

A Unique Byzantine Architectural Remains on the Eastern Bank of Jordan River

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Abstract

Bethany ("Bethabara" in some ancient manuscripts) has been identified on the eastern side of the Jordan River opposite Jericho and extending 2 km (1,2 miles) east, up a dry river-bed called Wadi el-Kharrar. Now the site has been excavated and developed for tourism, A low hill on the eastern edge of the site is called Jebel Mar Elyas, "Mount of Saint Elijah". Mentioned by several pilgrims in the Byzantine period, the site was identified in antiquity as the place where Elijah ascended to heaven. At the foot of Jebel Mar Elyas, a spring emerges into a series of pools where baptisms may have taken place in antiquity. Hermit monks carved caves in the rocks along the way and lived in them during the Roman and Byzantine era. Down near the Jordan River, excavation revealed the ruins of a Byzantine monastery with a church located at the traditional site where Jesus is said to have left his clothes during his baptism.

Keywords: Archaeology, Religion, Excavations, Caves, Architecture, Byzantine

Introduction

Bethany Beyond the Jordan or Site of Jesus Baptism located on the eastern side of Jordan River, to the northern part of the Dead Sea in Jordan Valley. According to the Gospels, John was baptizing in Bethany beyond the Jordan, which was undoubtedly on the east bank of the Jordan River. Bethany is sometimes taken to mean Beth-aniah or Bet-anniyah, which means "house of the boat" (Jn 1:28). The area is referred to again in (John 10:40) Wadi el-Kharrar was the center and core of this area during the pre-Roman, Roman and Byzantine periods. (Fig:1)

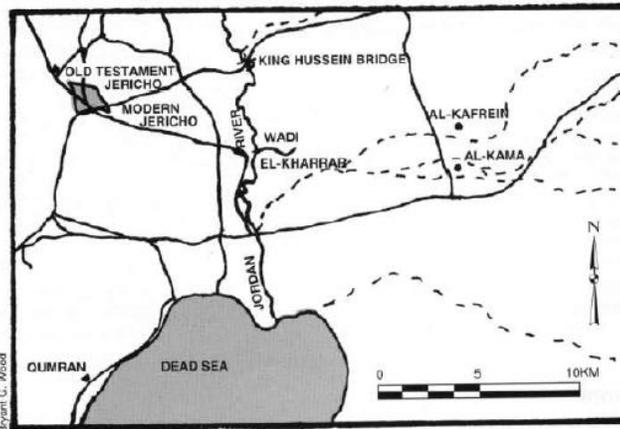


Fig1: A map showing the location of Bethany (Wadi El Kharrar)

New evidence may have finally pinned down the legendary 'Bethany beyond the Jordan' Substantial new evidence from archaeological excavations may have located where Jesus was baptized. Scholars long identified Jesus' baptism as taking place at the lower reaches of the Jordan River, east of Jericho - prompted by a combination of biblical references, Byzantine, and other mediaeval texts, and the uninterrupted traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church, which has custody of the area.

In 1884 monks repairing a church in Madaba, a small town 30 km SW of Amman (Capital of modern Jordan), were amazed to discover a large mosaic floor depicting a map of the Holy Land, and emphasizing its holy sites. It also labels all the baptism sites mentioned in the New Testament, but surprisingly confuses them all.

South of Beth-Shean the maps labels a site as “Aenon, near Salim”. No doubt it is referring to “Aenon near Salim” mentioned in John 3:23, and recorded by several contemporary pilgrims. Yet east of Jericho, the map labels the site of “Bethany across the Jordan” (John 1:28) as “*Aenon, where now [is] Sapsaphas*”. Such a place name is not known from the New Testament or any other ancient sources. The map also labels the western bank of the Jordan River at that site, but it names it “*Bethabarah, [place] of Saint John the Baptist*”. “Bethabarah” is a name given by some old versions instead of “Bethany” (e.g. Codex Sinaiticus), yet if so, it should have been on the eastern bank of the Jordan river, not the western one.

Apparently, the locations of the baptismal sites were mixed up during the Byzantine period. The artist of the Madaba map placed “Aenon” at two locations, and “Bethany” on the western bank of the river, but labeled it the alternative name “Bethabarah”.

