



A UNIQUE BYZANTINE COMPLEX NEAR THE JORDAN RIVER IN SOUTHERN LEVANT AND A TENTATIVE INTERPRETATION

Mohammad Waheeb, Dr Abdelaziz Mahmod, Eyad Al-Masri

Queen Rania Institute for Heritage and Tourism, Hashemite University, Jordan

Received: 07/08/2012

Accepted: 15/10/2012

Corresponding author: mwaheeb@hu.edu.jo

ABSTRACT

Bethany beyond the Jordan, where Jesus is said that was seating of stone staircase, a foundation base and a small church near the river he was baptized on the east bank of the Jordan River, has revealed a Byzantine complex. This raises the number of churches identified in the region of Jordan River to four plus three at Tell el-Kharrar (Elijah's Hill), nearly two kilometers east of the river. The discovered architectural remains represent a unique Byzantine complex on the eastern bank of Jordan River.

KEYWORDS: Early Byzantine, Excavations, Jordan River, Architecture, Church, Archaeology, Arculfus, St. John

INTRODUCTION

In the framework of the archaeological excavations on the eastern side of Jordan River, special attention was paid during the 2010/2011 campaign to the south-eastern parts of St. John's Church that lies 200m east of the river, and 50m to the south of the river itself and foundations of a small Byzantine church at Bethany¹. There is an extensive existence of tamarisk trees surrounding the excavations site. The excavated buildings were built in an area (Al Zore) that consists of mud and alluvial material brought in by Jordan River as a result of flooding and then depositing along the river bank. Moreover, this area is considered to be a joining of the Al Kharrar spring (springs from Tel Mar Ellias through Al Kharrar valley) and the Jordan River, for the water finally pours into Jordan River after passing through the excavation site².

To date, the work in the region of Bethany beyond the Jordan along the east bank of the river has identified over seven different antiquities sites (Fig. 1), dating mainly to the Roman-Byzantine period (1st – 7th centuries AD), but also include remains from the Hellenistic and the early Islamic eras.

The Bible (*John* 1:28) states that John the Baptist was living or staying at Bethany beyond the Jordan when he baptized Jesus. It is possible that the name of the site could refer to a specific village or a wider region.

¹ Bethany beyond Jordan also called "Bethabara" in ancient texts, has always been the geographical and spiritual pivot of this area. The site was named after John 1:28 and is also mentioned on the Madaba Mosaic map as Aenon, now Sapsaphas (Avi-Yonah, 1954). The site was recently called Bassat Al- Kharar (Harding, 1881), and Tal Al-Kharar (Ibrahim, et al, 1996) or Wadi Al-Kharar (Waheeb, 1998 a, b, c). This is a dramatic site situated near the eastern part of the Jordan River, west of al-Kafrein Village and not far away from the famous site of Jericho.

² Excavation works were resumed in zone D and its related grid-squared zones, namely A4/B4/C4/D4. The aim of these excavations was to discover the remaining parts of the two walls that follow the stairs of the Church, or the Third Church as has been agreed to be called; (Waheeb 1999, 635) and go down to a water path that is assumed to be an old path where the water of Al Kharrar spring and Jordan River used to meet.

