

The Discovery of Bethany Beyond the Jordan River (Wadi Al- Kharrar)

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological survey and excavation of the eastern side of the Jordan River was initiated in 1996-1997 season as part of the Jordan Cultural Resources Management Project. The archaeological remains are located along the southern edge of Wadi al-Kharrar. The sites are scattered over small hills and barren terraces of marl and limestone. The work up to date has identified over 15 related sites from the Roman, and Byzantine periods. The key discoveries are the Roman remains and Byzantine monastery at al-Kharrar, ancient Bethany Beyond the Jordan River., several smaller churches, chapels, monks hermitages, caves and cells; a large Byzantine church complex adjacent to the Jordan River' an impressive water system included ceramic pipeline bringing water to Bethany beyond Jordan; several Kilometers to the east; a large plastered pools and adjacent caravanserai halfway between the Bethany settlement and the Jordan River, a pilgrims' rest station and caravanserai east of Bethany, on the route to Mount Nebo; and other scattered remains. Most of the sites are clustered along the south bank of the Wadi al-Kharrar perennial stream.

Keywords: Archaeological excavations, Wadi al-Kharrar, The Jordan River.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bethany Beyond the Jordan River in the Jordan Valley is not only a ford, but also represents a large site located between Wadi Nimrin to the north and Wadi Gharaba to the south; Wadi al-Kharrar (fig. 1) was the center and core of this area during the pre-Roman, Roman and Byzantine period.

In fact, the Madaba Map has correctly indicated the spring on the eastern side of the Jordan River with the inscription "Ainon where now is Sapsaphas" meaning the place was hence called Ainon place of a spring⁽¹⁾. According to the description of the pilgrims and travelers, the spring of Wadi al-Kharrar⁽²⁾ was called "John the Baptist spring" "and was located less than 2Km (1.8 miles) on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. While another place on the Madaba Map refers to the western side called Aenon near Salim, this site is located eight miles south of Scythopolis near Salem⁽³⁾.

The Roman remains discovered during the

excavations. The area was known to pilgrims and many traveler⁽⁴⁾ who started visiting the area, reaching a high point during the Byzantine period 5th-6th Century A.D⁽⁵⁾.

The discovered Roman and Byzantine remains at Wadi al-Kharrar, and its related outposts down the northern coast of the Dead Sea, played a vital part in the history of the whole Jordan Valley⁽⁶⁾.

Pilgrims Accounts

Several travelers and pilgrims visited Tal al-Kharrar during their trips to the Holy Land, they described the area and the incidents that happened during late Roman - Early Byzantine periods.

Their description was subjected to intensive analysis and comparison studies with the recent results of archaeological excavations in Wadi al-Kharrar area.

Their description vary from general to detailed description such as The description of origin 210-230 AD⁽⁷⁾ Eusebius 325AD⁽⁸⁾ St Hellena 336AD⁽⁹⁾ Egeria 384AD⁽¹⁰⁾ St.Mary of Egypt 4th AD⁽¹¹⁾ St Jerome 4o4AD⁽¹²⁾ Bordeaux 333AD⁽¹³⁾ Theodosius 530AD⁽¹⁴⁾ Antonius 570AD⁽¹⁵⁾ and Arculf 670AD⁽¹⁶⁾.

