

## RECENT DISCOVERIES IN BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN

Mohammad Waheeb

Recent archaeological discoveries during 2001 revealed the presence of architectural remains related to the Byzantine Period. Several rooms built on the eastern bank of Jordan River are thought to be where St. Mary the Egyptian (*Maqām*) lived in the eastern side of the river is where she used to lived where the monk Zosima visited her and tells of her journey from Egypt to Jerusalem and then to the eastern side for the calling of the spirit. It is where she dreamed of Mary the Egyptian, were she crossed the sacred river, and where worship to God was according to the fortune's of the patriarch of Jerusalem. The story is as follows:

In her youth Mary chose to live a disreputable life in Alexandria. One day, out of curiosity, she joined some Christian pilgrims who sailed to Jerusalem. During the voyage she seduced many of the pilgrims. She kept living this kind of destructive life even in Jerusalem. Until, on the day of the Honor of the Holy Cross, she joined the pilgrims in the church of the Holy Sepulcher where the relic of the cross of Jesus Christ was displayed.

When she reached the church door, she suddenly felt herself repelled by some secret force, and having vainly attempted three or four times to enter, she retired to a corner of the church yard, and was struck with remorse for her wicked life, which she recognized as the cause of her exclusion from the church. Bursting into bitter tears and beating her breasts, she began to bewail her sins. Just then her eyes fell upon a statue of the Blessed Virgin above the spot where she was standing, and in deep faith and humility of heart she besought our Lady for help and permission to enter the church and venerate the sacred wood on which Jesus had suffered, promising that if her request was granted, she would then renounce forever the world and its way, and forthwith depart with her so ever our lady might led her. Encouraged by prayer and the mercy of the mother of God, she once more approached the door of the church, and time succeeded in entering without the slightest difficulty. Having adored the holy Cross and kissed the pavement of

the church, she returned to our Lady's statue, and while praying there for guidance, she heard a voice from a far telling her that if she crossed Jordan, she would find rest. That same evening Mary reached Jordan, and the following day crossed the river and wandered eastward into the wilderness that stretches towards Arabia.

Here she lived alone for forty seven years, apparently subsisting on herbs, when a priest and monk, named Zosimus, who, after the custom of his brethren, had come out from his monastery to spend Lent in the desert, met her and learned from her own lips the strange and romantic story of her life. As soon as they met she called Zosimus by his name and recognized him as a priest. After they had conversed and prayed together, she begged Zosimus to meet her at the Jordan River on Holy Thursday evening of the following year and bring with him the Blessed Sacrament. When the appointed evening arrived, Zosimus came to the spot that had been indicated. After some time Mary appeared on the eastern bank of the river, and having made the sign of the Cross, walked on the western side. Having received communion, she raised her hands towards heaven, and cried aloud: "Now thou dost dismiss thy servant O lord, according to thy word in peace, because my eyes have seen thy salvation". She then charged Zosimus to come in the course of a year to the spot where he had first met her in the desert adding that he would find her then in what condition God might ordain. He came but only to find the poor saint's corpse, and written beside it on the ground a request that he should bury her with a statement that she died a year before on the very ground on which he had given her Holy Communion far away by the bank of the Jordan River aided, we are told by a lion.

He prepared her grave and buried her. He returned to his monastery, where now for the first time, he recounted the wondrous story of her life.

### Site of St. Mary of Egypt (*Maqām*)

The site, discovered over two years ago, was lo-



cated 50m east of the river and was surrounded by tamarisk trees all sides. The structure is bordered by Lisan marl cliffs to the east, the Jordan River to the west and the remains of John the Baptist church 100m to the south.

The surface survey in 1999 revealed the presence of a few Byzantine pottery sherds mixed with sherds of modern pottery. The team decided not to excavate the site at first, because its architecture and other artifacts such as pottery sherds suggested that they were relatively modern remains from the turn of the century, and piles of stones and sand on the top of the structure were the remains of recent activities of the Jordanian army (Fig. 1).

The site was reexamined during the 1999-2000 season. Several test trenches were dug in different locations on and near the site, revealing more Byzantine pottery sherds and well-cut ashlar (Fig. 2).