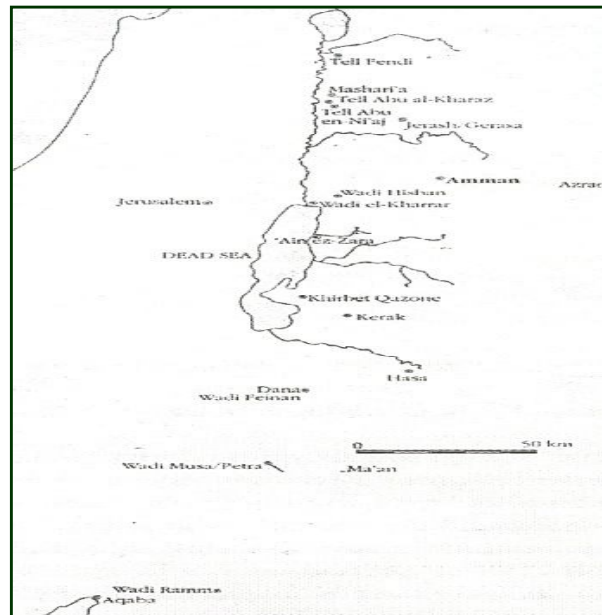


Figure 1: Location of the Baptism site

About 1.5 km east of the four churches near the river, is the other main part of Bethany beyond the Jordan, the hilltop where the 5th-6th century Byzantine monastery on Tell el-Kharar is situated. It has at least three churches, along with architectural and artifactual remains from the Roman period (4th - 7th century). It is clear that the Tell el-Kharar area had been inhabited in the time of Jesus and John, in the early 1st century AD. John may have lived there with a few of his disciples in a simple hamlet, or a small village may have developed around John's preaching and baptizing activities (Fig. 2).

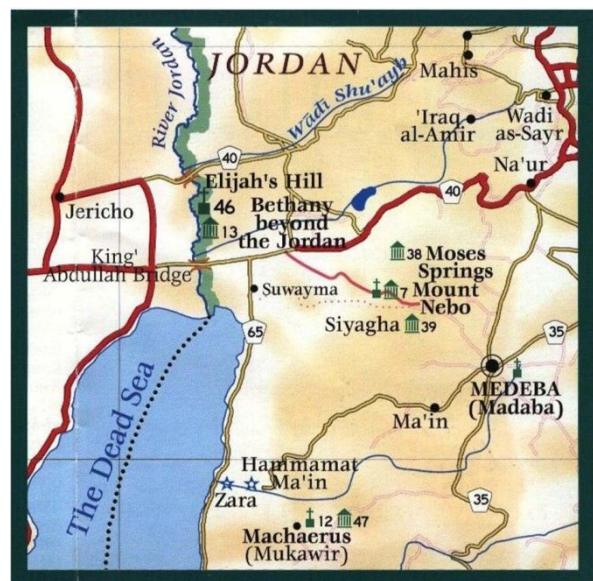


Figure 2: Close map of the location of the site

The site of the hilltop monastery has also been identified (since the 4th century) as the hill from which the Prophet Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind and on a chariot of fire: Tell el-Kharrar is also called Elijah's Hill, or Tell Mar Elias in Arabic.

Another intriguing link with Elijah could be the name of the wadi immediately south of Wadi Kharrar, in the past known locally as Wadi Gharab (the valley of ravens). The Bible says that God told Elijah to hide in the Kerith Stream, on the east bank of the Jordan River, where ravens would bring him food in the morning and evening (*1 Kings 17: v5*).

THE SMALL CHURCH

The newly discovered church is a rectangular chapel given its small size, it measures 4m×6m and much of its south side has disappeared, probably due to erosion by the flooding of the Jordan River. The Jordan River today is about 150m west of the chapel, and makes a large U-shaped loop around the area and also around the three other Byzantine churches there.

Previously, the river may have passed closer to the church, and thus eroded parts of the structure during the annual winter and spring floods. The Jordan River is one of the most meandering waterways in the world, and it was known for changing its course frequently. It has generally retained its route since the middle of the 20th century, mainly because dams built in adjacent countries have reduced the inflow into the river and consequently stopped its annual flooding and bursting of its banks.

Its apse and north side are well preserved. The chapel is paved with white plaster, and its walls were plastered also. The excavation has not revealed any mosaic floor remains or significant artifacts other than the black marble and small pottery flask, pottery shards, and some bones. This is also probably due to the washing action of the river over many centuries.

A re-used Corinthian capital and other architectural evidence indicate that the chapel had two phases of use during its life in the late Byzantine period (5th – 6th centuries).

