

# DOCUMENTATION OF ‘AYN SĀLIM NEAR THE ESBUS-LIVIAS ROAD

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## **Introduction**

‘Ayn Sālim is located on the western slopes of Mādabā, with its nearby springs, the *tall*, the Roman road (Esbu-Jericho) and its watchtowers. The site disappeared from the pages of history after the Arab conquest in 636AD, after which no more pilgrims visited this ‘Ayn Nūn (Aenon) east of the Jordan river, adjacent to the southern bank of Wādī Ḥisbān and immediately north of the lower part of the famous Roman road.

Archaeological survey and excavations by the Department of Antiquities (DoA) of Jordan during 2001 revealed the presence of new architectural remains dated to the Iron Age II, Roman and Byzantine periods, as well as pottery sherds, grinding stones and white mosaic fragments scattered over a flat area of 10 acres on the way from the site of Jesus’s baptism up to Mount Nebo on the western slopes of Mādabā (MMC 1897).

## **Field Operations**

There are a number of traditions that help us to identify ‘Ayn Nūn (Aenon) and Sālim (Salem). One of these locates ‘Ayn Nūn on the eastern bank of the Jordan river, since we know from John 1:28 that John the Baptist was active in this region. Support for this comes from the Mādabā mosaic map, which has an ‘Ayn Nūn (Aenon) just northeast of the Dead Sea. “Aenon, where now is Sapsaphas” identifies with Wādī al-Kharrār, the place where recent archaeological explorations have found extensive early Roman-Byzantine remains in the Jordan valley, on the eastern side of the Jordan river, which have been dated to the period of John the Baptist (Waheeb 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b, 2002a, 2002b).

Another tradition locates Aenon in the northern Jordan valley, on the west bank some eight miles south of Scythopolis (Bethshan). Eusebius (265-340) places “Aenon where John baptized” eight miles south of Scythopolis, near Salem and the Jordan (Onomasticon 1904: 40; Joseph 1987). He lists various places in Palestine under the name Salem (Genesis 14:18). Only the first words of his text remain to us, but according to Procopius, who quotes him, he knew of “another village called Sālim in the plain of Scythopolis. It was called Salumias” (Onomasticon 1904: 152, Note 4).

Jerome translated Eusebius’s text concerning Sālim literally into Latin. He translates the words missing from the Greek text available to us as Procopius does, but adds once more the distance from Scythopolis: eight miles. About 390AD, he regarded Jerusalem as the Salem of Melchisedech. Then, in 398AD, he changed his mind and said: “Salem is a town near Scythopolis and it is still called Sālim. There they show you the palace of Melchisedech, the vast ruins of which indicate how splendid the old building must have been” (Ep. 73: CSEL LV 20 f; Ep. 108, 9 CSEL LV 314 [Here he thinks erroneously, in the year 404, that Jerusalem was at first called Jebus and then later Salem, This does not constitute a retreat to his former line of argument; he simply wishes to leave the city with this name, and now takes the residence of Melchisedech to be Scythopolis]). In those days the place was called Salumias, and also Salem. Such double names are not uncommon (Kopp 1963).

The evidence of the *Chronica* of 334AD is important because it is independent of Eusebius. According to this, Scythopolis is situated



1. Map showing the location of holy sites east of the Jordan river near Ain Salem.

“near the town of Salem where Melchisedech, priest of the most high God, reigned”. Aenon is not mentioned but, along with the nearby Salem, was part of the territory of Scythopolis.

Egeria appears to have visited a place called Aenon: “Then I remembered that according to the Bible it was near Salem that holy John baptized at Aenon. There was a kind of pool in front of the spring at which it appears holy John Baptist exercised his ministry of Baptism” (Wilkinson 1977: 127, 1981). Egeria again separates Salem from the springs by a mere two hundred paces. At the top of the hill she found a church, while at the foot of the hill she saw the ruins of Melchisedech’s palace. However, according to Holscher (1910: 24), Egeria’s indication of distance did not agree.