A systematic and comprehensive excavation started at the site aiming to discover the lower re-

mains and to understand the correlation between the site, the Jordan River and other Byzantine building remains discovered at the site of Jesus' baptism. The excavation has revealed two rooms from the 5th-6th century (Byzantine period) and two other rooms, which were added later, probably during the Ottoman period (Fig. 3).

#### Room No. 1

It is located in the western section of the structure. It is square shaped, measuring 5.55m x 6.10m, and was built of well-cut dressed sandstone ashlar. The doorway, 1.00m wide, was built in the southern wall (Fig. 4).

#### Room No. 2

This room was built adjacent to room No. 1. The western wall of this room, which measures 0.75m, was probably added in a later period, and served as a division wall between the two rooms.



1. The site before excavation.



2. The site during the survey.



3. Remains of St. Mary house (Abel 1932).



4. A nearby structure.

The rectangular room measures 4.44m x 6.10m. The walls of the room were built of well cut dressed sand stone ashlar. The doorway, 1.00m wide, was built in the southern wall (Fig. 5).

The two originally connected rooms were reused in the Ottoman period. Two rectangular rooms were added to the eastern side of the structure during this period

#### Room No. 3

Room 3 measures 6.00m x 3.30m and was built of stones from local fields and small pieces of broken sandstone ashlar. A small square structure of 1.85m x 1.65m was located in the north-western corner of the room (Fig. 6).

#### Room No. 4

This room measures 9.00m x 4.90m and was built of stones from the local fields and small broken pieces of sandstone ashlar. A small square structure measuring 1.00m x 1.20m, located in the south-western corner, was probably used as a fireplace, some charcoal pieces were found during the excavation.

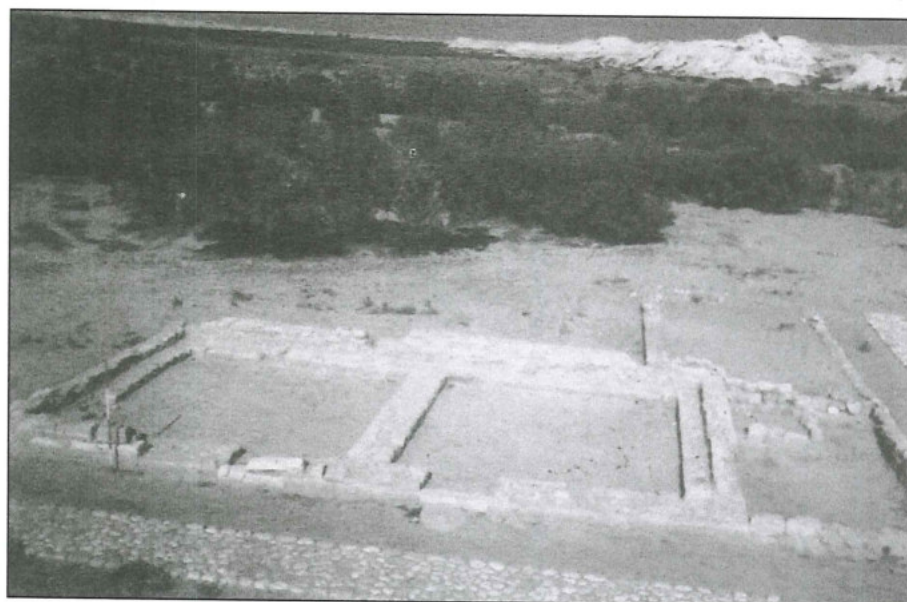
The later Ottoman rooms may have served as a part of the Ottoman security network in this region, since it was located near several strategic fords across the Jordan River (Fig. 7).