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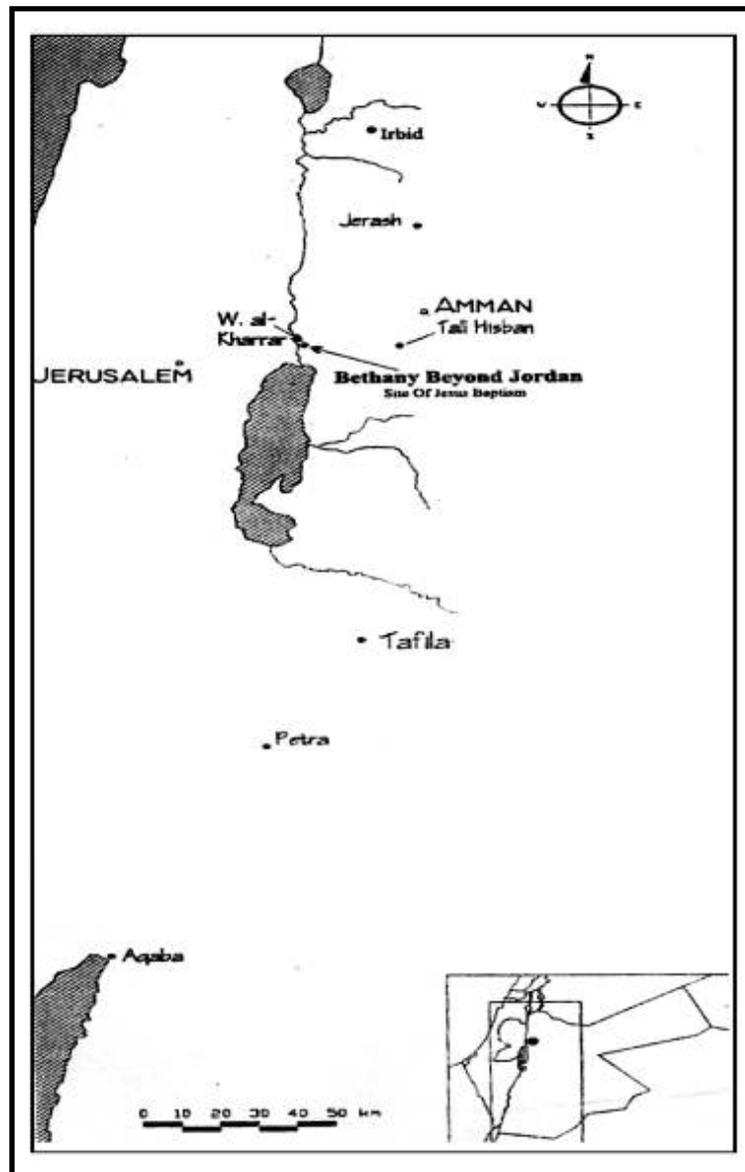


Fig 1. A Map Showing the Location of Bethany Beyond the Jordan River.

Wadi Al Kharrar

The valley Wadi Al-Kharrar is located in an area called Ghor al Kafrein and is bordered by Wadi Nimrin on the north, on the south by Wadi Gharaba, on the east by the modern village al- Kafrein, and on the west by the Jordan River. Wadi al Kharrar is a natural depression which extends east-west for 2 Km (1.8 miles) before emptying into the Jordan River. At the beginning of the Wadi is a small hill called Elijah's hill (Tell Mar Elyas). Next to the hill is a spring described by the pilgrims as the Baptism spring. Numerous springs join together there and empty into the Jordan River.

Several kinds of trees and plants still grow in the

Wadi, and reflect the beautiful nature of the area. Caves (Monk cells) are still visible on both sides of the Valley indicating the importance of the site and recalling the memory of religious life and sacred events. According to the tradition, holymen started their mission and preaching in and around this valley. Near the end of the river, archeological excavations have revealed three churches and other architectural remains⁽¹⁸⁾.

Tel al-Kharrar

Tell al-Kharrar is a small low hill located at the southeastern end of the Wadi al-Kharrar. The site is surrounded by trees, grass and active springs on the

North, East and West sides. The southern parts of the tell are linked with the flat plains, which extend to Wadi

Gharaba. The site commands excellent views, especially to the West.

