

WĀDĪ AL-KHARRĀR ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT (AL-MAGHTAS)

by

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Introduction

The ministry of Tourism in cooperation with the Ministry of Water and Irrigation are preparing a master plan for the tourist development of the baptism site Al-Maghtas on the Jordan River. In fact, field operations, of Wādī al-Kharrār and the adjacent area have already started in January 1997 as part of the cultural impact assessment of the site. The Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DAJ) has chosen the Wādī al-Kharrār area in particular, so as to protect the archaeological sites from threats of destruction by initiating an emergency archaeological survey, followed by test soundings and comprehensive excavations.

The work plan was divided into the following three sections:

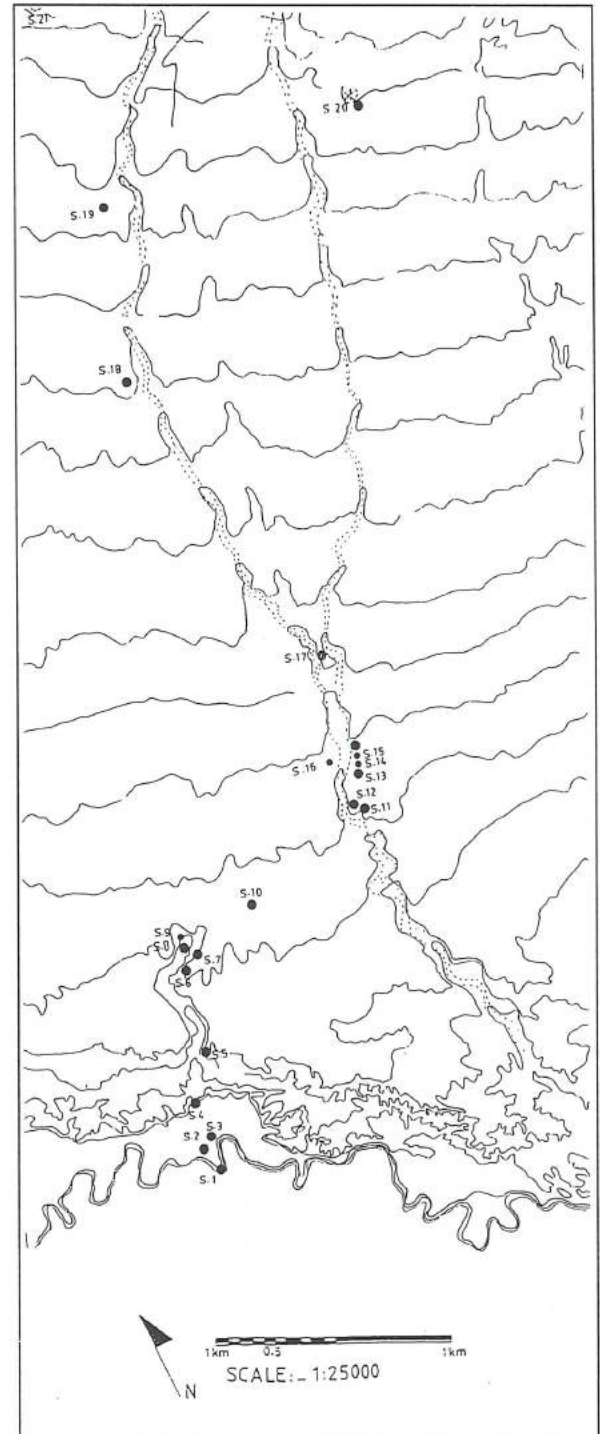
- Survey
- Excavations
- Restoration

The Survey

The survey, conducted by the DAJ team, has located 21 sites, (Fig.1) some of which were identified for the first time. Since much of the area is covered by accumulation of deposits from alluvial and cultivation activities, in addition to numerous mine fields, the limits of the discovered archaeological sites are still being investigated

The discovered sites belong mainly to the following archaeological periods:

1. Chalcolithic-Early Bronze Age Periods:
site No.17
P.G.coordinates 206.2,137,4.
2. Iron Age I-II: site No.18 P.G coordinates
203,7,138,4.
3. Early to Late Roman periods: site No 7



1. Archaeological sites discovered during the survey of 1997.

P.G coordinates 203,7,138,4.

4. Early to Late Byzantine periods: site No.3

P.G coordinates 202,2,138,4.

5. Islamic period (Umayyad): site No. 12

P.G coordinates 205,1,137.1.

