

# RECENT DISCOVERIES EAST OF THE JORDAN RIVER WĀDĪ AL-KHARRĀR ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROJECT PRELIMINARY REPORT

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## Introduction

Modern archaeologists have some difficulty in locating the sites where John the Baptist and Jesus Christ lived and taught. Indeed, they are sometimes embarrassed to find one or more sites for the same event. There is in the human nature a deeply rooted desire to know exactly where significant events occurred, such as the real site of Christ's Baptism. A recent archaeological survey and excavations confidently provide explicit answers to such desires. The Ministry of Tourism/ Department of Antiquities team identified one of the most important archaeological sites during systematic excavations in the area of Wādī al-Kharrār (وادي الخزار) in the Jordan Valley.

Our way out took us to the end of the "John the Baptist spring", at the point where the spring empties into the Jordan River. At the end of Wādī al-Kharrār, holy men (monks) had many cells and there are remains of mosaic tesserae and well-cut ashlar scattered in the "Jungle" area (az-Zawr الزور) east of the Jordan River.

The site is located approximately 200m to the east of the river and 100m to the north of the "traditional place of Baptism". The whole site was covered by tamarisk trees from all sides, while Lisan marl cliffs are still visible to the east of the site.

Wādī al-Kharrār is the only route still linking the site (the Zawr area), with the other sites located to the east (Ghawr area). The water coming through the Wādī al-Kharrār is still feeding the lower area and still affects the discovered archaeological remains.

Systematic survey and excavations at the site started in 1998, when the team tried to document and excavate all the threatened remains along the eastern bank of the Jordan River. The discovered remains mainly consist of three churches, the second church built partly on the foundations of the first one, while the third church is built directly on top of the second one (Fig. 1).

## The First Church

The preliminary results of the excavations



1. The location of the three churches during excavation.

showed foundations for arches and walls, with partially preserved mosaic and marble floors *in situ*. Since no excavations have been previously performed on the eastern side of the Jordan River, Church No. 1 may represent (and fits) the descriptions of the ancient pilgrims who passed through this area on their way from Jerusalem to Mount Nebo through the eastern side of the Jordan River, at the area of the newly discovered churches (Fig. 2). This discovery clarifies all doubts about the exact location of the church, which was built on the eastern side of the River to commemorate the sacred event of the baptism.

The builders of the church dug deep into the ground to prepare the foundations and to strength-



2. The discovered foundations of church no. 1 (John the Baptist Church).



en the structure against the hazards of the Jordan River flood and the water of the Wādi al-Kharrār spring, especially during the winter and spring seasons. They used local small and medium-sized fieldstones mixed with gray lime to fix these stones in constructing the bases and foundations of the church. The depth of these bases ranged between 1 to 1.50m and well-cut sandstone ashlar were added over these bases in order to carry the pillars, which consisted of pieces of sandstone ashlar, well organized and well prepared. Recently the team identified a quarry located 20km east of the church near the village of Suwayma سويمية. Perhaps they brought the sandstone ashlar from this quarry by camels and mules to build churches and other associated structures.

The excavations revealed several well-cut ashlar fallen and scattered between the foundations of the church, mixed with Byzantine pottery sherds and some coins. It is difficult to find standing pillars in the church, although one of these pillars was found intact, fallen on the floor, and consisting of well hewn sandstone ashlar. Unfortunately the stones of the other fallen pillars and the church were removed and used to build other nearby structures.

A layer of dark ash was noticed under the fallen pillar indicating a destruction phase. It is reasonable to assume that a high structure using the arch and vault system was standing at the site. Many well-cut key stones were recovered, scattered all over the site, indicating remains of fallen arches. Judging from the available evidence it is clear that these arches were designed to support a church, which was later destroyed by the river, the water of the spring and by earthquakes.

#### *The Entrance*

Depending on the discovered foundations it is logical to assume that a staircase from the western side lead up into the church. The discovered pillar foundations at this church consist of three rows oriented east-west. The pillar foundations of the western section were built close to each other while the other foundations are at a reasonable distance.

This leads us to suggest that when people coming from the west crossed the Jordan River, the first site they met was the church on the eastern side, and they entered the church by using the staircase.

Some of the church arches were noted in the survey conducted by Abel (1932).