Key:

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1-North Church | 9-Monks |
| 2-Prayer Hall | 10-Gateway |
| 3-Church of the Cave | 11-John Paul II |
| 4-Second cave | 12-Prayer Hall |
| 5-Third cave | 13-Water Cistern |
| 6-North Eastern pool | 14-Cylindrical well |
| 7-North Western pool | 15-Water System |
| 8-Southern pool | 16-Small room |

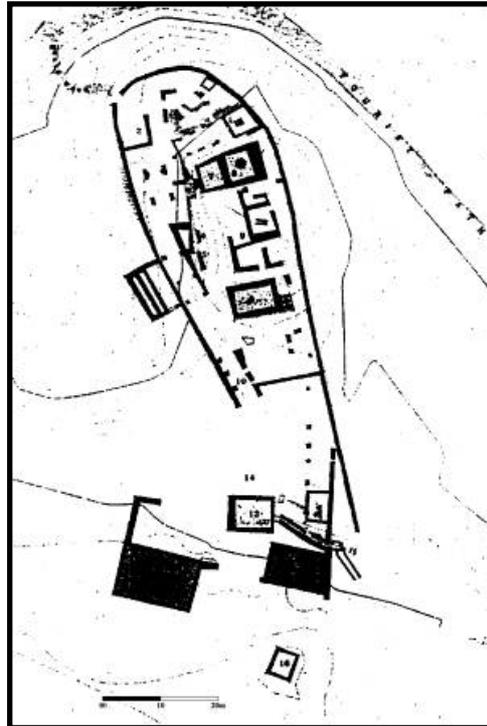


Figure 2. Top Plan of Tall al Kharrar.

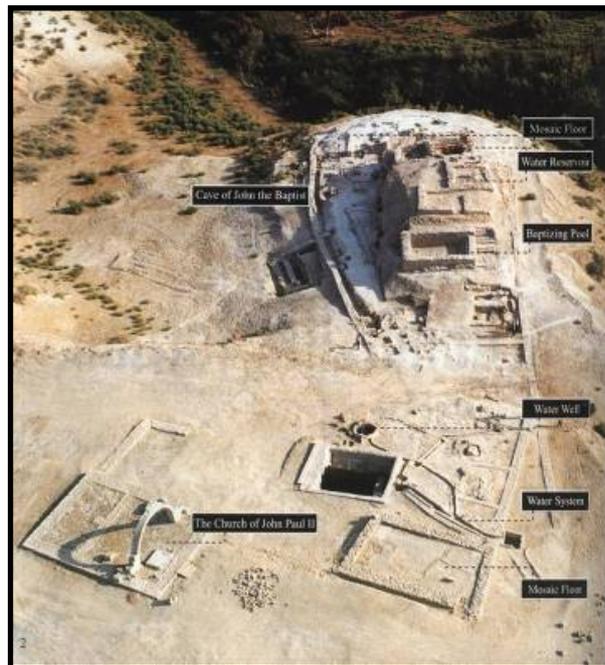


Figure 3. Aerial Photograph Showing the Discovered Site Tell al Kharrar.

The Tell consists of white lisan marl mixed with brown-red top soil. The Eastern, Western and Northern slopes of the tell fall steeply down into the bed of the wadi that runs west to join the Jordan River. Thus the banks of Wadi al-Kharrar, especially the southern bank,

represents a natural route from Tell al-Kharrar down to the Jordan River (Fig. 3).

The hill was occupied during the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. Systematic excavations on the site revealed the presence of two churches and a small prayer

hall chapel, three caves and three pools, with a protection wall around the hill. Two entrances were used to access the site from the South and from the West. The top of the hill was later occupied by Greek Orthodox monks between the 12th and 18th Centuries, while several remains were recovered to the South of the tell as follows:

Prayer Hall Chapel

The structure is a rectangular building, measuring 11.75 m E-W and 7.30m N-S built of undressed field stones and located near the southeastern corner of Tell al-Kharrar. A plain white mosaic pavement makes up the floor. *The location, the type of construction, in addition to its orientation towards the east, supports the suggestion that the structure functioned as a prayer hall (small chapel) this type of chapel represent a type was well known in the nearby area specially the Western Area of Jordan River.*

Material recovered through the excavations date the structure to the late Roman Early Byzantine periods. Modern agricultural activity in the area caused considerable damage to the building ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Church of the Arch