The Roman and Byzantine periods, combined, are represented at the two sites on the basis of this survey alone. One way say that Wādī al-Kharrār has shown a record of continuous occupation. However, it is important to stress an almost total absence of pre-historic sites and materials, while the periods between the first century BC and the seventh century AD mark the high point of human occupation and intensive exploitation of the limited resources in the area.

The sites fall under five main categories:

- Agricultural sites
- Religious sites
- Habitation sites
- Water installation
- Sherd scatter
- Unspecified sites

The important result of the survey is the discovery of several archaeological sites in an area, which today looks totally inhospitable: As can now be seen, man was able to adapt to the harsh environment. In fact, adaptation was only possible through a number of factors one of which was the territorial link with the plateaus in Ghawr al-Kafrayn, ar-Rāmeḥ and the Jordan River. It seems that these 'links' were explored during the Roman and Byzantine periods.

The Excavations

Several factors were considered in the work plan for the excavation of the discovered sites. Some of these were the examination of the size and nature of the area, the depth of the archaeological deposits and the fact that the sites may be very important for the early history of Christianity.

The ongoing excavations by a DAJ team along the Wādī al-Kharrār, east of the Jordan River have identified the remains of several architectural features such as churches,

water installations and other buildings.

The most important discovery is the remains of a church, immediately adjacent to the east of the Jordan River, with fine coloured mosaic floors Corinthian capitals and pottery sherds, all dating back to the Late Roman, Byzantine and Late Islamic periods. The second important site comprises structures on and around Tall al-Kharrār, located two kilometers east of the Jordan River and adjacent to the spring and small oasis at the head of the wadi.

The site continued to be used from the Roman up to the Late Byzantine period. Excavations of this settlement have revealed three plaster-lined pools, and a system of water pipes and channels to carry water to and from the site. In addition, several mosaic floors and associated buildings were discovered: one of these floors has an inscription consisting of five lines mentioning ROTORUIS as the Head of the monastery, translated as follows (see Fig. 2): "By the help of the grace of Christ our God. The whole monastery was constructed in the time of Rhetorios, the most God-beloved presbyter and Abbot. May God the Saviour give him mercy".

Furthermore, the DAJ team has identified two natural caves, which had been transformed into hermit grottas and monk cells. Other caves certainly remain to be identified. Excavations are still continuing on five sites located near the eastern side of the Jordan River and along the southern bank of



2. Tall al-Kharrār: Mosaic floor with inscription.

Wādī al-Kharrār.

The discovery of Roman and Byzantine remains at Wādī al-Kharrār, confirms stories told in the Gospel and that these sites were an integral part of the local history.

The discovered buildings at al-Kharrār (Fig.3) and its related outposts, further down the northern coast of the Dead Sea, had played a vital part in the recorded events. What supports the association of the site with biblical history is that the area of al-Kharrār was at a point near the River to which old roads came down. The road which concerns us most is, about four and one half miles down-stream, where the monastery of St. John stood, on a low hill, seven hundred yards west of the River. And on other side the eastern side the road comes in from the east. Both the circumstances of John's work and the archaeological discoveries emphasize that John's activities were accomplished on the eastern side of the river as well. There is a clear reference to John's work, in (John 1:28 and 10:40) where it is stated that he carried out baptisms in Bethany beyond the Jordan River.

In addition to that, pilgrims from Bordeaux (333 AD) and Theodosius (530 AD) have stated that the place of the baptism had some connection with Tall al-Kharrār from which Elijah was taken up to heaven and

they located this place on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moreover, in Jhon Moschas' writings in the seventh century, he mentions 'Sapsaphas' near Wādī al-Kharrār, and he also says that the patriarch Elias of Jerusalem (464-518 AD) had built a church and monastery there.

Recent excavations in the southern al-Ghawr at Nimrīn, Iktanū, al-Hammām, Wādī al-Kafrayn, as-Suwaymah, az-Zāra, Dayr al-Qaṭṭār al-Byzantī and Dayr 'Ayn-Abāṭā help in studying the importance of sites related to our area.

Wādī al-Kharrār deserves not only excavation and preservation, but also some degree of aesthetic and archaeological development in order to become, once again, a focal point of attraction in the whole area of the Jordan Valley.

Restoration

Given the unique spiritual and environmental character of the area, a long term strategy for the protection of the discovered archaeological sites were adopted by the engineers and archaeologist of the DAJ team.

Particular emphasis was given to conservation work at Tall al-Kharrār during the 1997-98 excavation season. The first job was to repair the damage done by erosion and earthquakes. Some field stones were re-



3. Tall al-Kharrār. 1997 excavations.

placed including the strengthening frames of other stones. Original blocks were joined back together so as to put them in their original position.

Acknowledgement

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