#### *Dating of the Church*

Among the discovered materials from the ex-

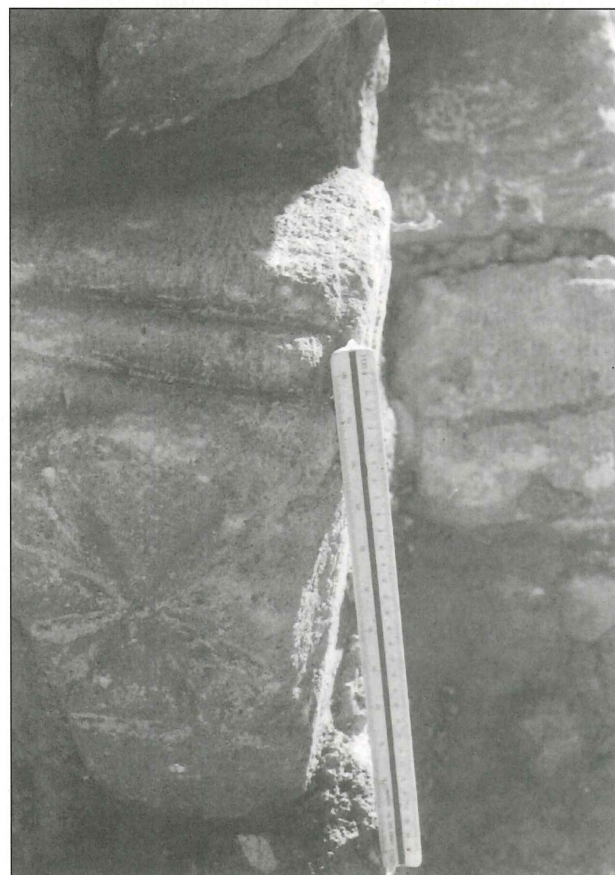
cavations were quantities of pottery sherds, mostly dated to the Byzantine period, and some coins dating to the fifth and sixth centuries AD, including some from the reign of the emperor Anastasius (AD 491-518).

Other discoveries consist of roof tiles, used for roofing the church, and marble fragments as remains of the pavement. A white marble fragment was discovered which has an inscription in Greek characters, possibly representing the name of the church.

#### **The Second Church**

On the southwestern corner of the third church, the team decided to investigate the foundations of the third church and the effect of the flood on the western side of the site. Limited test sounding followed by limited excavation revealed the presence of layers of destruction directly over a marble pavement. More investigations revealed stone pillars and fallen ashlar mixed with lime, and white plaster still adhering to them (Fig. 3).

Another test trench was conducted to the north which revealed the marble pavement and a broken marble column in the section, used as foundations



3. Reused decorated ashlar found in the walls of the second church.



for the third church (Fig. 4).

A marble floor of square, triangular, and octagonal shapes is most likely part of a church built directly beside the first church. When the first church collapsed and was destroyed, the builders decided to build another church, this time without pillars and vaults to carry the body of the church. The second church was built directly on the natural ground (the alluvial sand of the river) while the pillars of the first church to the north functioned as a protection wall against the threats of the floods of the river. Despite this, it is clear that the marble floor and the whole church were affected by flood and earthquakes, destroying the second church and giving the builders a reason to build the third church on top.

More excavations at this church will answer several questions about its size, shape and accurate date. Depending on the recovered materials, the church is dated to the Byzantine period.

### The Third Church

On the same spot as the first church, remains of another church were recovered through the systematic excavations on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. The church is partly built on top of the southern pillar foundations of the first church, reusing some of the well cut fallen sandstone ashlars.

The third church covered an area of approximately 20 x 20m. The builders of the church used several materials to construct a unique church east of the Jordan River, among the recovered materials were well dressed sandstone ashlars, marble pavements of different kinds and colors, and mosaic floors with floral and geometric designs, which

reflect high standards of skillful techniques.

The church consists of three aisles, the northern aisle was built directly on part of the first church while the central and southern aisles were built on top of an older structure, possibly another church, which was partly excavated. The altar of the church was located in the midst of the central aisle which was surrounded by marble pavement from the east (Fig. 5).