Systematic excavations to the South of Tell el-Kharrar uncovered a structure, measuring 13.50m E-W and 9.00m N-S, and built of well-dressed sandstone blocks. The general shape of the structure is rectangular. It is clear that the structure represents a small chapel located near the Southwestern corner of Tell al-Kharrar. The chapel consisted of two parts, with three arches to support the roof. Courtyard remains were recovered near the

Northwestern corner of the structure. It is difficult now to locate the doorway of the chapel, but the location of the courtyard suggests that the door possibly was located in the Northern wall, especially the Northwestern corner just opposite Tell al-Kharrar. Remains of the coloured mosaic floor were recovered in the corner of the chapel. The material recovered through the excavations dated from the 5th to 6th centuries AD⁽²⁰⁾

Water System

A pool, cistern and settling basins were located between the prayer hall and the small chapel. The recovered pool was dug in the natural lisan marl rock and well-cut sandstone ashlar were used to build the inner sides of the pool. A thick layer of lime was added and covered by a smooth layer of plaster to prevent any seepage. Apparently the pool was roofed by using a vault system, since remains of arches are still visible on the upper parts of the pool. It is reasonable to assume that the purpose of the roof was to reduce evaporation during summer and to keep the water inside the pool clean. Remains of a white plain mosaic floor were located at the top of the Western corner of the pool, possibly used for daily activities in the site.

A cistern, located near the Northwestern corner of the pool, is fed by an aqueduct. It is cylindrical shaped with a circular cross section. Excavations in the cistern revealed the presence of fallen ashlar mixed with smooth sand and pottery sherds which dated to the Byzantine period.

Several structures and buildings were constructed on Tell Al-Kharrar. Among these structures were three churches and three pools⁽²¹⁾ as follows.



Fig 4. The Discovered Old Greek Inscription.

The Northern Church

The Northern church consists of two sections, the chancel screen which measures 4.20 m N-S X 4.15m E-W and the nave which measures 8.85m E-W X 4.15m N-S. It has two entrances, one in the Northern wall and the other on the Western side. The distinguishing feature of the church is a complete (Greek) inscription set in a mosaic floor. It reads,

“By the help of the grace of Christ our God the whole monastery was constructed in the time of Rhotorios, the most God-beloved Presbyter and Abbot. May God the Savior give him mercy”. (Fig. 4)

The mentioned name in the text Rhotorios is not known from previous documents or text in the Holy Land.

The floor was covered by a colored mosaic with a frame and cross marks depicted with geometrical designs. Pillars along the northern wall of the church were designed to support the roof. No roof tiles were recovered from the excavations. Possibly the roof was comprised of wooden beams which have decomposed. The internal walls of the church were covered with a layer of smooth white plaster. The recovered material from the church dated back to the late Byzantine periods.

The Western Church

The western church measures 13m x 13m and consisted of two parts. First, a (cave) cut in the natural rock located under the northwestern pool. The cave (niche) was well prepared with small lamp niches were

dug in its Southern and Western sides. Remains of the door of the chancel screen in front of the apse are still visible. The other part of the church consisted of four bases built of well-dressed sandstone ashlars creating a nave and two aisles. Nothing remained of the roof except remains of arch springs still in situ. Originally the floor was covered with coloured mosaics. Unfortunately all that was left were fragments of mosaic with gray lime still adhering to them. Pottery sherds indicated a Byzantine date of this church.

It is reasonable to assume that the apse represents the reuse of a cave which had been dug into the natural rock in an earlier period.

Pool

A large pool was recovered during the excavation in the lower area of Bethany Beyond the Jordan River called the zoor. The pool measures 12-15 m North-South and 21-24 m East-West.

The lower courses and the foundations were built of local field stones, while the upper courses were built of well-cut sandstone ashlars. Three courses of the well-cut ashlars remain in situ. The inner sides of the pool were coated with three layers of plaster to prevent seepage.