The Madaba Mosaic Map has clearly indicated the Jordan River and a spring on the eastern side of the Jordan River with the inscription “Ainon where now is Sapsaphas” (Avi-Yonah 1954). The descriptions of the pilgrims and travelers refers to a spring called “John the Baptist spring” located east of the Jordan River, in this general area. It is clear that John the Baptist came to this place (Wadi el-Kharrar) where Elijah had come before him and had been caught up to heaven. So John chooses this place and began to act in the spirit and power of Elijah. Though it should be emphasized that John the Baptist was not Elijah (Jn 1:21), he was the voice of one “crying in the wilderness.” The Classical remains discovered during the excavations indicate a considerable settlement near Wadi el-Kharrar. The area was known to pilgrims and many people started visiting the area, reaching a high point during the Byzantine period

Travelers Description:

The main mound at Tell al-Kharrar has long been called Elijah's Hill, Tell Mar Elias in Arabic. This reflects its identification as the place from where the Prophet Elijah ascended to heaven (2 Kings 2:5-14). Today the area is called Jabal Mar Elyas or Al-Maghtas, "the place of baptism" or "of immersion." Byzantine-era Christian testimony remains one of the strongest sources of evidence for placing Jesus' baptism here. Starting in the 3rd century, Christian writers and pilgrims associated this region with Elijah's ascension and Jesus' baptism.

Pilgrim of Bordeaux, 333AD

The anonymous Pilgrim of Bordeaux in 333 located the site of Jesus' baptism at five Roman miles (7,400 meters) north of the Dead Sea shore - near where Wadi al-Kharrar joins the Jordan River.

Theodosius, 5-6thAD:

According to the pilgrim Theodosius' account (dated around 530), in the late-5th century, the Emperor Anastasius built the first church to commemorate Jesus' baptism on the east bank of the Jordan. The Pilgrim of Piacenza (570) first specified that the baptism site was directly opposite the monastery of St. John, whose rebuilt remains still stand on a hilltop some 800 meters west of the river, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Pilgrim of Piacenza 6th AD

The **Pilgrim of Piacenza** was the first to mention the spring of John the Baptist at the site of Tell al-Kharrar, 3 kilometers east of the river. Writing between the 9th and 11th centuries, the monk Epiphanius mentioned a cave near a spring nearly 4.5 kilometers east of the river, where John the Baptist lived and baptized. The early 12th-century traveler Abbot Daniel mentioned a grotto of St. John the Baptist east of the river.

John moschus (ca. ad 615)

John moschus relates a tale about the area where John the Baptist lived:

There was an elder living in the monastery of abba Eustorgios whom saintly archbishop of Jerusalem wanted to appoint higoumen [the monk in charge of a monastery] of the monastery. <The candidate>, however, would not agree and said: “I prefer prayer on mount Sinai.” the archbishop urged him first to become <higoumen> and then to depart <for the mountain > but the elder would not be persuaded. So <the archbishop> gave him leave of absence, charging him to accept the office of higoumen on his return. <The elder> bid the archbishop farewell and set out on the journey to Mount Sinai, taking his own disciple with him. They crossed the river Jordan but before they reached even the first mile-post the elder began to shiver with fever. As he was unable to walk, they found a small cave and went into it so that the elder could rest. He stayed in the cave for three days, scarcely able to move and burning with fever.

Then, whilst he was sleeping, he saw a figure who said to him: “tell me, elder, where do you want to go”? He replied: “to mount Sinai. “The vision then said him:” please, I beg of you, do not go there” but as he could not prevail upon the elder, he withdrew from him. Now the elders fever attacked more violently. Again the following night the same figure with the same appearance came to him and said: “why do you insist on suffering like this, good elder? Listen to me and do not go there.” The elder asked him: “who then are you”? The vision replied: “I am John the Baptist and that is why I say to you: do not go there. For this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Many times did our Lord Jesus Christ come in here visit me. Give me your word that you will stay here and I will give you back your health. “The elder accepted this with joy and gave his solemn word that he would remain in the cave. He was instantly restored to health and stayed there for the rest of his life. He made the cave into a church and gathered a brotherhood together there; the place is called Sapsas. Close by it and to the left is the Wadi Chorath to which Elijah the Tishbit was sent during the drought; it faces the Jordan (Moschus 1992:4-5)

