

## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

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### ABSTRACT

The monastic way of life evolved during the early history of Christianity, and developed in diverse forms. The Baptism site hermits started to dwell in natural caves, living in seclusion in a very modest and secluded life. Recent excavations in Bethany Beyond Jordan (BBJ) revealed the presence of unique archeological remains related to St Mary of Egypt located close to John the Baptist church and not far away from the eastern bank of Jordan River. This article will focus on the relation between the discovered architectural remains and the narratives of St. Mary of Egypt who dwelt and died in this area on the eastern side of Jordan River during the early time of Christianity.

**Keywords:** Antiquity, Christians, Roman, Byzantine Ages, Caves, Religion

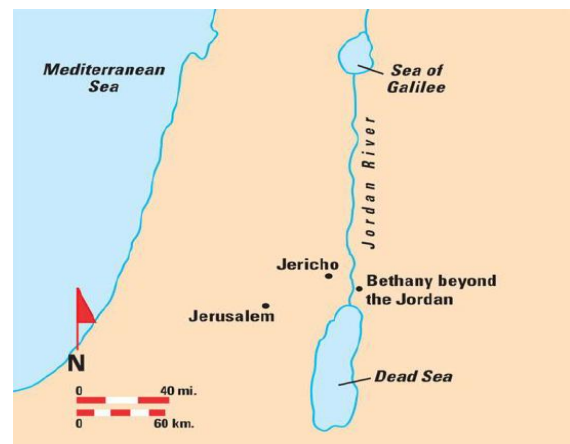
### INTRODUCTION

Recent excavations on the eastern bank of Jordan River in Bethany beyond Jordan (BBJ) revealed the presence of small building built and used by local monks for religious practices<sup>1</sup> during the Byzantine Period, this way of life formulized into two common methods of Perea / desert monasticism - the Laura and the Coenobium. Initially these forms were loosely formulated, but in time the oral tradition became more disciplined and followed strict written rules.

The Laura (or Lavra) of St Mary<sup>(1)</sup> originally meant a cluster of caves or cells with small building used by herself or by the hermits for seclusion, with a church as their weekly meeting center (usually on Sundays). This functioned as a monastery for hermits, with an emphasis of solitary religious living during the 6 week days. The word is derived from Greek (meaning "a path").

One of The most famous legends regarding the area of Wadi al-Kharrar is about the life of Saint Mary the Egyptian who chose to live a

disreputable life in Alexandria in her youth. She abandoned her life of sin during a visit to Jerusalem and went on to become a model of repentance in Bethany Beyond the Jordan see fig:1 . ( Waheeb: 2004 )



**Figure 1.** A map showing the location of BBJ which includes site of St Mary of Egypt

Fig :A map showing the location of BBJ which includes site of St Mary of Egypt

The Coenobium (pronounced Coi-Noi-Bee-Yum) was a communal monastery, where a number of structures were surrounded by a wall and the monks lived there in a commune. The monks lodged inside the compound and followed a strict daily schedule.(Kopp1963)

This word is based on the Greek words Koinos (common) and Bios (Life). The emphasis of this

(1) field excavations started in locality during 1996-2002 , Survey, documentation and investigation were continued from 2004-2017 , headed by the author of this article and supervised by the Hashemite University , Queen Rania Institute for Tourism and Cultural Heritage-Zarqa-Jordan .

## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

form is the community life, in contrast with the solitary living of the hermits which was too lonely and often led to mental breakdown.

It was larger, more disciplined than the Laura, and followed a daily schedule. (Herschfield, 1992). For many hermits, it was the first station before wandering to the desert or joining a Laura.<sup>2</sup> Both types were practiced in BBJ, on the eastern part of Jordan River in Roman Period (Piccirillo, 1987, 1996), and becomes clear during Late Roman –Early Byzantine periods and continued during Islamic era. (Waheeb : 1999)

The Site of Saint Mary of Egypt consists of the remains of two adjunct structures dating from the Byzantine and Ottoman periods fig:2.