A staircase and a kind of walled corridor link the chapel to the complex of three successive Byzantine churches whose remains were found superimposed one above the other. The three churches also date from the late Byzantine period (a confirmed dating might be useful by applying luminescence or archaeomagnetic dating on ceramic fabric, see e.g. Liritzis, 1989; Downey & Liritzis, 2013; Liritzis et al., 2001), when the tradition of the baptism of Jesus was commemorated on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. (Fig. 3)

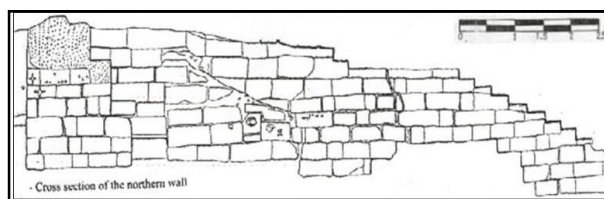


Figure 3: Cross section of the stair

It was apparent that after the first two churches were destroyed, either by earthquake or by the flooding river, they were rebuilt on the same spot. After three successive churches were destroyed, the subsequent builders slightly moved to the east where the fourth and smallest church or chapel was built. The earliest of the four churches is identified as the one built in AD 491 by Emperor Anastasias, whom we know of from Byzantine texts, especially Theodosius (AD 530).

A solid stone foundation platform remains intact beneath the chapel, and seems to have been designed for structural support and protection against the flooding river. 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.

The fact that the church 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. Next to the church the excavators cleared three Byzantine tombs containing a boy, a man of middle age and an old man. The simple cist tombs were at the same level as the chapel and clearly related to it (Nabulsi, 2009, 61). Whether the deceased lived in the area or died during a pilgrimage passage there is not clear. The chapel and the entire region of Bethany beyond the Jordan were on the main By-

zantine era pilgrimage route that linked Jerusalem with Jericho, the Jordan River-baptism region, and Mount Nebo.

A few meters south-east of the apse of the chapel is a substantial square-shaped foundation made of stone. It has been speculated that it may have been part of a bridge that crossed the river (as Byzantine texts attest) or may have formed the foundation for the cross-topped marble pillar that was erected in the Jordan River to commemorate the spot of Jesus' baptism (as recounted by Theodosius in AD 530)³ who said in his book *On the Topography of the Holy Land*: "At the place where my Lord was baptized is a single marble column and on top of it has been set an iron cross".

Arculfu visited this small church in 670 AD and published his description of it in his book *Narrative about the Holy Land* saying: "Right at the river edge stand a small rectangular church, which was were built, so it is said, at the place where the Lord's clothes were placed when he was baptized" (Arculf, 1895).

EARLY MONKS AND MONASTERIES

The presence of hermit monk's cells along the banks of the Wadi Kharrar was attested by the Pilgrim of Piacenza (570) and Arculfu (670), but many that were carved out of the soft marl formations on the edge of the wadi have since eroded away. Two well preserved cells (laura) carved into the marl have survived, and are accessible to visitors. Two other stone-built cells were excavated along the south bank of the wadi. Each comprised two connected rooms, and included Late Byzantine artifacts such as cooking pots and other vessels. It seems that these may be among the earliest known monasteries and lauras in the region (a series of individual lauras would have been called a monastery in the Byzantine period, as the monks ga-

thered once a day or once a week to pray together and obtain their provisions).

The tradition of the site of John's residence and Jesus' baptism was deeply related to the east bank of the Jordan River, including the spring and cave of St. John at Elijah's Hill (both a spring and a cave have been identified at the site). After the mid-7th -century though, the tradition of Jesus' baptism seems to shift towards the Jordan River and also to its western bank. This is clear in the archaeological discoveries as only Byzantine remains have been found next to the river itself, but mixed Roman and Byzantine remains have now been confirmed at Elijah's Hill.