A well-made channel directed water from a nearby spring from the North into the pool. An outlet was provided in the Southern wall. A staircase was located near the Southern wall. Material recovered from the pool dates the structure to the Byzantine period (Fig. 5).



Fig 5. The Large Pool.

Cave Cells

Two caves were discovered during the field activities in the area of Wadi al-Kharrar. Caves found on the Eastern side of the Jordan River were utilized by monks for various purposes. Caves used as churches are generally found in the center of monasteries in the wilderness near the banks of the Jordan River. The two caves (cells) that we found were dug into the upper layers of the lisan marl cliffs and were used for praying. Prayer niches were located in the eastern walls of the two caves. Their location was such that the monks had to gain access using ropes or ladders.

John Mochos, a monk from the monastery of Eustorgios in Jerusalem, tells of a personal experience in the monastic caves of the area in the seventh century. "He was on a pilgrimage to the Sinai by way of Aila and road to Arabia. When he crossed the Jordan River he was stricken by a violent fever and forced to take refuge in a cave. Three days later John the Baptist appeared to him in a dream and tried to dissuade him from continuing his

pilgrimage. John told the monk, "For this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Many times did our Lord Jesus Christ come in here to visit me". When he recovered from his illness the monk transformed the cave into a church for hermits living in the area. John Moschus concludes, "The place is called Sapsas, it faces the Jordan"⁽²²⁾. The conducted detailed investigations of this cave on the eastern bank of Jordan River support the suggestion that the discovered two caves possibly represent the above mentioned caves.

The prayer Hall (Chapel)

The excavation uncovered a small building, which measures 6m X6m located to the north of the western church and west of the northern church. What remain from the site are remains of a colored mosaic floor, decorated with flora designs, but in poor state of preservation due to natural factors and erosion. The walls of the structure were built of field stone, of this only the foundations are still in situ.



Fig 6. Close View of the Southern Pool.

The way of construction, the location and the function of this structure should probably be interpreted in association with nearby churches, and possibly used as a prayer hall (Chapel) dated back to the early Byzantine period.

The pools

Three pools were discovered on the Tell. The first one is located on the lower southern slope, while the other two pools were situated at the higher top of the northern edge of Tell al-Kharrar

The Southern Pool

The southern pool was totally excavated and well documented. Damage caused by robbers to the eastern side of the pool revealed medium undressed stones mixed with gray to dark lime adhering to it. The systematic excavations to this section revealed a staircase built of local fieldstones and lime; the remains consist of 9 steps that were used to enable the people to reach the pool, and the other two pools at the northern edge of the Tell. The discovered pool measures 4. m N-S x 7.50m E-W, representing a rectangular structure with an inner staircase

located on its eastern side. Only four steps that are still in situ extended the whole width of the pool (Fig. 6).

These were apparently used to enable people to go down into this pool and either to be baptized or have a

refreshing wash. The inner sides of the pool were coated with three layers of lime and plaster, possibly to prevent seepage. There is no evidences referring to agricultural or other usages for these pools (Fig. 7).

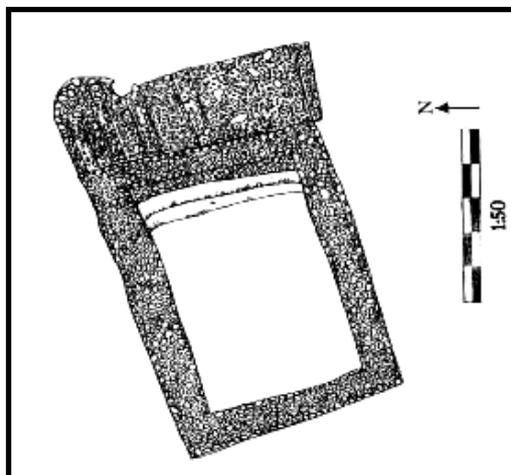


Fig 7. The Southern Pool.