The floor of the church was paved with colored mosaic. Part of this mosaic is still *in situ* in the chancel screen area (Fig. 6), which represents floral designs and rosettes. The western section of the church was partly damaged and removed possibly by the flood of the river in the past. The builders of the church raised the level of the ground to keep the body of the church away from threats of the river flood. A thick layer of fill was added on the lower (former) church so as to raise the level of the ground.

Remains of arch springers that supported the



5. Cement bedding of the marble floor of the third church.



4. Marble pavement of the second church.





6. Colored mosaic floor of the chancel screen area of the third church.

roof are still *in situ*, but they severely suffered from destruction caused by flood, later occupations, and especially agricultural activities.

To the east of the altar, a square platform paved with marble slabs of different shapes and colors was discovered during the 1999 season. The area measures approximately 6.30 x 4.30m. What distinguishes it is the staircase leading down to the water source. The staircase suffered from destruction, while some steps built of black marble ashlar are still *in situ*.

The northern and southern aisles were paved with colored mosaic floors of geometrical designs. Some of these mosaics are still *in situ*, especially in the southwestern corner of the southern aisle where

the fallen stones of the church still rest on this floor (Fig. 7). Among the discoveries is the chancel post, which was found resting on the marble floor of the chancel screen. In addition, there were many pottery shards, scattered marble fragments and mosaic tesserae (Figs. 8, 9).

Two marble Corinthian capitals were among the discoveries, it seems that they were used to decorate different parts of the church. Some white, red and black marble fragments were recovered while most of the marble fragments were either robbed or washed away in antiquity (Figs. 10,11).

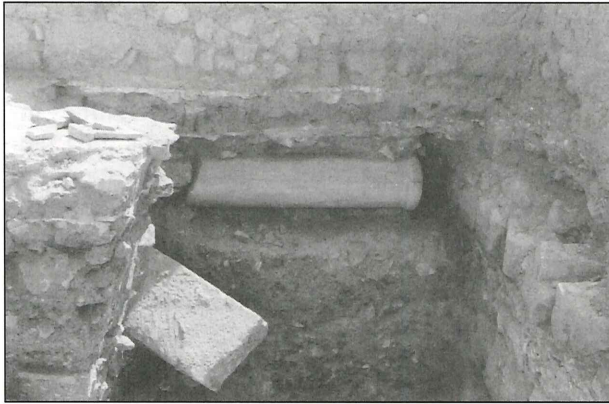
### The Pool

Not far from the John the Baptist Church, at ap-



7. Remains of mosaic floor and collapsed stones of the third church.





8. Broken marble column found in the debris.



10. Engraved stone with a cross, the third church.

proximately 250m to the east of the church near the point where the spring of John the Baptist empties into the alluvial area of the Jordan River, the Byzantines decided to build a large pool on a slightly raised Lisan Marl ground.

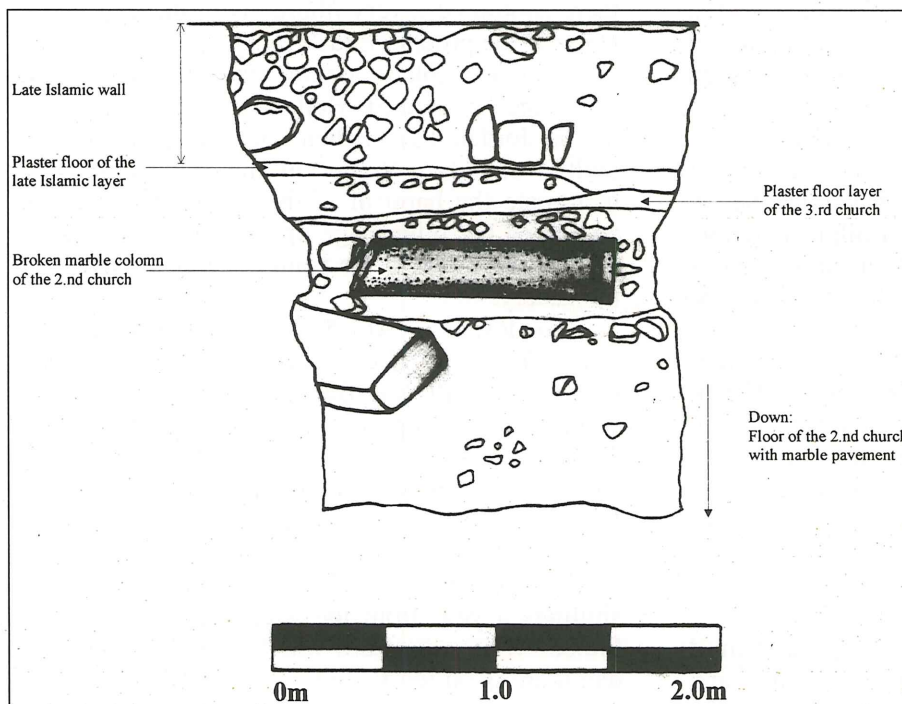
Reasonably it is difficult to build a pool in the alluvial area of the river, even on pillars and vaults. The pool with its staircase, inlet and outlet, represent the first Byzantine pool built beyond the river, not far from the traditional place of Baptism on the Jordan River.