The elderly monk was going from Jerusalem to Mount Sinai by means of Transjordan and the road that went south to Ayla on the Red Sea / Gulf of Aqaba. He crossed over the Jordan River and was soon struck by a fever before going more than one Roman mile (1.480m). The apparition of John the Baptist took place at Sapsas (Sapsaphas), a place located on the Madaba mosaic map immediately to the east of the Jordan River (“Aenon, where now is Sapsaphas” (Alliata & Piccirillo 1999:51, 54). The story locates both the place where Jesus came to visit John and to which Elijah fled in the area of what is now Wadi al-Kharrar. The site became a place for a brotherhood of monks on the Jordan’s east bank.

Both the pilgrim of Piacenza and John Moschus distinguish between the place where the baptism of Jesus was commemorated on the banks of the Jordan River and place near the spring of Aenon / Sapsaphas to the east where Jesus and John stayed. The same distinction is made on the Madaba mosaic map: Bethabara on the river and Aenon / Sapsaphas beyond the Jordan.

Arculf (7th AD) states:

The holy, venerable spot at which the Lord was baptized by John is permanently covered by the water of the Jordan River, and Arculf who reached the place, and has swam across the river both ways, says that a tall wooden cross has been set up on that holy place ...

The position of this cross where, as we have said, the Lord was baptized, is on the near side of the river bed. A strong man using a sling can throw a stone from there to the far bank on the Arabian side. From this cross a stone causeway supported on arches stretches to the bank, and people approaching the cross go down a ramp and return up it to reach the bank. (PPTS, 1895)

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 vaults, makes it usable, since the water, which comes in from all sides, 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. But in the upper part, there is a great monastery for monks, which has been built on the brow of a small hill nearby, overlooking the church. There is also a church built there in honor of Saint John Baptist which, together with the monastery, is enclosed in a single masonry wall (Wilkinson, 2002:190-91)

Arul’s account places the baptism of Jesus within the river itself. A tall wooden cross marks the spot. From this cross. A causeway stretches to the east bank, where a ramp leads upward. Arculf recounts that a church on this bank (the eastern one), “right at the river’s edge.” Marks the spot where Jesus placed his clothes at the time of his baptism. It is located in the lower part of the valley. Beyond, there is a monastery that overlooks the church. At the monastery, there is a church built to honor John the Baptist; together with the monastery, it is enclosed in a single masonry wall. Much of this is similar to the account of Theodosius.

Epiphany the monk

Epiphany (last half of the seventh- first half of the eighth century) writes:

....And, about three miles beyond the Jordan a cave in which lived the forerunner. There too is the bed on which he slept, a natural shelf in the rock of the cave, and a small chamber. Inside the cave is the sound of water and in the room is a spring in which holy John the forerunner used to baptize (Wilkinson, 2002: 213-14). Epiphanius places the cave in which John the Baptist lived about three miles from the Jordan. It is also here that he places John’s baptizing activity.

Willibald (8th AD) said:

... The monastery of St. John the baptism, where there are about twenty monks. One night they remained there, and then went on above a mile to the Jordan, where our lord was baptized. Willibald knew of a monastery dedicated to Saint John the Baptist. He indicates, furthermore, that the distance from this monastery to the Jordan, where Jesus was baptized, is about 1,480 meters.(Wilkinson, 1977)

Abbot Daniel (ad 1106-1107) states:

Not far away from the river, a distance of two arrow throws is the place where Prophet Elijah was taken into heaven in a chariot of fire. There is also the grotto of Saint John the Baptist. A beautiful torrent full of water flows over the stones towards the Jordan, the water is very cold and has a very good test; it is the water that John drank while he lived in the holy grotto (pilgrimage of the Russian abbot Daniel to the holy land PPTS, 1895; Wilson, 1895:29).

Abbot Daniel places of the site of the ascension of Elijah and the grotto of John the Baptist at a distance from the Jordan. At this locations, water flows towards the Jordan. The abbot appears to be describing Wadi al-Kharrar.