The floor of the pool consisted of fieldstones covered by a lime layer. The only way to fill this pool with water was by the aqueduct located to the south of the pool, and through the channel supported on stone pillars and which partly rested on the western side of the protection wall to reach the pool. Unfortunately, the channel near the pool was demolished in antiquity, only the foundations are still in situ (fig. 8).

The Two Northern Pools

Excavations at the northern parts of the hill uncovered

the presence of two pools linked together and built of local field stones with gray lime mortar in between.

The north-western pool measures 3.40m E-W x 4.30m N-S; some ashlar were later added near the southwestern corner of the pool, possibly used as a staircase to go down into the pool. The northeastern pool measures 4.85m NS x 2.50m E-W. This pool has severely suffered from destruction caused by extensive usage during the later periods. Part of the western wall and the floor were damaged and removed. More uncovered water well.



Fig 8. Remains of the Channel Foundation.

Its top part is circular in shape, and built of well-cut sandstone ashlars, while there are no remains of lime or plaster covering the inner sides, which leads us to think

that the well was built on the spot of the water table of the nearby spring. Up to date, the depth of this well has reached 12m from the top. (fig. 9).

The recovered material from this well consists of fallen ashlars, sand, pottery sherds, and coins. The remains dated back from the early Roman to late Byzantine periods.

Depending on the recovered material, the well was dug later during the Byzantine period. Taking into consideration that during the later occupations all the building material from earlier periods were removed and

possibly thrown into the well. Remains of a channel and the base of a pillar built of local fieldstones were uncovered near the southern wall of the two pools, and were designed and built to feed the two pools with water. The Byzantine pottery sherds found in and near the pools suggested a date from the 5th and 6th century AD. (fig. 10).

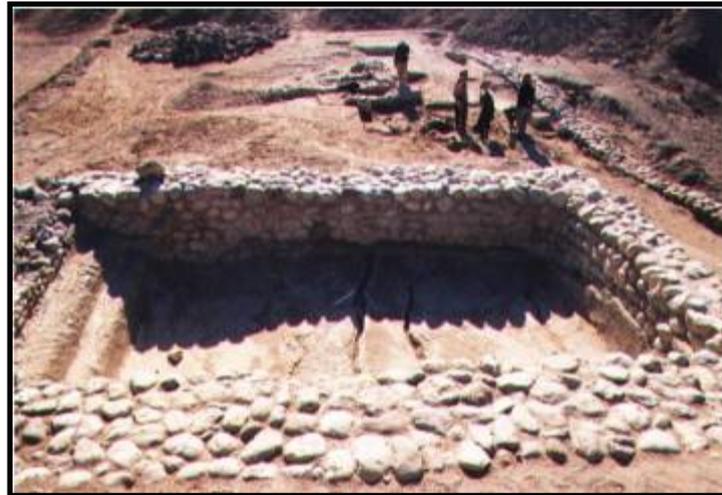


Fig 9. The Two Northern Pools.

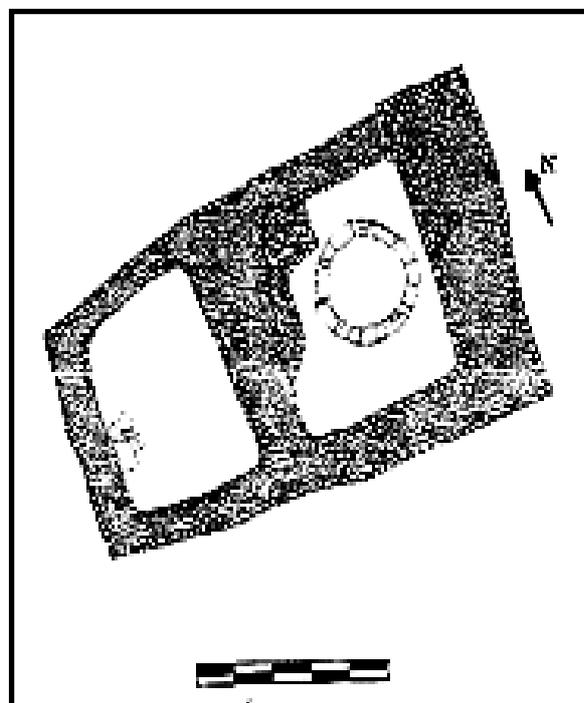


Fig 10: Top Plan of the Two Northern Pools.