The shift of commemorating John's baptism of Jesus to the west bank of the river may be explained in several ways, including earthquakes that destroyed the churches on the east bank, the rise of Jerusalem as a Christian center and the starting point for pilgrimages to the river during the Byzantine period, the difficulty of crossing the river during flood season (when the river became over 1km wide), political instability and danger to travelers on the east bank (as was also the case in the 18th-19th Century), and the need to enter the river to celebrate the feast of Epiphany during the Byzantine era.

Arculfus can be seen in retrospect as the turning point after which the accounts of John's ministry and Jesus' baptism start to be linked with the west bank of the river. Arculfus mentioned a small church near the river that marked the spot where people thought Jesus had left his clothes before being baptized; this church is one of the four churches that have been excavated near the river Jordan. Byzantine accounts such as that (Arculf, 1895), mention that a small church on the east bank was located "as stones throw" away from the river.

THE STAIRS

The stairs are one of the essential structures at the east part of John's the Baptist Church that is connected to the Third Church. The stairs were separated from the Third Church for about 1.5m because of the flow of Jordan River's water and the earthquakes the region wit-

³ The excavation has stopped several times during winter season because the natural water table has risen and made the excavation trenches into pools of water nearly half a meter deep. Survey and test trenches are continuing in the area immediately around the four churches, to try to determine if any other antiquities are to be found there.

nessed. The stairs are 2.50m wide and have 22 black marble steps. The steps were cut and shaped professionally and some chisel marks are still evident on the marble. Every step is 17-23 cm high and consists of more than one piece of marble; and the more we descend the deeper the steps become.

The foundation base of the stairs was strengthened by setting up a layer of unshaped stones mixed with lute fixed at various depths in accordance with the slope. After that, the marble steps were added where the sills and extent system was used to reduce the sharpness of the slant that tends to move down.

What distinguishes the stair ends is the discovery of marble panel of 95cm × 115cm that was used in paving the small space at the end of the stairs. The panel was installed in line with the middle of the stairs in a way that makes it the final standing point for any person who wishes to use the stairs to descend to the water.

This paved space was connected with the foundation base of the church and one of the square bases. There were in the same location some blocks that belong to an arch and the apse of the church.

Some additional excavations were carried out near and around the yard, especially from the south side that is parallel to the west wall looking for any evidence that can demonstrate the existence of any ruins at this site. The results were negative as the level of water was an obstacle for excavators who could only overcome it through pumping the water out, but if they overcome the problem, they might find some evidence.

NORTH WALL

This wall extends from the end of the Third church's middle corridor to the east, sloping in line with the stair system leading to the east side. This wall is the best preserved one and has inscriptions on it.

The wall was a two-line sandstone building, filled in between with small stones, measuring 30m in length and 60-70cm in width. The highest point of the wall is in the eastern part, near the square foundation base, whereas the lowest

peak of it is at the end of the western part, near the church. This is a clear indication that when the wall was built the graduation style was taken into consideration, i.e. graduating with the building from earth level of Al Zore area down to lower than the surface (descended in the mud and alluvium area because of the flood).

As a result, the foundation base and the course of this wall were found to exist below the level of earth surface, especially in the eastern part of it. On the other hand, most of its courses in the western part are above the level of the earth surface. One can conclude that the wall varies in height. The highest part (western) was exposed to floodwater, and so consequently lost most of the foundation, while it had also drifted. As for the eastern part, the floods of Jordan River and Al Kharrar River caused its upper course to drift; while the lower courses that constituted the major part of the wall remained fixed. This was because of the accumulation of sand brought in by the floods of both rivers⁴ (Fig. 4)



Figure 4: Picture of the small church and the square foundation

What distinguishes the internal façade of the wall is the presence of some religious characters

⁴ The reason behind Al Kharrar's flood during winter is the general increase in water level in the basin, for the water floods over the banks especially in the period between December-April. During summer months, however, the water of the river disappears and never found save in some specific places. Another reason for the flood can be the flow of valley water that goes directly to Al Kharrar Valley causing the level of water at Al Zore area, where the excavated churches are, to increase and then pour in Jordan River. For more details see Abel 1932).