After the period of the crusades, the memory of the place of the baptism was not lost. For example, Grethenios (AD 1400) writes: "it is said that beyond the Jordan one can find the grotto of Saint John; it is the place where he baptized the people. We did not go there for fear of the Arabs"

From all the above it is evident that from the sixth century on, the monastery of Saint John on the east side of the Jordan river remained the place for the localization of the sanctuary of the baptism. Moreover, the texts tell of the existence of a second church on the eastern bank of the river in front of the monastery of Saint John.

During the crusades, the Jordan River became a frontier line between the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem and the sultanate of Damascus. This political situation resulted in the abandonment of the sanctuaries on the east bank of the river, and the ceremonies were carried out on its west bank. This situation has continued until the present.

The above texts are witness to a constant placement of the place of John the Baptist's activity "beyond the Jordan." The fourth gospel consistently emphasizes that his initial activity was "across the Jordan" (3:26; 10:40) and furnishes the further specification that the precise place was called "Bethany across the Jordan" (1.28). This is now supported by the recent archaeological excavations at Elijah's hill, the Wadi al-Kharrar, and along the east bank of the Jordan where the Wadi enters it.

The rich textual evidence from the 4th through 12th centuries reveals a consistent tradition locating John the Baptist's settlement near the spring source of Wadi al-Kharrar, in an area characterized by springs and caves some two kilometers east of the Jordan River.

Field Operation in Bethany Beyond the Jordan Archaeological

The site called "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (UTM coordinates: 0743979 E/3526317N; elev. -304) is located east of the Jordan River, west of the modern village of al-Kafayn, and within sight of the town of Jericho west of the river. Situated at the head of W al-Kharrar, eventually feeding into the Jordan River around 2 km to the west. Due to the springs, an oasis dominates the starts of Wadi al-Kharrar and the site of tell al-Kharrar. Moreover, thick and green vegetation is characteristic of the entire length of the Wadi. As recent archaeological activity shows, the place of Bethany beyond the Jordan was located at or around the natural hill called tall al-Kharrar. Following the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace agreement, archaeologists promptly resumed the search for the place called "Bethany beyond the Jordan." That search had begun over a century earlier.

The archaeological remains were located in front of the remnants of a monastery. In addition, the remains of hermit's cells near the spring of the Wadi at Jabal Mar Elyas/ Saint Elijah's Hill were identified. The two sites were visited until 1947 when, due to the political situation in the area, they had to be suspended. The six-day war of 1967 resulted in this area of the river Jordan becoming a fortified zone and thus off limits to civilians. With the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, the area was once again opened up for explorations. (Waheeb,1999b)

Recent archeological activity in the area of Wadi al-Kharrar has identified remains dating from the Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Periods. These remains indicate that the area was inhabited during the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. They also show that monks and hermits lived in the region during the byzantine period and the beginning of early Islamic times. Thus, a brief description of the archeological remains is presented here (fig.2).

Elijah' hill

Saint Elijah's Hill –Jabal Mar Elyas in Arabic – is located at the south-eastern end of Wadi al-Kharrar. The hill is associated with the Prophet Elijah's ascension into heaven (2 kings 2.5-15). Here is located the sanctuary that attracted pilgrims into the medieval period.

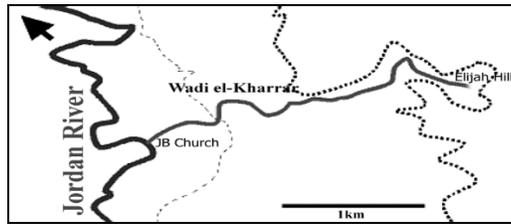


Fig:2 Major sites along Wadi El-Kharrar.