Antoninus Martyr, after his description of the eastern side of the Jordan river in 570AD, states: “and near there is a city which is named Salamaida [he refers to Livias where al-Kafrayn and ar-Rāmah villages are situated]. In this place are hot baths which are called the bath of Moses (Tall al-Ḥammām) where also lepers are

cleansed. And there is a fountain of very sweet water which is drunk as a cathartic and heals many sicknesses” (Antoninus 1896: 9).

Antoninus described the holy places close to the eastern bank of the Jordan in much more detail than any of the earlier pilgrims. The city of Salamaida was located at al-Kafrayn, which is around 500 meters north of ‘Ayn Sālīm on the eastern side of Jordan river. Without any tangible evidence supporting his claim, Tobler tentatively identifies Salamaida - which he takes to be a compound of Salem and Amatha - with Salem near Enon. The hot baths (that is to say the so-called bath of Moses) were identified with the pool of hot sulphurous water at Tall al-Ḥammām in the same area, north of ‘Ayn Sālīm and east al-Kafrayn village on the eastern side of the Jordan river. This is the same place which Picirillo connect with Livias, the plains where the hot baths known as Livias or Julias during the Roman period were located (Picirillo 1978, 1996).

Theodosius fixed the location of the baths, saying the city of Livias lies beyond the Jordan

twelve miles from Jericho, and that “[i]n this Livias Moses struck the rock with his rod, and the waters flowed out. Thence emerges a rather large stream which irrigates the whole Livias... there are the warm waters where Moses bathed, and in these warm waters lepers are cleansed”.

The *Chronicon Paschale* (631-641AD) has Abraham crossing the Jordan after conquering the kings of the east at Damascus. Melchisedech greeted him there, for God had called him on account of his holiness “into the land beyond Jordan, to the town Salem, which I saw” (Kopp 1963: ). The ‘land beyond Jordan’, means the west bank, for Abraham was coming from the east.

Later Albright investigated the hill near Salem and concluded the following: “The absence of Roman pottery proves that it is wrong to identify Tall ar-Ridra with Salumias of Eusebius or the Salem of John” (Albright 1895: 509). Albright suggests Umm al-‘Amān to the south-east of ‘Ayn ad-Dayr as the place of Aennon. Larange later found some ruins there, with a marble pillar (Albright 1895: 509) but no conclusive evidence.

### Field Documentation

Turning again to the eastern side of the Jordan river, where two seasons of survey and excavation conducted by a DoA team between 2001 and 2002 - and more recent analyses of the excavated materials - have revealed architectural remains in several locations in the ‘Ayn Sālīm area just 6km east of the traditional Jordan river baptism site. The discovered remains dated from 900 BC to the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD [The excavations were conducted by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and were headed by the author of this article. The survey covered the spring of Ain Salem and approximately 6 km<sup>2</sup> of the surrounding area, including the lower parts of Wādī Ḥisbān as well as the Ešbus-Jericho Roman road and Livias plains (modern villages of al-Kafrayn and ar-Rāmāh)]. They had close links with the major site of Jesus’s baptism near Wādī al-Kharrār, where identical material was found at the Maqbarat al-‘Ajājrah site. Nowadays the most visible site in this area east of the Jordan river is Tall ‘Ayn Sālīm, which stands immediately south of the lower part of Wādī Ḥisbān, close to the paved high-

