps and ramp (it may be that the steps and ramp were partially covered with water during some periods of the year).

The northern wall seems to have functioned as a retaining wall at its lowest, easternmost end, holding back the natural soil. It was constructed of average size sandstone ashlar joined with a thin layer of mortar, whereas the backfill consisted of average size boulders joined by lime cement. Some cross marks are observed at its lowest end, near the area of the four piers. The western parts of this wall, which seems to have been higher than the topsoil at



9. The western part of the staircase from the west (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).



10. Western part of staircase from the south with the western wall collapsed to a lower depth (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).



11. The remains of the four piers from the south (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).

the time of its construction, is almost totally destroyed and indicates strong flooding of the river. A high risk of floods still exists; the area was inundated on February 24th and March 27th, 2003.

Enough remains of a side entrance to the staircase to the north to show it had a width of 1.30m with sidewalls that were 0.70m thick. This was also built of sandstone ashlars.

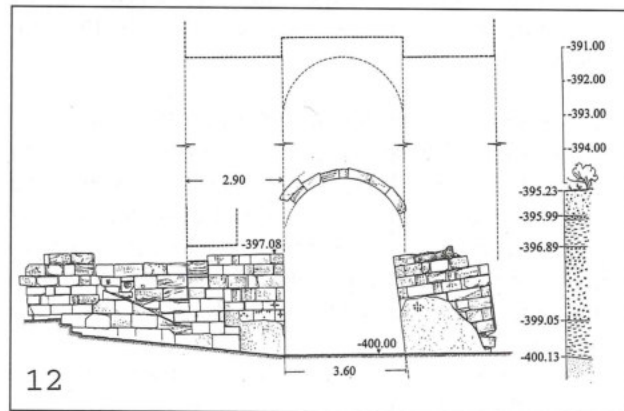
The south wall of the staircase has totally collapsed southward to a depth lower than the staircase itself. This indicates that the natural level south of that south wall was of a lower level than the steps at this point along the descent (Figs. 9, 10). Therefore, water may have raised that high at some point in time, thereby undermining the foundations.

The Four Piers

The remains of three massive, well built piers are at the lowermost end of the staircase (Figs. 2, 11). Two of them stand to a height of 3m and there are the poor remains of a third pier to the SW. It appears that these belong to an original arrangement that consisted of four piers. The fourth (SE) pier has almost totally vanished, but can be assumed by symmetry, and excavations carried out in the summer of 2002 uncovered a few ashlar and fieldstones scattered in the presumed location of the SE pier.

Hence there were at least four piers at the eastern end of the staircase, and they were built to carry or withstand great pressures. Because of their location at the point where the Wādī al-Kharrār met the river or one of its offshoots, the piers suffered great damage: the southern piers have all but vanished; the NE pier tilts about 4 degrees (from the vertical plane) towards the west, while the NW pier tilts about 1 degree to the east (Fig. 12).

The NE pier is almost square in plan (2.70 x 2.80m), while the NW pier has a length of 2.25m but its other sides cannot be measured because it



12. Section through piers and the piered structure (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).

was not excavated as a chapel lies over it. The distance separating the piers at the top is 3.38m and at the bottom is 3.60 to 3.65m.

The overall arrangement is 9.25 x 9.25m². The area inside the piers is paved with large flagstones, and is about -400.000m to -400.013m, thus about 2m above the water level of the Jordan River (which was 402.000 m on January 15th, 2003).