Rhetorius monastery

The byzantine monastery called monastery (fifth-sixth centuries) is located on Saint Elijah's hill at western edge of Wadi al-Kharrar, which connects it with the place where Jesus was baptized, a distance of ca. 1.5km to the west. It is on the pilgrimage route from Jerusalem to mount Nebo through Bethany beyond the Jordan. The name of the monastery comes from an inscription found in the apse of its northern church

The inscription reads:

(By the help of the grace of Christ our lord. The whole monastery was constructed in the time of Rhetorius, the most god-beloved presbyter, and abbot. May god the savior give him mercy) (Waheeb, 1998a:636) The monastery is comprised of several churches and other buildings within an enclosure wall – to protect from erosion rather than to serve a defensive function. An entrance in the northwestern wall leads to the living quarters of the monks. The monastery and its churches were probably built to commemorate John the Baptist and Elijah. Because of the spring, the monastery had a good source of water.

In the mid-to-late Ottoman period (16th-18th centuries ad), Greek orthodox monks established another monastery at the site, which consisted of structures for worship, residence, and accommodations for visiting pilgrims.

Northern church

The Northern church of the Rhetorius monastery has a typical byzantine design of an altar area separated from the nave – the central part of the church – by a chancel screen. A colored mosaic, which included cross marks and geometric designs within a frame, covered the floor. The inscription, cited above, comes from this church. The entrances to the church are in its northern and western walls.. (Waheeb, 1999a)

Western church/ cave church

The Western church of the monastery is comprised of two parts (fig. 5). One part consists of a semi-circular apse cut into the natural rock. There are lamp niches carved into southern and eastern walls. A chancel screen separates this part of the church from the second part, namely, the nave consisting of the main and two side aisles, separated by columns. Four column bases, built of well-dressed, square-cut sandstone blocks, are still in place. (Waheeb, 1999a)

The pools

Three pools are located on Elijah's hill. (Waheeb 1998; 2001a and b), the excavator, dates the first one, located on the hill's lower, southern slope, to the third-fourth centuries ad. The pool, rectangular in shape, had an inner staircase on the eastern side, the four steps of which extend the full width of the pool. The excavator assumes that pilgrims would descend into the pool to be baptized. The other two pools, dating from the late roman period, are located on the top of the northern edge of the hill, overlooking the northern church. They are almost square. Large ashlar blocks were added to the southwestern corner of the northwestern pool at a later period; they could possibly have formed a staircase to go down into the pool. Excavations under the damaged floor of the northeastern pool revealed a well or deep cistern, dating from the early roman to late. Byzantine Periods. It is built of well-cut sandstone ashlar. The pools received their water supply through channels carried over arches. Fig 3

Wadi al-Kharrar

Prayer Hall

What is believed to be a Prayer Hall is located down the slope of Elijah's hill and near its southern corner. It is a rectangular structure, measuring 10.70 × 7.40m, built of undressed field stones. A plain white mosaic pavement covered its floor, while the roof was probably made of wood and reeds. The excavator thinks that based on its construction and location it may have functioned as a prayer hall or chapel. It could date from before the fourth century AD. If so, it might be the earliest worship facility at the site. (Waheeb 1999b)