The area of the pool was probably a natural pond during the Roman period and modified later during the Byzantine period, taking into consideration the needs of the pilgrims to be baptized or to bathe in the water of the spring during their holy journey to Bethany Beyond the Jordan. Very few



11. Corinthian capital found on the floor of the third church.

Roman pottery sherds were discovered around the pool, while most of the sherds may be broadly dated to the Byzantine period.



9. Section of the eastern cut of the late Islamic room, showing a broken marble column reused in the foundation of the third church.



The pool measures 15m east-west by 24m north-south, and 2m deep depending on the remaining courses. The builders chose the local fieldstones mixed with gray lime to build the foundations or the lower parts of the pool, while the upper parts were built with well-cut sandstone ashlar, probably brought in from the area of Suwayma and Wādī Ḥisbān.

The staircase, located in the southwestern corner of the pool, was plainly used to enable a group of people to go down into the pool and be immersed in water.

### Conclusion

The discovered archaeological remains on the eastern bank of the Jordan River clearly suggest the importance of this area during the early time of Christianity.

The recovered material from Elijah's Hill and the nearby sites such as site number "7" in the survey is clear evidence for the settlement of the area from the beginning of the early Roman to the late Byzantine periods. According to the descriptions of the pilgrims and travelers, the Byzantines recognized the site of Baptism on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. After AD 333, emperors, governors, monks, and saints started building monuments, churches, and water installations for the memory of the holy events which happened in this area.

The influx of the pilgrims increased the number of monasteries and churches located on the road between Jerusalem and Mount Nebo. One of the most important memorial churches was uncovered on the eastern side of the Jordan River, established along the pilgrims' route. This memorial church was not built to serve a community or a village, but to commemorate a sacred event (The Baptism of the Christ) and also to perpetuate the memory of the Lord and John the Baptist. It was a destination of pilgrimage and functioned as a pilgrim station. According to a pilgrims' descriptions, a number of monks was attached to the churches to serve the pilgrims.

The newly discovered church (the first church) is part of a complex that consisted of three churches. Emperor Anastasius built the church there and endowed a monastic community attached to it. This church was considered the most notable memorial church of St. John the Baptist on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, where the baptism of Jesus is traditionally said to have taken place.

Later on when the first church collapsed, the Byzantines decided to build the second and third churches. The increased number of pilgrims and the holiness of the site pushed them to build the

other churches to be used by the pilgrims who passed through this area toward the holy sites in the Jordan Valley.

The question here is why did the Byzantines insist on building churches in a dangerous area facing threats of the river flood, the spring flood and the earthquakes, then why did they decorate these churches with different kinds of beautiful marble and mosaic floors.

According to the Pilgrim of Bordeaux (AD 333-334): "Five miles from the Dead Sea to the Jordan, where the Lord was baptized by John. There is a Place by the River, a little hill upon the farther (left) bank from which Elijah was caught up into heaven".

The Roman five miles equal four and one-half English miles, from the Dead Sea upstream one would reach the excavated church. Regarding the little hill on the East Side, this would be the mound of St. Elijah or Jabal Mār Elias, or recently called Tall al-Kharrār in Wādī al-Kharrār/ Ghawr al-Kafrayn. The pilgrim apparently places the "place of baptism" on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, and associates with it the little hill where Elijah was caught up to heaven.