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 (Moschos, 1992).

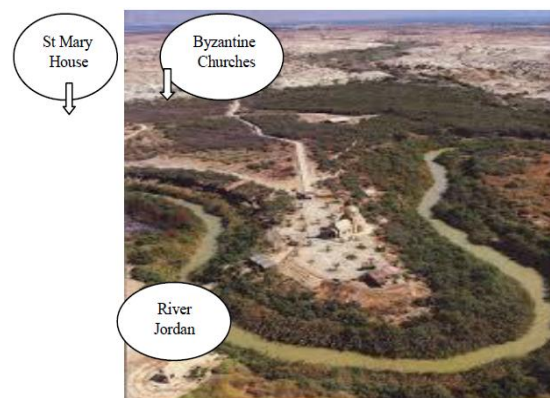
According to Sophronius, the voice of the Virgin Mary told Mary of Egypt to cross the Jordan River in order to "find rest".

She lived alone 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, M. 2004).

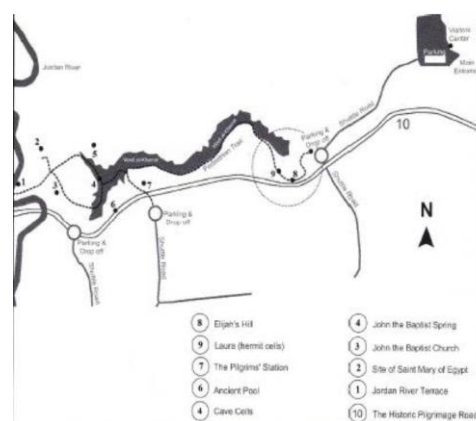
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2 One of The most famous legends regarding the area of Wadi al-Kharrar is about the life of Saint Mary the Egyptian who chose to live a disreputable life in Alexandria in her youth. She abandoned her life of sin during a visit to Jerusalem and went on to become a model of repentance.

After consulting the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem, she had heard a voice telling her: Cross the Jordan and you will find rest. She crossed to the east bank of the Jordan River, and spent the last 47 years of her life living alone, praying and fasting in the Jordanian desert where she could be close to God. Before dying she was found by the monk Zosima from a nearby monastery, who prayed with her, listened to her story, and gave her Holy Communion shortly before she died. Zosima buried her, reportedly with the help of a lion that helped him dig her grave with its paws. The site associated with Saint Mary the Egyptian is in the Zor area close to the place where Jesus was baptized. (Waheeb, 2004)



**Figure 2.** Aerial photo showing the location of St. Mary Site close to River Jordan



**Figure 3.** A map showing the location of St Mary Laura east of Jordan River

### PREVIOUS STUDIES

Archaeological activities, which started in 1899 with explorations in the area of Wadi al-Kharrar, identified the remains of a church on the east bank of the Jordan River, fig: 3. The first short account of the monticule's of Elias, which mentions that it was about eighty-six yards long and forty-three yards broad, was written by L. Federlin in 1902. On top, he found many weather-beaten lumps of freestone, which apparently had belonged to various buildings. He could not trace the plan of these, but one seemed to him to have stood about sixteen yards square (Federlin: 1902).

In 1931, D. Buzy made a more thorough examination of the hill and wadi. He, too, used only his eyes, but vowed to begin excavations without delay. Unfortunately he never carried out his intention. He no longer found any hewn stones on the mount of Elias. The local people had made partly off with them. When the sand is removed, however, "traces of the walls of houses appear everywhere". Ceramics and tesserae show that the hill was inhabited in Byzantine times. Then he moved back along the

## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

course of the wadi, and thought he found traces there of fifty, or perhaps even a hundred houses. (Buzy: 1931).