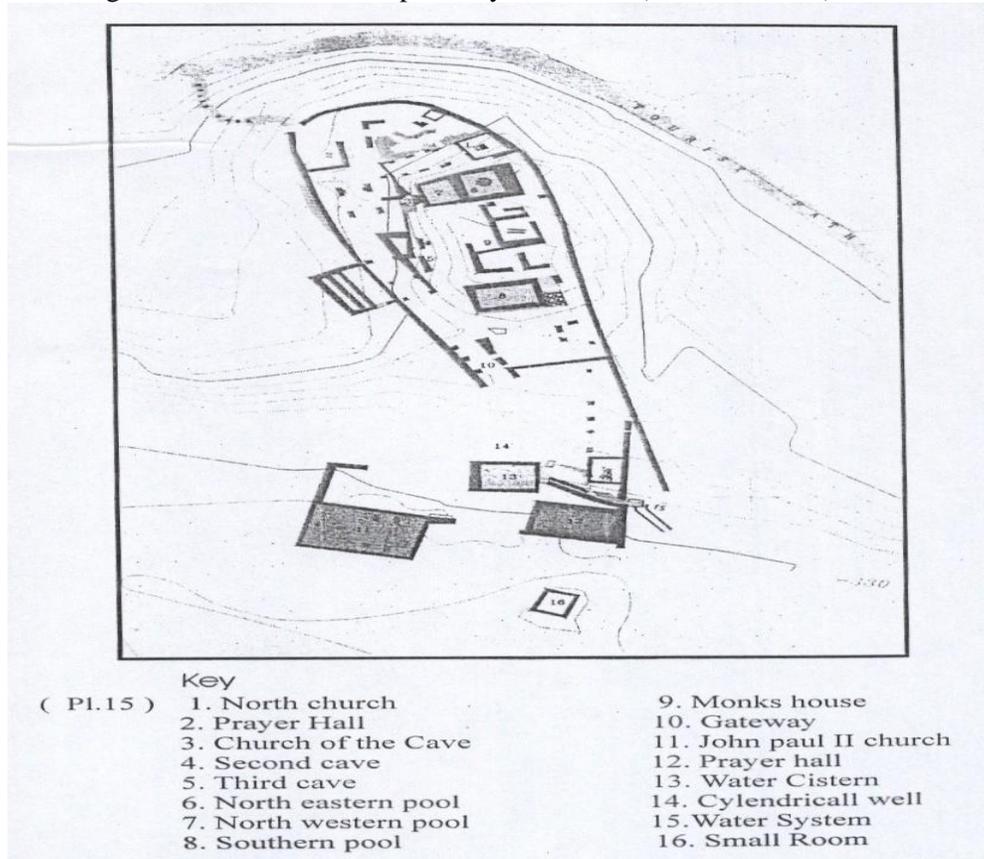


Fig 3: Site plan of Bethany beyond the Jordan

Water Installations

A Water system, consisting of a cistern and settling basins, is located near the Prayer Hall and the small chapel called the church of John Paul II. It was dug out of the natural marl rock and is the largest reservoir discovered at the site. Its inner walls are built of well-cut sandstone ashlar covered by a smooth layer of plaster to prevent seepage. The excavator thinks that the system was roofed by a vault system. He dates it to the fifth-sixth century's AD. The excavators have identified ceramic pipes 300 m to the southeast of the main settlement. These pipes would have brought water to the site from the nearby Wadis that flow into the valley from the foothills to the east. (Waheeb, 1998b)

The church of John Paul II

A rectangular church, measuring 13.65 × 9.45 m, is located on the saddle of land south of Saint Elijah's hill. The excavators think that incoming pilgrims used it for prayer and worship. The church had a mosaic floor with cross decorations and arches supporting the roof. One of these arches has been reconstructed. The structure was probably built during the fifth-sixth centuries AD. It is presently called the church of John Paul II to commemorate the pope's visit to and blessing of the site on March 21, 2000 (Waheeb, 1998c)

Ancient pool

The excavators discovered a large pool in the lower area of the site, just east of the Jordan river. The pool measures over 25x10 m and was constructed of large stones coated with plaster. It may have been used for group baptisms in the byzantine period since it could accommodate 300 persons. A canal directed water into the pool from a nearby spring to the north. Another canal carried water out of the pool's southern wall. On the basis of the materials recovered from the pool, the excavator dates the structure to the fifth-sixth centuries.

Cave cells

Surveyors in the area found two caves just to the north of John the Baptist spring. The caves were dug into the upper layers of the lissan marl cliffs and would have been used by monks as dwellings (Cells). They have prayer niches carved into their eastern walls. The monks would have gained access to the caves by using ropes or ladders. These caves could have been part of the monastery described previously.



Fig 4: Cave cells on the eastern bank of Jordan River (Waheeb1999)

John the Baptist church area

Three hundred meters east and 70m north of the present course of the Jordan River, archaeologists and architects have uncovered the remains of memorial churches in an area they are calling the "John the Baptist church area". Remnants of structures within this area are: pillared hall (the first church); lower basilica (the second church); basilica (the third church); room south of the basilica (mosaic pavement); staircase; tow piers; chapel (the fourth church); and later structures (later Islamic structures) (Waheeb, 1998a) see Fig 5.



Fig 5: Showing the excavations in on the eastern edge of the river (Waheeb2001)

All were built on the spot where believers located John's baptism of Jesus. Over the centuries, this series of churches was destroyed, at least in part, by floods and/or earthquakes; but they were rebuilt, because believers wished to have a memorial where they were convinced the baptism of Jesus took place. The structures dated back between the 5th and 12th centuries. Had they been constructed in a precarious location, they would probably have survived.