According to St. Hellana from *An Anonymous Life of Constantine* (AD 260-340): "When she had crossed the Jordan and found the cave, in which the former used to live, she caused a church to be made in the name of John the Baptist. Opposite the cave is a raised place at which Saint Elias was caught up to heaven, and there she decreed that there should be a very impressive sanctuary in the name of the prophet Elias".

It is reasonable to assume that the monks living in the area guided St. Hellana to the eastern bank of the Jordan River, then she was convinced to build a church in honor of the Baptist to commemorate the baptism of the Lord. Then Hellana continued her pilgrimage up through the Valley to Elijah's Hill, where the team of DAJ discovered a monastery.

Theodosius in AD 530, in his book *The Topography of the Holy Land*, said: "At the place where my Lord was Baptized is a single marble column, and on top of it has been set an iron cross. There also is the Church of Saint John the Baptist, which was constructed by the Emperor Anastasius. It stands on great vaults, which are high enough for the times when the Jordan River is in flood. The monks who reside at this Church each receive six shillings a year from the Treasury for their livelihood. Where my Lord was baptized beyond Jordan there is on the far side of the Jordan the (little hill) called Hermon where Saint Elijah was taken



up. It is five miles from the place where my Lord was baptized to the point where the Jordan enters the Dead Sea”.

Clearly Theodosius refers to the discovered church (Church No. 1) on the eastern side of the Jordan River and the recovered foundations of the arches and vaults still visible today, while some coins also found at the site date back to the period of Anastasius.

John Moschas, writing in the seventh century, mentions Sapsaphas near “Wadi al-Kharrar,” also saying that the patriarch Elias of Jerusalem (AD 464-518) had built a church and monastery there (Mosch: *Pratum* 1,2853). The church and monastery were recently discovered, built on Elijah’s Hill.

Arcluf visited the baptismal site in AD 670. He published his description in *Narrative about the Holy Land* as follows: “Right at the river’s edge stands a small rectangular church, which was built, so it is said, at the place where the Lord’s clothes were placed when he was baptized. The fact that it is supported on four stone vaults makes it usable, since the water, which comes in from all side, is underneath it. It has a tiled roof. This remarkable church is supported, as we have said, by arches and vaults, and stands in the lower part of the valley through which the Jordan flows”.

In his description Arcluf described the last church (Church No. 3, or Church No. 4 which is still under excavation), which was still standing during his visit to the site during the Umayyad period. He saw the water surround the church from all sides, which means water of the river and water of the spring.

It is clear that all the texts indicate that the original buildings were located on the east side of the Jordan River. The church of John the Baptist built by Anastasius has been partly demolished, the builders of this church tried to protect the body of the church by using an arch and vault system to enable the water of the Jordan River during flood time and the water of the spring (John the Baptist Spring) to pass underneath without affecting the church. Despite the destruction of the church by the water of the river flood and earthquakes, so possibly most of its remains had been washed away, our excavations uncovered the foundations

of this church while the upper parts had collapsed and were removed. Another church was built beside the former one, this church was partly excavated since the third church was built directly over it. Some discovered evidence proves that the flood partly affected the second church, later on after a period of time the third church was built.

Until 1900 there were ruins of a church on the east bank, which have also been washed away. At the beginning of this period many things changed. Regarding the topography of the eastern side of the Jordan River, depending on the descriptions of the pilgrims and the archaeological excavations, the discovered remains fit the early descriptions.

The archaeological remains of the early monuments can still be traced a short distance to the east of traditional place of baptism on the Jordan River, at a distance of less than 200 meters.

It is possible to say that the Persian devastation, the river flood and the Muslim conquest put an end to the Byzantine buildings on the east bank of the Jordan River, particularly in the Wādī al-Kharrār area. The first to refer to this turning is Arcluf (670), he presents the turning point, he saw a small church on the higher ground. After that date, the baptism was moved to the western side, since the remains of the churches on the eastern side could not be seen, partly destroyed by the earthquakes and covered by the flood of the river.

Day after day a new church was built on the western side of the Jordan River, while the buildings of the Byzantine churches on the eastern side disappeared gradually.

### Acknowledgment

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