The Byzantine rooms were rebuilt and expanded in the Ottoman era, using stones that were robbed out of the nearby Byzantine church of John

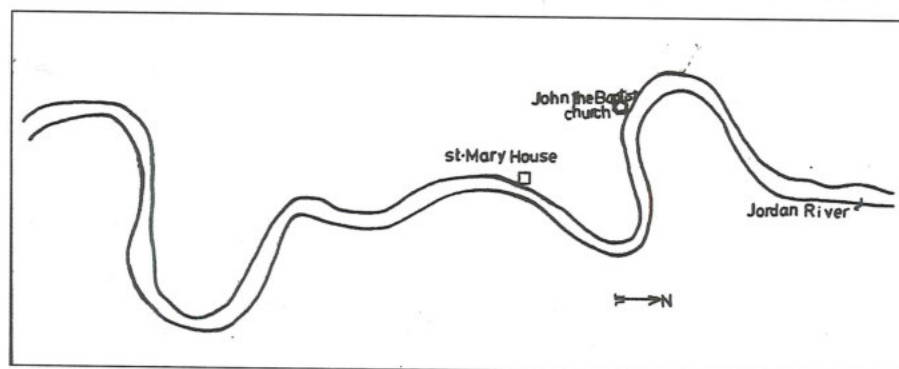




5. The site after excavation.



6. General view of the site.



7. A map showing the location of the site.

the Baptist. This church, known from pilgrim's accounts from the Byzantine and medieval periods, has been rediscovered and is being excavated by

the author. Several black marble blocks from John the Baptist church were found reused in the entrance and walls of the two rooms. In addition to

that, some other fragments were found reused in the courses of the walls of the Ottoman building. This indicates the continuous destruction of John the Baptist church even during the Ottoman period and later by the floods of the Jordan River (Fig. 8).

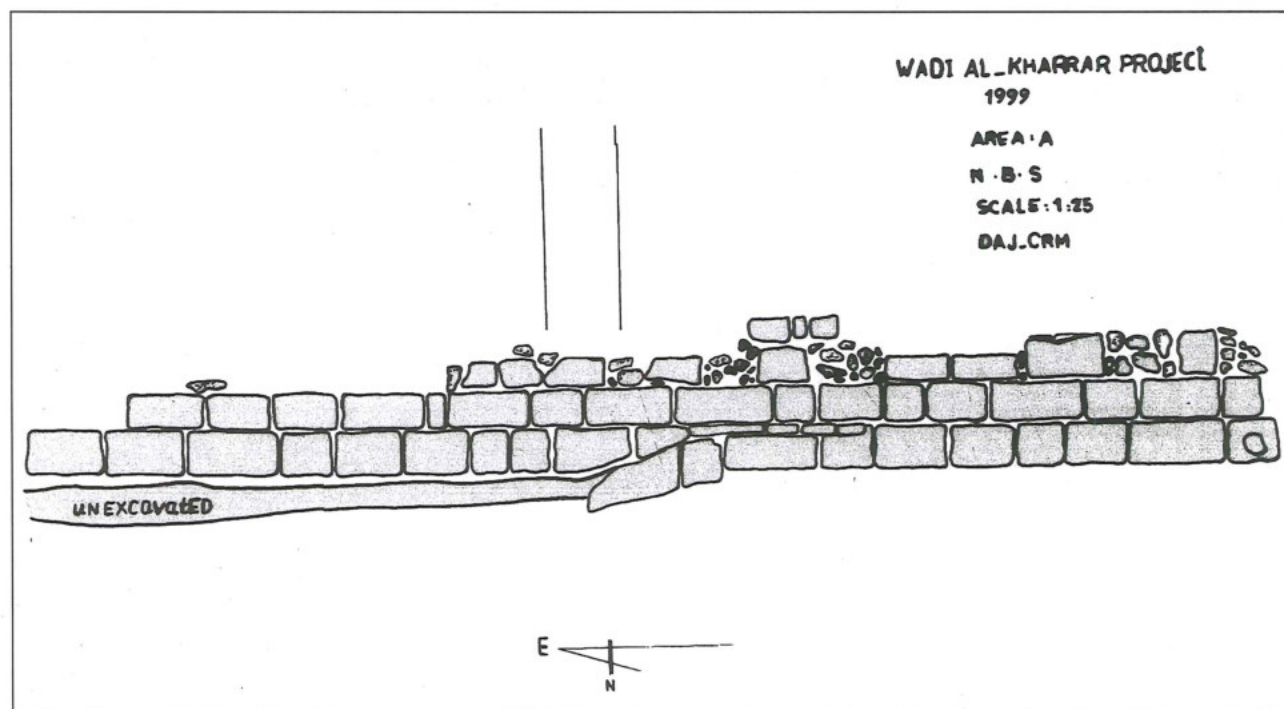
One of the aims of excavating this site is to study the possible correlation of the original two rooms with the story of the life of St. Mary of Egypt. This link is largely based on the work of French scholar F.M. Abel, who suggested in the turn of the century:

that either she used the rooms herself or that they were built after her death in the Byzantine era to commemorate the spot where she is thought to have lived and had been buried (Fig. 9).