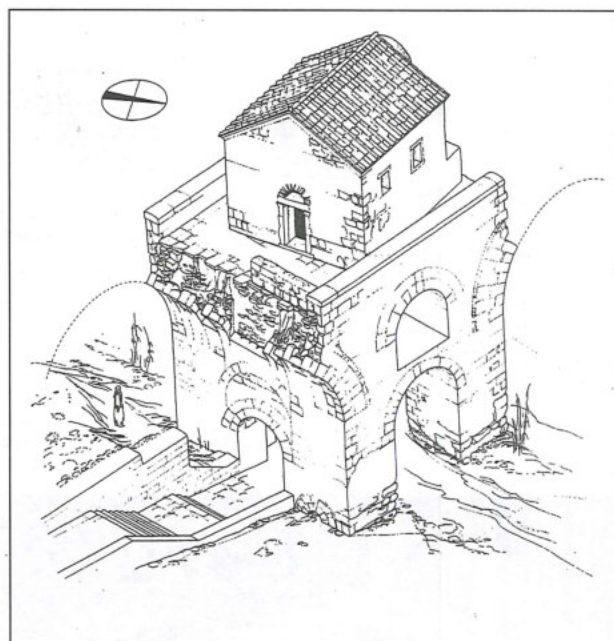
Sandstone ashlars, about a foot high, were used to construct the outer skins of the piers, which in turn had a core densely filled with fieldstone and sandstone pieces well cemented with a lime mortar. At the lower parts of the existing piers grayish plaster covering them is still well attached (total thickness of 15-20mm) with hundreds of cross marks incised all over them. Inscriptions were also noted on the southern part of the NW pier.

A study of the arch stones found in the center of the four piers indicated that they belonged to arches of about 1.8m in radius. Knowing that the distance between the piers is about 3.50 — 3.60m, we could conclude that they belonged to arches and vaults on top of the piers (Figs. 12, 13).

Remains of a large arched gateway with door-jambs, each 1m wide, are in the western pair of piers. The clear opening of the gate is 2.50m, thus



13. Hypothetical reconstruction of the piers carrying a Chapel (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).



14. Hypothetical reconstruction of the "small square" church built on the piers of an older, ruined bridge over Wādī al-Kharrār (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).

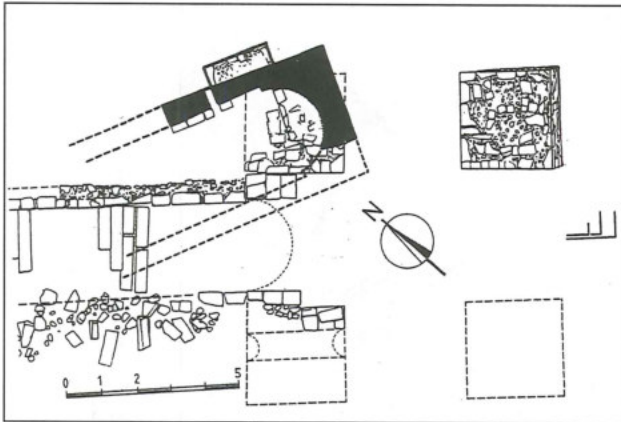
corresponding to the width of the staircase that leads from the four piers to the Basilica (the third church). *In situ* arch springers are found at a height of 1.80m above floor level, allowing for reconstruction of the arched gate. Thus the overall height of the latter can be calculated to be 3.00 to 3.05m.

During the documentation project, consideration was given to whether the four piers could in fact be the remains of a bridge over Wādī al-Kharrār. William Francis Lynch's 1848 map of the Jordan River documents the ruins of two Roman bridges, both considerably north of this site. At this site, Lynch marks "Pilgrim's Ford" (Rook 1998 "Sketch Map of the River Jordan": 17, illustration "Ruined bridge of Semakh"). According to this scenario, the "small square church" that is described by Arculfus as standing on four vaults, would in fact be built on the standing piers of an older, ruined bridge (see below, conclusions and Fig. 14). However, examination of the excavated area and extant remains did not identify any features, either — in sequence or in correspondence with the extant set of piers, — that could be interpreted as bridge elements. The mere existence of a gate leading to the banks underneath the piered structure would be somewhat unusual for a bridge. The piered structure is closely associated with the Staircase and the axial approach to the Basilica, thus allowing for a Byzantine date for the massive piers.