A year later, Abel saw upon the hill “very clear traces of ancient foundations”. He too, discovered weathered sandstone and a few pieces of ceramics down the wadi, but none earlier than Byzantine, also refers to St Mary of Egypt house (Abel : 1932)

Wilken describes Palestine as it was under British mandate before the second world-war, He maintains that, on the slopes of the Mount of Elias (Elijah’s Hill) recently called Tell Mar Elyas there were pieces of pottery dating from the time of Christ, and near them, five rock-graves with contents belonging to the same period. This would have provided Bethany with an archaeological basis; but in the long time, which elapsed between visiting the site and writing down the facts, many things became confused in his mind. (Wilkenson, 1976, 1977, 2002c see also Wilken, 1992)

The remains he describes were located in front of the remnants of a monastery. In addition, the remains of hermit’s cells near the source of the wadi at Jabal Mar Elias/ Saint Elijah’s hill were identified. The two sites were visited until 1947 when, due to the political situation in the area, visits 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 in 1994, the area was once again opened up for explorations. (Waheeb, 2003, Allita ,and Piccirillo, 1999).

### Field Excavations

Field survey followed by excavations were started in locality along Wadi Al-Kharrar during the summer of 1996 under supervision of the author and revealed the presence of several architectural remains and artifacts on the eastern part of Jordan River , as follow:

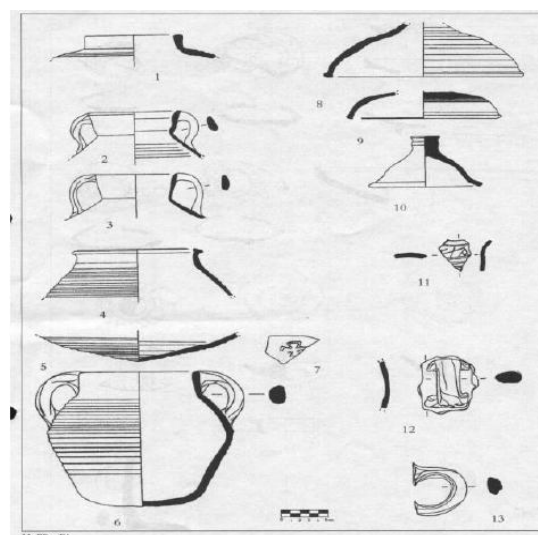
### Rhetorius Monastery

The byzantine monastery called Rhetorius monastery (fifth- sixth centuries) that was uncovered is located on Saint Elijah’s hill at the western edge of Wadi al-Kharrar. It connects 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 see also 1998B, 1998C).

The monastery is comprised of three churches and other related buildings within an enclosure – a 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.(Waheeb:1999)

Excavations in the lower area near the river revealed three churches were built very close to the river route, these churches dated back to Byzantine period 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> and later modifications up to Ottoman rule, among of these churches is John the Baptist Church described by pilgrims and travelers and building of St Mary was found very close to the discovered church. (Waheeb, 2012) fig. 4. 1q



**Figure 4.** Early Byzantine pottery sherds and vessel found in the Baptism site near St Mary site (Abu-Shemis, and Waheeb2002A)

The local people who lived in the area during the period between 1930-1967 still call the two original rooms as the (palace of the lady).( Qaser el-Set)in Arabic . Depended on the recovered architectural remains and other

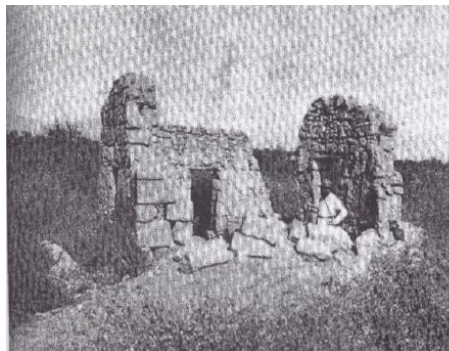


## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

datable material, it is highly recommended to conclude that the site with the nearby caves was Laura of St Mary of Egypt built during the Byzantine period and destroyed by the earthquakes and the floods of Jordan River in



the late Byzantine period ,fig :5. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the site rebuilt and used by local settlers like Ottomans (as watch tower ) and later was used by the local farmers .