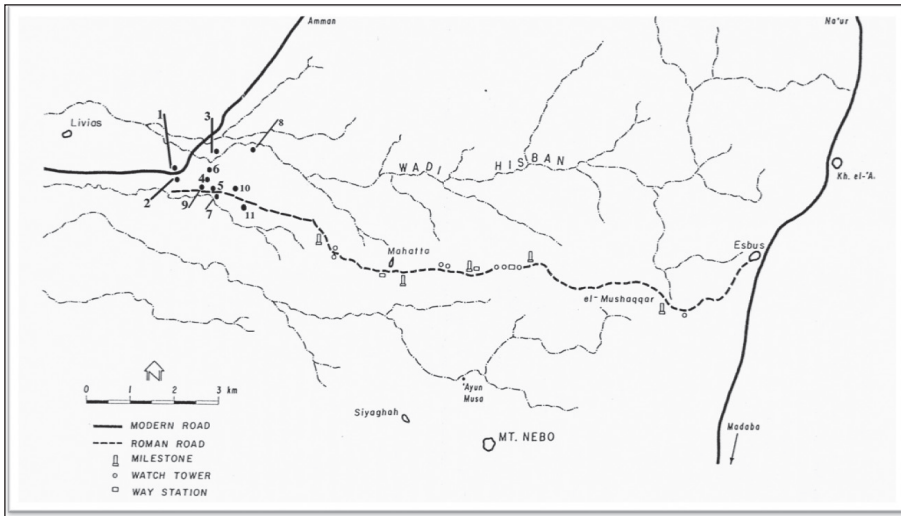
way on the stretch of land leading westward to the Dead Sea shoreline. At the point where Wādī Ḥisbān enters the floor of the valley, the area was until 2002 private property, but after that it was subjected to extensive survey and excavation.

Excavations were concentrated on the *tall* (site No 4) and the watchtowers (site Nos 7, 10 and 11). The results revealed the presence of Iron Age II remains, with substantial remnants of human settlement being exposed on the western side of the site. The site was reused during the Roman and Byzantine periods, represented by the discovery of several types of building between ‘Ayn Sālīm and ‘Ayn Sālīm al-Fawara, just to the north of the Roman Ešbus-Jericho road.

The Iron Age remains occupy the acropolis area of the *tall* and consist of square and rectangular rooms built of undressed limestone blocks. The Roman and Byzantine remains occupied an area of approximately 4 acres (the ‘village site’) on the flat area to the east of the acropolis. Several water channels were found on the surrounding plains which direct water from the springs to several gardens, agricultural fields and occasional courtyards near the Roman road. In addition, architectural remains occupied the flat areas to the north, on the edge of Wādī Ḥisbān between the above-mentioned two springs. Several caves related to ‘Ayn Sālīm were found here, some with carved stone steps that have survived until the present day. However, most of these remains have suffered severely from destruction caused by natural and human factors.

The recovered artifacts and details of construction suggest that the channels and water installations date back to the Early Roman period and continued to be used into the late Byzantine and Islamic periods.

Excavations at the adjacent sites (Nos 7, 10 and 11) (**Fig. 2**) yielded quantities of Roman-period pottery mixed with a strong presence of late Byzantine sherds - which relate to the continuation of settlement at ‘Ayn Sālīm, possibly as a station for pilgrims en route to Mount Nebo. Excavations at the small sites discovered on both sides of the Roman road indicate a function related to a final-usage period in the Byzantine era, possibly as watchtowers to con-