The similarity in construction methods of the three pools on the Tell indicated that the building of the pools was related and linked with the discovered churches on

the Tell, during the latest use. Similar types churches and water installations were recovered on the western bank of the Jordan River, among of them St Peter's church,

recently (called Qaser Ali), St Adam's church (called Khan Saliba), and John the Baptist church (called Qaser al-Yahud).⁽²³⁾

All these churches were built for pilgrims who passed through the area during their pilgrimage to the Holy Land during Byzantine period; these Monasteries were located on the pilgrims route from Jerusalem through the Jordan River up to Mount Nebo on the eastern bank of Jordan River.

CONCLUSIONS

The archeological evidence uncovered at Tell al-Kharrar in ghor area is sufficient to allow a reconstruction of the appearance of monastery. The reconstruction emphasize the character of the complex as a monastery situated in the wildness, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River.

It seems that the monastery was built on three separated levels:

- The lowest level occupied by the churches on the northern and western sides surrounded by a wall.
- The middle level was the place of the pools, two of which were located on the northern side of the Tell, and one located on the southern side.
- The upper level, on top of the hill possibly comprised the monks living area.

A staircase that began at the main entrance to the monastery connected the Wadi al-Kharrar with the three levels. The small finds of the excavation, suggest that the monastery was founded, broadly, during the Byzantine period and stayed in use until the muslim conquest of Jordan in the middle of the 7th Century.

Historical references and archaeological discoveries in Jordan revealed the importance of Jordan Valley during classical periods.

The Roman road passed through this area (Jericho-Esbus)⁽²⁴⁾ revealed the significance of the surrounding zone especially Wadi al-Kharrar area, and both sides of Jordan River from first century-seventh century AD.

The area of Wadi al-Kharrar reached its high peak during this time. The conducted excavations on the southern edge of Wadi al-Kharrar revealed the presence of several archaeological sites, such as small structures, pools, aqueducts and monks' caves.

In fact, the 5th-6th Century Madaba Map has correctly indicated some structures and the spring on the eastern side of the Jordan River, with the inscription

“Aenon now Sapsaphas” meaning the place was once called Ainon-place of a spring⁽²⁵⁾. According to the descriptions of the pilgrims and travelers, the spring was called “John the Baptist spring” and was located east of the Jordan River, less than 2 kilometers from the river.

Conducted test trenches and limited excavations along the nearby wadies, such as Wadi Nimrin and Wadi Gharaba,⁽²⁶⁾ revealed the importance of this area and its relation with Wadi al-Kharrar. In general the archeological excavations on the eastern side of the Jordan River and along the banks of Wadi al-Kharrar revealed important buildings.

The archaeological remains of the early monuments can still be traced a short distance to the east of the traditional place of baptism on the Jordan River at a distance of less than 2km .At the beginning of this period, many things changed regarding the topography. It is possible to say that the Persian devastation, the river flood and the muslim penetration put an end to the Byzantine buildings on the east bank of the Jordan River particularly in Wadi al- Kharrar area. According to Shick, one must be careful not exaggerate the impact of Sasanian invasion and occupation, their effect were undoubtedly serious, both materially and psychologically⁽²⁷⁾. The first who referred to this turning was Arculf (670A.D) who presents the turning point, in that he saw a small church on the higher ground.⁽²⁸⁾

After that date, the baptism site 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 gradually disappeared.

The recent discovery of Roman and Byzantine architectural remains on the eastern banks of Jordan River, without exaggeration represent the rediscovery of Bethany Beyond the Jordan River, or the so called by Madaba Mosaic Map Sapsaphas during the Byzantine Periods⁽²⁹⁾

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NOTES

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