**Figure 5.** Remains of nearby structures and St. Mary House according to Able (Able, 1932).

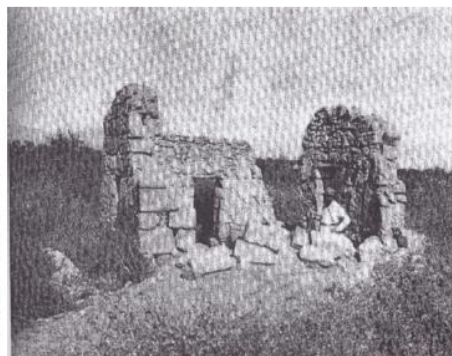
One of the major main aims of excavating this site is studying possible associations of the original two rooms with the story of the life of Saint Mary of Egypt. This link is based almost totally on the suggestion by the French scholar F.M. Able at the turn of the century- either that she used the rooms herself, or that they were built after her death in the Byzantine era to

commerate the spot where she is thought to have lived and been buried.

The team has excavated a multi- room complex. Initially the site identified over two years ago during 1996, fig:6 , it was located 50 meters to the east away from the river and surrounded by tamarisk trees, palm, and different types of local plants from all sides



A



B

**Figure 6.** A: Site of St. Mary before excavation during 1996 covered by heaps of stones and sand accumulation during 1999AD . (Waheeb,1997) B:St. Mary House before latest destruction according to Able 18th century (Able, 1932).

The structure bordered by the Lissan marl cliffs with its caves around 150m from the east, by Jordan River 50m to the west and 100 meters to the south by the famous remains of John the Baptist church. The surface survey during 1996 revealed the presence of few Byzantine pottery shreds mixed with modern pottery shreds. The team decided not to excavate the site at first, because its architecture and other few artifacts such as pottery shreds suggested that it was relatively modern remains / Ottoman from the turn of the century, while piles of stones and sand on top of the structure were remains from recent Jordanian army activities.

The site reexamined again during 1999 -2000 A.D. season of excavations, several test trenches were conducted in different locations on and near the site, then more Byzantine pottery shreds and well cut ashlar brought from the nearby Byzantine church.(Waheeb,2002 B)

Systematic comprehensive excavations started in the site aiming to discover the whole site and the original lower courses and remains, also to understand the relation between the site, the nearby caves and Jordan River as well as the other Byzantine architectures discovered and found in site of Jesus Baptism. The local narratives as part of intangible heritage of the

## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

site were taken into consideration. The excavation has revealed two original rooms from the 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantine period, and two other rooms that were added on in a later period depending on way of building and datable recovered materials, probably dated back the ottoman period as follow:

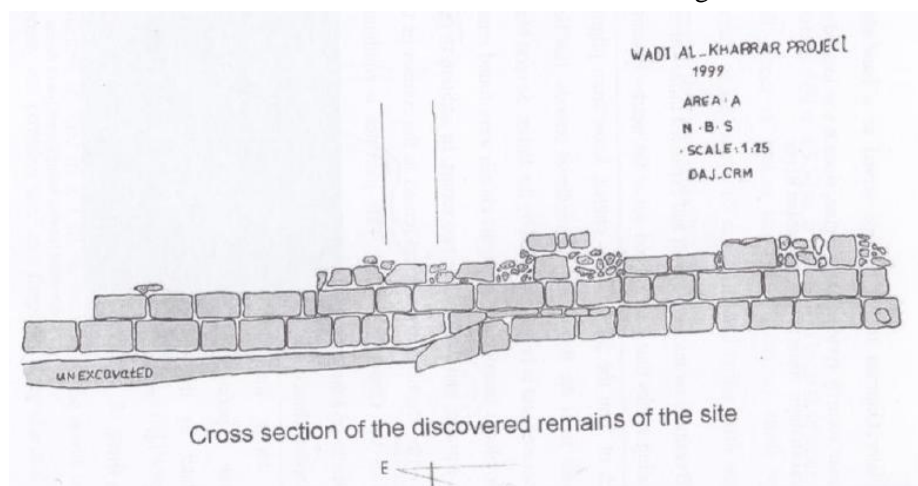


Figure 7. Cross Section of the northern wall remains. (Kabajeh, 1999)

### Room No 2

built adjacent to Room No1, the western wall of this room which measures 075m probably added in later period served as a division wall between the two rooms. The square shape room measures 5,55mx 6,10m.