and symbols, such as a cross symbol engraved in the middle course. There are four Greek letters filling the cross. Next to the cross, there is a hole of irregular shape made in a way resulting in different widths at its ends. This hole is believed to be connected to the stairs, and may have a related-function to the stairs: it may be a place of a wooden bar that extended between the north and west walls. Examining the style of the cavity shows that its history is older than that of the two walls and the stairs. It is worth noting that the eastern end of the north wall was built in a very accurate and magnificent geometric way and includes a strong structure as a foundation base according to written evidences Arculfu visited this small church in 670 AD as mentioned above.

Excavation work near the lower part of the wall revealed some remaining layers that had covered the wall for the sake of protecting it (hereafter wall layers). These layers were kept intact by the mud and alluvial material that accumulated there through the ages. There are three wall layers forming the wall, the most important of which is the third and final layer that is smooth and hard, and consists of white lute. After cleaning these remains carefully, which are so fragile and thin, some engraved writings and a sharp tool used in engraving them, were recovered. The writings were irregular words in old Greek and Syriac languages, with an intensive existence of additional different cross shapes. In some cases, the writings were framed with a semi-circle or rectangle that was also engraved. If this tells us anything, the writings includes names of some saints like Mina, it is that how important this wall is, especially its lower part where the wall layers were used to record some events that this placed was used for.

SOUTH WALL

An examination of the ruins of the excavated foundation bases makes clear that the south wall is exactly the same as the north wall including the same building structure, and same measurements. Severe damage has been encountered and most of the wall was lost except for some foundation bases.

The wall's function was to support and strengthen the stairs. Studying the scattered ruins around the foundation base indicates that the two walls were built at the same time. The damage of the south wall, however, caused the stairs to collapse; and since the south wall is parallel to the north wall, the ends of it were damaged as well. This made it difficult to recognize some parts of the structure that may be similar to the ones at the eastern end of the north wall. The wall measures 30m in length and 70-80cm in width (based on the ruins of the foundation base).

Excavation has revealed the presence of the wall's fallen stones and the most likely reason behind the destruction of the south wall was, again, Jordan River. Thus the flood water which is running close to the foundation bases caused the wall, the foundation bases, and the upper courses to collapse and to be scattered near the wall where some marble pieces (the collapsed stairs' steps) have been found. The destruction of the south wall introduces an assumption that there was always running water near the foundation bases of the wall, which leads to another assumption that there was a water path of Jordan River beneath the wall (Jordan river is 50m far to the west from the wall now).

THE FOUNDATION BASE

The square foundation base exists to the east of the end of the north wall of the stairs, and is 3m far. It is square and it is 2.75m x 2.80m (Fig. 5).

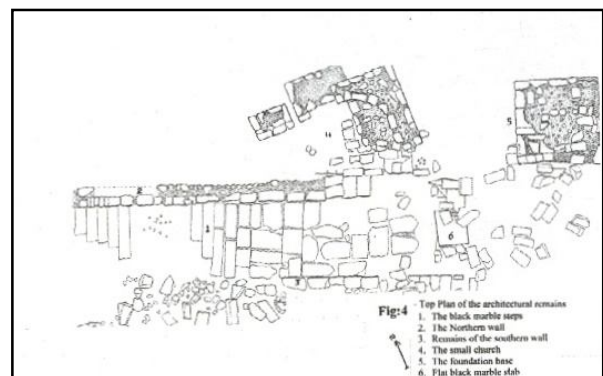


Figure 5: Top plan of the small church, the stair and the stone foundation

The base foundation was built of well-shaped sandstones based on a strong base. It was designed to perform a certain job in special cir-