The local people who lived in the area during the period between 1930 and 1967 still called the two original rooms the "Palace of the Lady" (*Qasr as-Sitt*). Due to the recovered architectural remains and other datable material, it is strongly suggested that the site that of Laura of St. Mary of Egypt,

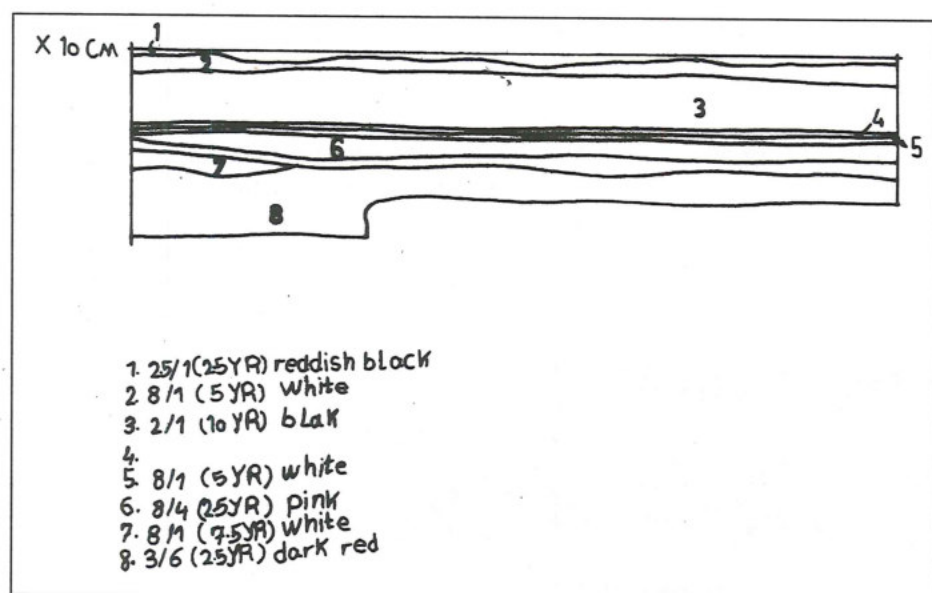


8. Part of the site during excavation.



9. Cross section.





10. Stratified layers.

built during the Byzantine period and destroyed by the earthquakes and the floods of the Jordan River in the late Byzantine period. During the nineteenth century the site was rebuilt and reused by local settlers (Fig. 10).

### Selected References

#### New Testament

Abel, R.

- 1932 Exploration du sud-est de la Vallée du Jourdain. *RB* 43 (Suie et fin): 237-263.

Hirschfeld, Y.

- 1992 *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period*. Yale University, U.S.A.

Waheeb, M.

- 1997 Report on the Excavations at Wadi el-Kafrein Southern Ghours (Al Aghwar). *ADAJ* 41: 463-468.  
 1998 Wadi Al-Kharrar al-maghtas. *AJA* 102, 3: 601.  
 1998 New discoveries near the baptism site. *Occident and Orient* 3, 1: 19-20.  
 1998 Wadi Al-Kharrar. *AJA* 102, 3: 106.  
 1998 Wadi al-Kharrar Archaeological Project. *ADAJ* 43: 635-638.  
 1999 Wadi al-Kharrar Archaeological Project, the Monastery. *ADAJ* XLIII: 549-557.  
 2001 Archaeological Excavations at the Baptism site Bethany Beyond the Jordan. *Bible and Spade* 14, 2: 43-53.  
 2001 Wadi al-Kharrar Archaeological Project, The Survey. *SHAJ* 7: 591-601.