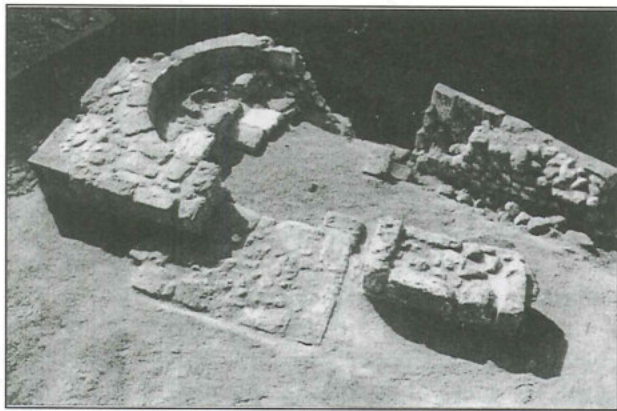
Chapel (the fourth church)

At some point, after the destruction of the four piers, a small Chapel was built on the remains of the NW pier. The existing remains of the Chapel show that it was built using materials similar to all the churches mentioned above. There is only one course of sandstone wall remaining in its northern and northeastern parts. However, these remains are enough to assume a Chapel of about 3.05m wide and 5m long (Figs. 15, 16). In the midst of the northern wall an entrance, 1.6m wide, led to the Chapel in which only the whitish bedding of the pavement now remains. The northern wall is 0.60m thick and was built using sandstone ashlar (0.30m high) on the outer and inner skins. The core of the wall is densely filled with boulders and sandstone pieces that are well cemented. The apse is incorporated within the rectangular external walls and is almost semicircular (0.95m deep, 2.25m wide) with the eastern wall about 0.85m thick. The apse floor is around 0.15m higher than the floor of the nave. Again, only the whitish bedding of the floor remains in the apse. In the center of the chancel screen there is a reused white marble capital with sandstone ashlar around it.

The architects made use of the best-preserved pier (the NW pier) as the main foundation for the Chapel. But it is important to note that the chapel was not built parallel to the pier walls. In other words, the Chapel is oriented almost exactly east-west, and was larger than the pier. Hence the fol-



15. Plan of the Chapel (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).



16. The Chapel from the north (photo by Rustom Mkhjian).

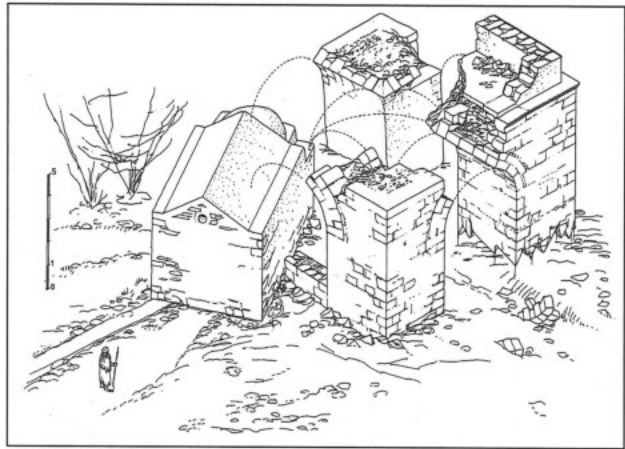
lowing can be deduced:

1. Floods and/or earthquakes had destroyed whatever superstructure the four piers carried, and debris filled the area.
2. The baptistery area below the structure of the four piers was no longer in use.
3. The staircase had partially collapsed and was covered by alluvial deposits.
4. The Basilicas had also been destroyed; reused marble capital at the center of the chancel screen and other reused stones seen in the southern section of the Chapel are evidence of this.