The walls of the room built of well cut dressed ashlar of sand stone. The door way measure (1) meter wide. Fig:12

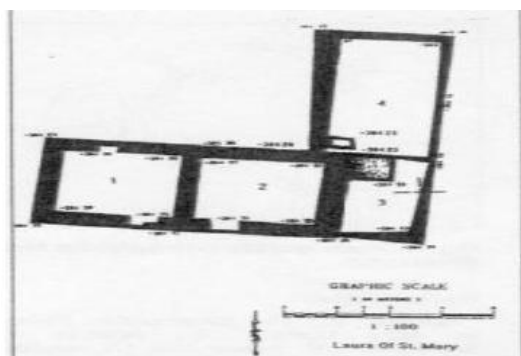


Figure 8. Ground Plan of the discovered building of St Mary of Egypt in Site of Jesus Baptism. (Kabajeh, 1999)

The two original square rooms were reused in the ottoman period. The two rectangular room were added and attached to the eastern side of the structure during this period, **Room No 3**: measures 6mx3, 30m, built of local field stones and small pieces of broken sandstone ashlar, a small square structure measures 1,85x1,65m was located in the north western corner of the room,

### Room No 1

Located on the western section of the discovered structure. It is squared shape and measures 5,55mx 6,10m built of well cut dressed sand stone ashlar. The door way measures (1 meter wide), and was built in the southern wall. Fig:7

probably used as small storage place for agricultural purposes. Fig :8

### Room No 4

measures 9mx4,90m, built of local field stones and a small broken pieces of sand stone ashlar, a small square structure measures 1mx1,20m was built in the south western corner of the room, depending on the recovered materials which consists of charcoal pieces were found during the excavation of this small structure.

mixed with ashy layer and refers to the probability of using this place as fire place and may concluded that the whole room was used as a kitchen during the Ottoman Period .

The floor of the site was covered with a hard compact sand composed of a gray leveled smooth sand. Excavations revealed no Pillars designed to support the roof. Also no roof tiles were recovered from the excavations, and possibly the roof comprised wooden beams which were washed away during reused periods. The internal walls of the site were covered with a smooth mud layer.

The Byzantine rooms were reused and expanded in the ottoman era using stones that were taken out of the nearby Byzantine era church of John the Baptist: that church known from Byzantine and medieval period pilgrims accounts( see Wilson1895). Has been rediscovered and is being excavated by the

## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

author In 1997. Several black marble blocks from St John the Baptist church and from the steps of the staircase were found reused in the entrance and walls of the two rooms, in addition some other fragments were found reused in the courses of the walls of the ottoman building, which indicate a continues removing of John the Baptist church stones even during the ottoman era and later by the local farmers , flood of Jordan River played a vital role in

demolishing the site and removing more stones of the original building .Fig:9

The later ottoman rooms were clearly served as a part of the Ottoman security system in this region, since it was located near several strategic historical fords across the Jordan River,



A

B

**Figure 9.** A: The Baptism site near Jordan River B: Engraved limestone block with cross found near site of St Mary of Egypt ( Waheeb,1998)



**Figure 10.** Madaba Mosaic Map showing the Byzantine fords on the east bank of Jordan River . (AviYonah, 1954)

### The Two Caves of The Laura

About 200m east of the site of St Mary and Just beyond the thick belt of tamarisk trees and bushes called the “Jungle of the Jordan”, the landscape suddenly changes into a soft chalky and stark whitish marl (Lisan marl formation), as a result of sedimentation at the bottom of a freshwater lake in ancient times. This barren area is called the “wilderness” in the New Testament.Fig:10

The archaeological survey and excavations in the area revealed the presence of tow caves that had been dug and transformed into Laura, ermit, and monk cells or sometimes small chapels. Two caves were discovered here while remains of the other caves (semi- demolished) were

noticed and traces could be seen near these caves .