A compression of the architectural remains with the historical texts cited above is enlightening: Theodosius refers to what was probably the pillared hall, Arculf likely mentions a structure carried on four piers and possibly the staircase, Willibald may be referring to the four piers and the presumed church above these piers, and abbot Daniel probably mentions the chapel built on the ruins of the four piers. See Fig 6



Fig 6: Remains of Byzantine churches discovered on the eastern side of Jordan River (Waheeb2000)

Site of Saint Mary of Egypt

The Site of Saint Mary of Egypt consists of the remains of two adjacent structures dating from the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. The site commemorates the former Egyptian prostitute's repentance and miraculous conversion at the church of the holy sepulcher in Jerusalem in the fourth or fifth century. The story is told by Sophronius, the companion of John Moschus and later patriarch of Jerusalem. According to Sophronius, the voice of the Virgin Mary told Mary of Egypt to cross the Jordan River in order to "find rest." She lived along in this area east of the river for forty-seven years, fasting and praying. Before dying she was found by Zosima, a monk from a nearby monastery. Zosima prayed with her, listened to her story, and gave her holy communion shortly before she died. He buried her with the assistance of a lion. (Waheeb, 2004)

Site of Wadi Gharabah Caravanserai

The pilgrims continue their Journey from Baptism site walking along the side of the clay channels, which were constructed to supply the Baptism site and the pilgrims with water. A walk of one kilometers to the south east direction will bring the pilgrims to the Gharabeh Valley, where huge pools and rest houses were constructed, some of them were excavated.

Wadi Gharaba structure is a major Byzantine (Early - Late Byzantine) fort and caravanserai. The site consist of two large pools, a channel as well as the rest house (Caravanserai) measures ca. 22.60x 37.60m in the middle, there are extensive agricultural fields associated with the structures. The site is located at the southern end of Wadi Gharaba. Field work survey and excavations gives the measurements of the two reservoirs connected by a channel and pilgrim station were built in the middle between the two pools. (Waheeb 2018b Forthcoming)

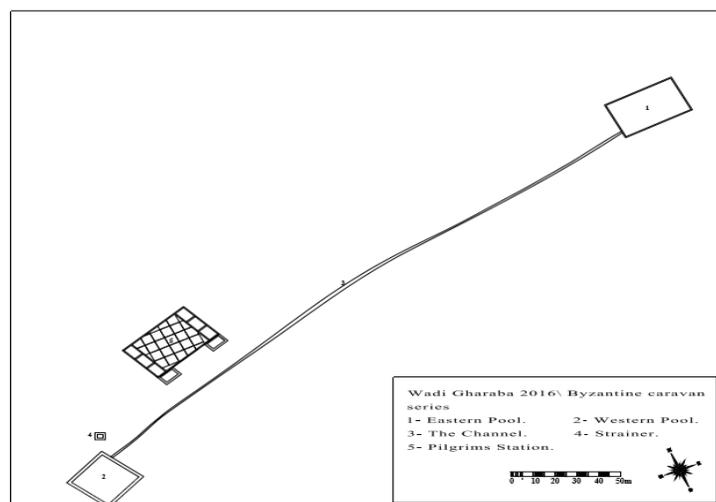


Fig7: Plan of the Channel of the water during field assessment (Waheeb, 2002)

Aenon Near to Saleem

The place of Aenon near to Saleem must have been so well known, that John states the name with great brevity, giving no further topographical reference. Recent survey and excavations on the eastern side of Jordan River in the area of Ain Saleem located close to the lower parts of Wadi Hesban shed light on new archaeological evidences such as churches, water installations, hermits caves, and active springs still running in the area, related to activities of John the Baptist during his ministry in Perea during the Roman and Byzantine periods (Waheeb2018a)se also ,(Kopp:1963).