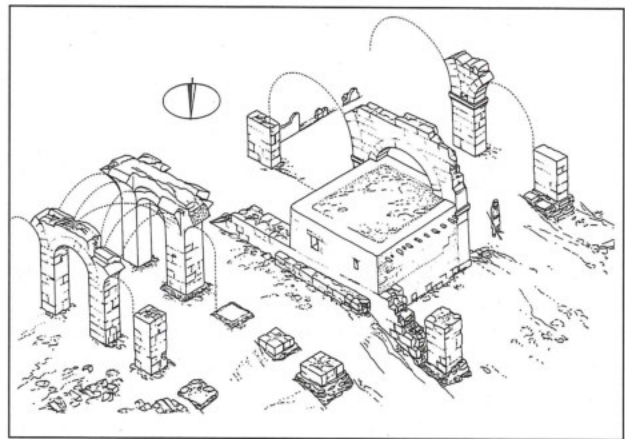
It therefore appears that this small Chapel was a later memorial at a location held sacred, perhaps as a reminder of the original function of the four piers or of the structure that had been supported on those piers (Fig. 17).

Later Structures (Late Islamic Structures)

M. Waheeb refers to a late Islamic layer in the Basilica (2001: 423, fig. 9; 2002; Abu Shmeis and Waheeb 2002). The plans of the related walls are incorporated in figure 5 and a hypothetical re-



17. The Chapel atop the ruined piers (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).



18. Umayyad room built between the wall and the north colonnade of the Basilica (the third church) with the ruined Pillared Hall in the foreground (drawing by Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos).

construction is shown in Figure 18.

Conclusion

A comparison of the architectural remains with the historical texts is enlightening. For a prior discussion of a number of the texts see Waheeb (2001: 424-25). Although a great number of pilgrims visited the site, only a few described what they saw in any detail. In AD 530, *Theodosius* (14-15) said:

“In the place where the Lord was baptized there is a single marble pillar, and on the pillar an iron cross has been fastened. There too is the Church of S. John the Baptist, which the Emperor Anastasius built: this church is very lofty, being built above large chambers, on account of the Jordan when it overflows”.

The connection between this account and the Pillared Hall has already been noted by Waheeb (2001: 425). The traveler of AD 670, *Arculfus* (37-38) said:

“a stone bridge is carried on arches to the bank,

across which men go to the cross and descend by a slope to the bank, ascending as they return. At the edge of the river is a small square church, built, as is said, on the spot where the garments of the Lord were taken care of at the time He was baptized. This is raised, so as to be uninhabitable, on four stone vaults, standing above the waters, which flow below. It is protected above by slacked lime, and below, as has been said, is supported by vaults and arches. This church is in the lower ground of the valley through which the river Jordan flows”.

Waheeb (2001: 425) associated this description with his third or fourth churches. However, it is more likely, given Arculfus's description of the church being “on four stone vaults”, that what he saw was a structure carried on the four piers (Fig. 13 or, much less likely, Fig. 14). Arculfus' description of a slope might fit well with the staircase. His mention of a stone bridge, however, is more difficult unless there was once such a bridge out to the place where the cross was and there is now no trace of that structure.

Dating to AD 754, the text of St. Willibald (18) describes what is at the place where Jesus was baptized: “A church stands there now, raised up high on stone columns, and underneath the church is now dry ground, where our Lord was baptized in this very spot”. This text would seem to be too late to be referring to the Pillared Hall, but might refer to the four piers and the presumed church above those piers. This theory would be reinforced by the fact that hundreds of cross marks were found in the lower parts of the piers. Pilgrims who were baptized in the place where they believed Jesus had been baptized presumably left these. A traveler in AD 1106-1107, *Abbot Daniel* (27-28) said:

“It is a couple of good bow-shots from Hermon to the ancient Monastery of St. John, where there was a large church dedicated to St. John the Forerunner. Not far from the altar of this church, upon an elevation on the east side, there is a little chapel with an altar. This marks the place where John the forerunner baptized our Lord Jesus Christ. The place where Christ was baptized is distant from the river Jordan as far as a man can throw a small stone”.

Given the date of this text it is probable that what he saw was the Chapel built on the ruins of the four piers.

The succession of structures at this site is testimony to the forces of nature and to the determination of the believers to build memorials at what they believed was the original site of the bap-

tism of Jesus. Had the structures been built in a less precarious location, they would probably have survived, albeit with modifications, into modern times. Floods and earthquakes, however, repeatedly destroyed the memorials until, at some point, the site was abandoned.

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