The two caves were dug in the upper part of the Lisan marl cliffs, which overlooks the thick vegetation area (Zor area), The location of the two caves reflects the aims and functions they served during the early periods. St Mary or the monks later led their monastic life in the location of the caves in the upper parts of the white cliffs, and they were able to control the whole surrounding area especially the crossing ford on the Jordan River that lies directly opposite to the caves. In addition to that, they tried to avoid the floods of the river in winter and spring, and to be safe and far from the threats of the wild animals living here in the



## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

pastimes, some of these threats were depicted on the Madabā mosaic map. ( Avi-Yonah 1954.)

The comprehensive study made on the caves and the surrounding area showed that there was one type of caves, which is the artificial cave, carved out of the rock by the monks. It is clear that much use was made of artificial caves formed in the soft Lisan marl formation during the Pre-Byzantine Period. Depending on the available evidence, such as pottery sherds and comparative studies with caves found on the western bank of Jordan River such as Arcadius Cell in the Great Laura revealed that the monks of Bethany Beyond the Jordan used the caves in the rocks as lauritic Cells.

The two caves are located 10 m above the ground level. The monks would climb down to the complex from the flat area at the top the cliff, and in order to ease their descent, they carved several steps in the natural rock — none of them is in existence now — using a rope ladder to facilitate climbing up. Wood is available in Wādi al Kharrār, especially on the Jordan River banks, and gathering it was an easy job. Manufacturing ladders, windows and doors for the caves were jobs for the monks and might be considered daily routine in BBJ.

### The First Cave /Laura

The cave measures about 5m east-west and 4m north-south with an average height of 180-200cm. The interior of the cave is divided into two chambers. Inside the cave, and to the right of the entrance, a low bench measuring 3m east-west and 1m wide is carved in the natural rock, which was probably used for sitting. The eastern wall of the entrance was carved in an apse-shape.

The largest chamber is the living area which is accessible through a doorway measuring 60cm wide and 170cm high. The chamber measures 2m east-west x 2.70m north-south.

The second chamber represents the prayer hall. The chamber is accessible through a doorway also measuring 60cm wide and 170cm high. The chamber measurements are 1.10 m east-west x 2m north-south, it's clear that the prayer room occupied the inner section of the cave.

Openings for windows were carved out in the Lisan marl rock whenever possible, window small recesses for oil lamps have been found in the living room and the prayer hall. More light for the prayer hall came through an opening in the southern wall of the prayer room through the

entrance area. It is clear that doors and windows of the monks' caves, such as this cave, were cut along with the cave to ensure air and light. Few Byzantine pottery sherds were found during the work in and around the caves which dated the cave broadly to Byzantine period. It's clear that this cave and next one were not equipped with a water storage system.

On the contrary the other three caves of Eijah's Hill ( 1800m to the east ) was equipped with water storage system Not far from Eijah's Hill( Tell al-Kharrar ), at a distance of ca. 300m to the west on the southern edge of Wadi al-Kharrar, the excavators uncovered some architectural remains.

These consist of small structures with foundations built from local field stones and upper courses built from mud bricks; with roofs constructed from wooden beams. Monks would have used these structures as their living and prayer quarters and for offering necessary services to the pilgrims visiting the site. The excavators think that these structures were part of a Laura, or a group of individual hermit cells, associated with the monastery.

This storage system could be compared with Arcadius Cell not far away from Mar Saba on the western bank of Jordan River ( Hirschfeld 1992. p.187-188.).