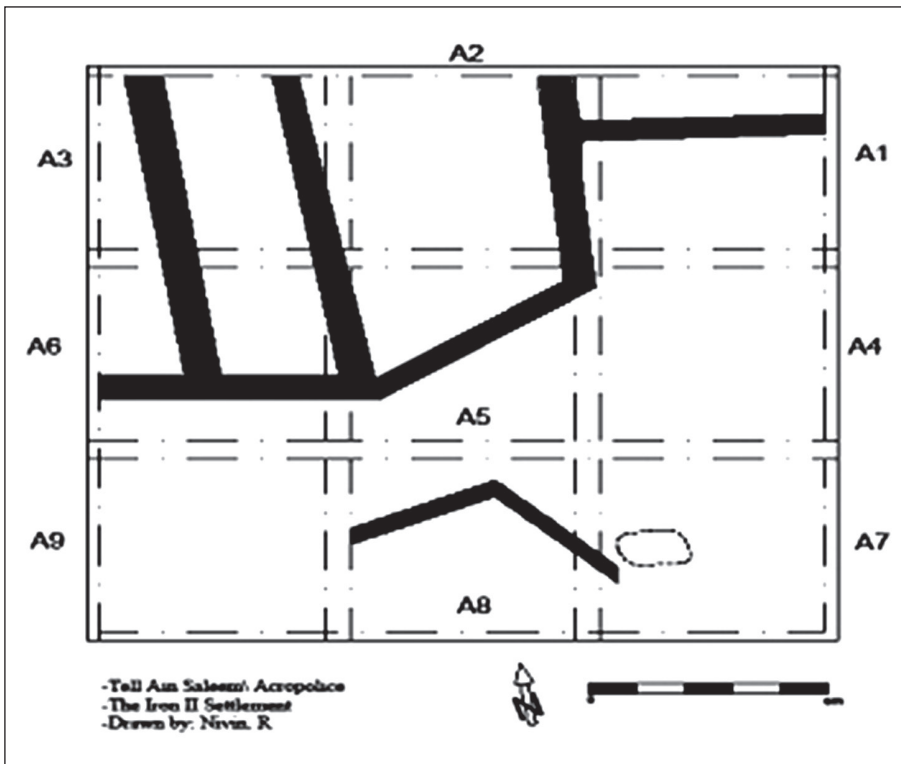
2. Map showing Ain Salem and the surrounding area: (1) Tall Iktanu; (2) Tall Al-Ḥuṣan; (3) Dolmen field; (4) Tall ‘Ayn Sālīm; (5) ‘Ayn Sālīm; (6) ‘Ayn Sālīm Fawara; (7) Watch tower; (8) Walls and canals; (9) Caves; (10) Watch tower; (11) Watch tower.

control the Roman road and safeguard the pilgrim caravans coming from the west bank and site of Jesus’s baptism. These towers have a strong connection with Tall Salem, which might have been used as a pilgrim station during the Byzantine period. In addition, we should take into consideration the well-known site Mahatta al-Hujaj (‘pilgrims’ station’) which exists to this day and is situated on top of the high mountain overlooking Ain Salem to the west. This pilgrim station was built 2km to the west, close to Mount Nebo and Moses’ springs on the way to Esbus (Hesban).

**Conclusion**

The place Aenon near to Saleem is situated close to Mount Nebo and Moses’ springs, while Mukāwir is not so far from the location where John was beheaded according to the Gospels. Also, Bethany Beyond the Jordan lies to the west of this site. All these sites support the assumed importance of the geographical area east of the Jordan river in the vicinity of the historical Esbus-Livias-Jericho road.

The recovered Iron Age II material and architecture at Tall ‘Ayn Sālīm gives a clear indication of strong connections with nearby hills



3. Top plan of excavation results at Tall ‘Ayn Sālīm.





4. Excavations at Tall 'Ayn Sālim (Waheeb 2001).

in the same area such as Tall Habasah, Matabba and 'Irāq Al-Amīr (Waheeb 2017), which Prag has attributed to the same date.

According to Antoninus, “On that side of Jordan is the fountain where John used to baptize, from it to the Jordan is two miles. In the valley itself Heilas (Elijah) was found, when the raven used to bring him bread and meat. On the side of the valley live a multitude of hermits”. Antoninus, among the earlier pilgrims, mentions the spot as Salamaida. In placing it opposite Jericho, he is more in accordance with Josephus, who says that Elijah travelled towards the south, than with old tradition (Antoninus 1896: 40). The name Salamaida was subjected to change and was later replaced by Livias.

As elsewhere on the plain of Livias, surveys and excavations have been carried out here. After leaving Bethany Beyond the Jordan, 'Ayn Sālim became the center of the baptist community for some time.

We do not know how the name was originally pronounced. Salem was the religious name it acquired after the Romans built the road there. Its original name lived on alongside the religious one. With regard to its linguistic root, Salamaida could be derived from Salem. Salamaida may well be a popular variant of this name, transmitted orally.

Early tradition clearly mentioned the Aenon and Salem of John 3: 23 as being in the region of springs lying close to Bethany Beyond the

Jordan (John 1: 28). At this place, the voice of one crying in the wilderness must have sounded for a long time in the memories of the people.

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