cumstances (water surrounding it often with a water high level). The foundation base is a square shape and the inside was filled with unshaped lime stones fixed by using a gray lute. The base was made of a strong rocky foundation, the aim of which was to create a firm base in an unstable mud and alluvium surrounding. Excavation at the lower parts of the foundation base revealed that there were wall layers that are still keeping their shape, and it is similar to the one found in the lower courses of the north wall. It also revealed some kind of engraved symbols and signs, such as crosses of different shapes and sizes. This is distinguished by revealing large amounts of inscriptions engraved in the layers of the wall. It was noted that inscriptions were not found at this lower part. As for the upper part of the foundation base, the wall layers were scattered and many had fallen due to circumstances. Later on some cross shapes engraved in the sandstones were discovered despite showing signs of erosion. (Fig. 6)

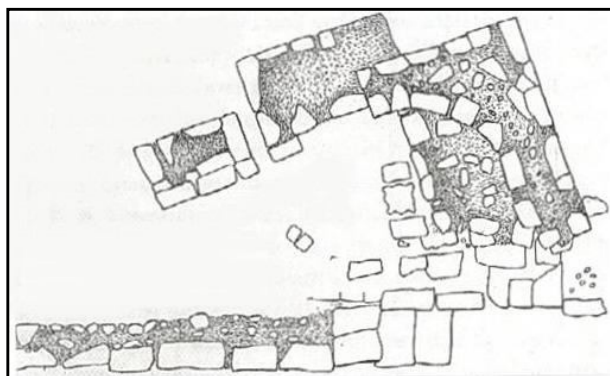


Figure 6: Top plan of the small church

Many other test soundings were carried out around the foundation base and they did not show any other related structures to the foundation base. Four graves were discovered, some of them were in bad conditions due to the humidity that affected the foundation base. These graves are believed to go back to the 8th century A.D (Nabulsi, 2009: 63-72).

Depending on the previous informations, one can comprehend the importance of the eastern part of Jordan River. Moreover, the structures excavated were religious building (churches) in addition to other related structures such as the foundation base and the stairs. The discovered remain could be listed under

the religious building list (see Waheeb, 1998a, 1998b, 1999 and 2001).

The archaeological finds and ruins, especially the pottery sherds are dated to the late Byzantium Era and indicate the idea of continuity, for there were some other pottery shards that are dated to the 8th century A.D. this proves that there was also civic continuity in the site, and had been in use until recent past.

Initial indicators concerning the function of the excavated buildings, shows that there is a small church, located close to other related holy structures, and built for the purpose of religious worship.

SITE DEVELOPMENT

The link between Elijah's Hill and the east bank of the Jordan River is the natural year-round stream called Wadi Kharrar (Arabic). For the entire route of the Wadi Kharrar stream (some of it underground), there has been built a simple, stone-linked path that allows pilgrims to literally walk in the footsteps of Jesus and John the Baptist. Another fascinating aspect of this short route (about a kilometer and a half) is that along its path, according to the Bible, the heavens opened at two different times: when God descended in the form of a whirlwind and took the Prophet Elijah to heaven on a chariot and horses of fire, and again during the baptism of Jesus when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and God proclaimed Himself pleased with His son.

The route of the Wadi Kharrar stream from Elijah's Hill to the Jordan River provides the spine along which a series of ancient structures were built; these include hermit monk's cell (small engraved caves), and large pools (some over 20m in diameter) that were probably used for baptism, water storage, serving pilgrims.

CONCLUSION

The discovery of Roman and Byzantine remains such as this church at Bethany Beyond The Jordan (al-Kharrar), confirms what the pesher of the gospels showed that this site is an integral part of history. The church and the surrounding buildings at el- Kharrar and its related outpost down the northern coast of the Dead Sea played a vital part in the events recorded. What supports

our idea is that the area of church was at a point near the River to which old roads came down. What concerns us is the road which is about four and one - half mile downstream where the monastery of St. John "stood", on a low hill, seven hundred yards west of the River. At the other side (eastern side), Wadi al-Kharrar and the newly discovered churches comes in from the east. Both the circumstances of John's work and the archaeological discoveries, emphasize that his activity was in the eastern side of the River, this was assisted in *John* (1:28 and 10:40) in which there is a clear reference to a specific area for John's work

where it is stated that he was baptized in Bethany Beyond the Jordan River.