Fig 8: Excavations in Tell Ain Saleem (Waheeb 2001)

Tyres Cave

(Tyres or Tyrus cave); that is considered a new discovery in Jordan. Recent excavation conducted in old Tyres (Modern Wadi-Sir) in Iraq al-Amir west of Amman City has revealed the presence of a number of the important archaeological building. One of them is a unique cave called by local community Mugharat al-Kaniseh, (Cave of the Church) or Kahf Al Maseih (Cave of Jesus) a site with the remains of Roman- Byzantine architectural remains. The cave with its two churches; the first located inside the cave with distinguished mosaic floor and artifacts; the second built outside in front of the cave entrance, paved with the colored mosaic floor with inscription and attached rooms.(Waheeb, 2001)

The cave, the two churches, and the surrounding monastic buildings indicated strong relations with the heritage of Jesus, John the Baptist, and disciples. The cave located on the old holy route close to the baptism site, Bethany Beyond the Jordan(site of Jesus Baptism) on the eastern bank of Jordan River. Recent excavations, as well as pilgrims and travelers description with holy text, refers to strong relations with early history of Christianity beyond the Jordan during the 1st century AD. (Safar,1974)



Fig 9: Front view of the external faced of the cave decorated with engraved cross.

Conclusions

There appears to be little doubt the eastern area of Jordan River (Perea) can be associated with Prophet Elijah's ascension to heaven. The location fits well with the traditions and narratives relating the crossing of the nearby Jordan by Joshua and the Elijah and the strong relations between Elijah and his successor Elisha. This could also be the location of Wadi Cherith, to which Elijah fled from Ahab, and where he was fed by ravens in the morning and the evening. The key discoveries are the Byzantine monastery and earlier Roman-era remains at Tell al-Kharrar; several medium and smaller Byzantine churches, chapels, monks' hermitages, caves, and hermit cells; a large Byzantine multi-church complex; a ceramic pipeline bringing water to the site from several kilometers east; a large plastered pool and adjacent khan halfway between Tell al-Kharrar and the Jordan; another pilgrims' rest station and khan like Gharaba, Aenon Near to Saleem, and Tyrues Cave located several kilometers east, on the ancient pilgrimage route to Mount Nebo.

The excavated main complex at Tell al-Kharrar, Aenon near to Saleem & Tyrues comprises structures on and around the small hills adjacent the springs at the head of Wadi al-Kharrar, Wadi Hesban, and Wadi Seir. Artifact evidence shows that the sites were inhabited from the Late Iron Age, Hellenistic/Herodian and Early Roman periods (2nd century BC to 2nd century AD), through the Early - Late Byzantine and early Islamic periods (1st to 8th centuries AD), and again in late Ottoman centuries. The discoveries have excited archaeologists and geographers alike. This seems the only site where textual, archaeological and traditional evidence converge. These new discoveries removed the puzzle about the precise site of Jesus' baptism, the different ancient names used to designate the area, the imprecise narrative in the biblical text, and the different modern sites where pilgrims commemorate the baptism now becomes clear.

John 1:28 and 1:35 explicitly names "Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing" as the location - though John is unclear as to whether the itinerant preacher was passing through, or lived there on a semi-permanent basis. John 10:40 mentions Jesus' escaping Jerusalem and going "away again across the Jordan to the place where John at first baptized ..."

John the Baptist and his connection to Elijah equally fit well in the region of Wadi al-Kharrar, Wadi Shitta & Wadi Seir. Believers saw the promise of Elijah's return fulfilled in the coming of John. It was here, at "Bethany beyond the Jordan," that John lived during the time of his ministry. Disciples, who were associated with his baptizing and preaching activities, would have been his companions. The places were convenient since it was close to Bethabara, "the house of the crossing," one of the places where travelers would have crossed the Jordan on their way east or west.

And it was to "Bethany beyond the Jordan" that Jesus came to be baptized by John. Believers, as archeological investigations have shown, commemorated the place of Jesus' baptism by a series of churches and a monastery that, according to the Piacenza pilgrim, contained two guest houses. Moreover, following John's death, Jesus retired to this area when the religious authorities in Jerusalem began to put pressure on him.

Finally, early pilgrims' reports, the Madaba mosaic map, and recent archeological work, as well as the biblical texts all, agree in location the place of the activity of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus east of the Jordan River at Bethany beyond the Jordan, Aenon near to Saleem & Tyers.

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