### The Second Cave/Laura

The second cave is located at the same level of the first cave, to its north. The cave measures 5.20m north-south x 2.70m east-west. It consists of two chambers and an entrance. The entrance of the cave faces the Jordan River and measures 2.50m long x 1m wide and 1.60m high. The entrance leads to two chambers and the apse-shaped wall which is carved in the eastern side of the cave. On the right side is the first chamber which is almost rectangular in shape. The doorway of the room measures 1 m wide and 1.60m high. The southern wall of the room is carved in an apsidal shape. The room measures 1.30m east-west x 1.10 m north-south.

The second chamber is located on the left side of the entrance; the way of carving this room is identical to the first room. The doorway of the chamber is carved slightly away and not opposite to the doorway of the first chamber, the doorway measures 1m wide and 1m high, the chamber measures 1.60m north-south x 1.10m

east-west. The recovered datable material in this room were some body shreds dated to Byzantine

period.Fig:11

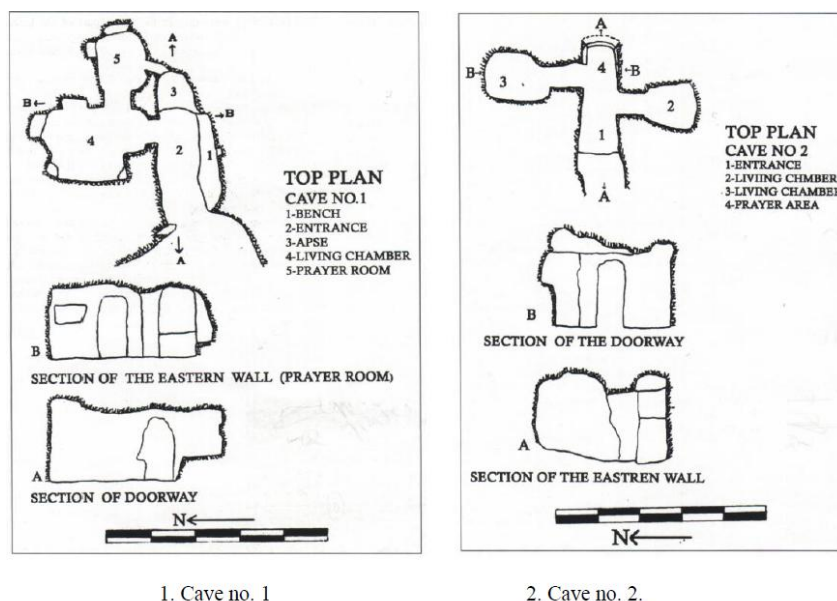


Figure 11. Top plan of the tow discovered caves east of Jordan River

The two caves probably housed group of monks who had something in common over and above their commitment to monastic life.



Figure 12. The site after excavations and restoration with some facilities, the site associated with Saint Mary the Egyptian is in the baptism area close to the place where Jesus was baptized.(Waheeb,2005)

**CONCLUSION**

The discovery of site/Laura of St Mary of Egypt and other major Byzantine sites like John the Baptist church and other churches fit equally well in the region of Wadi al-Kharrar on the eastern side of Jordan River . 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 and believers settled here built and engraved their cells and small houses/Laura’s .

The place where we found St Mary Laura remains was convenient as it was close to the traditional spot of baptism , one of the places

where travelers would have crossed the Jordan on their way east or west.

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 and laurs 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.

In Conclusion, the biblical texts, early pilgrims’ reports, the Madaba mosaic map, and recent archeological work all agree in locating the place of the activities of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus east of the Jordan River at Bethany beyond the Jordan, near Elijah’s Hill.

Moreover, excavations showed the efforts of the Byzantines in bringing about the stones, marbles, mosaics and the builders. This proves that the kings and the emperors were keen on this region.

The reason behind building these Laura's, churches or cells like St Mary structure is the religious connectivity to these places as well. This reflects the keenness and the memorial events with the region to the east of Jordan river, in addition other structures in remote areas to the east, such as Tel Mar Ellias, Al Rameh, and Al Kafreen where the sound testing near showed the continuity in building there,



## The Discovery of Byzantine Laura of St Mary the Egyptian in Site of Jesus Baptism

which indicates its religiously interrelation with the Byzantines in BBJ.

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