There is no doubt that the architectural style of the excavated church interprets the determination of the Byzantines to build such structures and find solutions for the obstacles that hindered such building, especially the water problem. Using arches to avoid water hitting the buildings was quite clear. The map of Ma'daba shows towers to the east of Jordan River that were built with arches to avoid the flood of Jordan River (Avi-Yonah, 1954).

REFERENCES

- Abel, R. (1932) Exploration du sud-est de la vallée du Jordain, *Review Biblique (RB)*, 43, 237-263.
- Arculf, A (1895) *The Pilgrimage of Arculfus in the Holy Land (670 AD.)*. Translated and Annotated by James Macpherson, London/New York, 1-64.
- Avi-Yonah, M (1954) *Madaba Mosaic Map*, Jerusalem.
- Herschfield, Y. (1992) *The Judean Desert Monasteries in the Byzantine Period*, New Haven.
- Ibrahim, M.J. Sauer, K. Yassine (1996) The east Jordan Valley Survey, 1975, *Bulletin of American School of Oriental Research (BASOR)* 222, 4-166.
- Liritzis Y., (1989) Greek archaeomagnetic intensities; Some aspects of reliability and geophysical implications. *Earth, Moon and Planets*, 47, 1-13
- Downey, W.S and Liritzis, I (201) Archaeomagnetic intensity of ceramic sherds from two Rhodian Byzantine Churches: A preliminary initiative. *Mediterranean Archaeology & Archaeometry*, Vol.13, No.2, 221-229.
- Liritzis I. Galloway R.B., Katsonopoulou D., D. Soters, (2001). In search of ancient Helike, Gulf of Corinth, Greece *Journal of Coastal Research*, vol.17, No 1, 118-123
- Nabulsi, A. (1999). The excavated Human Burials from the Baptism Site – Jordan River. In the *Great Discovery Jesus Baptism Site*. edited by Mohammad Waheeb, Amman. Jordan.
- Theodosius, (1893) *Theodosius on the Topography of the Holy Land 530 AD*. Translated by J.H. Bernard, London.
- Waheeb, M.A. and Abu Shemis (2002), Pottery of the Baptism Site, *Antiquities of Department Annual of Jordan (ADAJ)*, 545-555 .
- Waheeb, M. (1998a) Wadi al-kharrar, *American Journal of Archaeology (AJA)*, No.3, 102-106.
- Waheeb, M. (1998b) Wadi al-kharrar Archaeological Project, *Antiquities of Department Annual of Jordan (ADAJ)*, 43-55.
- Waheeb. M. (1998c) A New discoveries near the baptism site, *Occident and Orient* 3, 1, 19-20.
- Waheeb, M. (1999) Wadi Al-Kharrar Project (The Monastery), *Antiquities of Department Annual of Jordan (ADAJ)* 40, 549-557.
- Waheeb, M (2001) Archaeological Excavations at the Baptism site Bethany Beyond the Jordan, *Bible and Spade* 14, 2, 43-53.
- Waheeb. M. (1998c), A New discoveries near the baptism site, *Occident and Orient* 3, 1, 19-20.
- Waheeb, M.(1999) Wadi Al-Kharrar Project (The Monastery), *Antiquities of Department Annual of Jordan (ADAJ)* 40, 549-557.
- Waheeb, M.(2001) Archaeological Excavations at the Baptism site Bethany Beyond the Jordan, *Bible and Spade* 14, 2, 43-53.
- Waheeb. M.(2002) Wadi al-kharra, *American Journal of Archaeology (AJA)* 106, 445-446.