

---

## **“Bethany Beyond the Jordan” (Jordan) No 1446**

---

### **Official name as proposed by the State Party**

Baptism Site “Bethany Beyond the Jordan” (Al-Maghtas)

### **Location**

South Shunah District, Governorate of Al-Balqaa  
The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

### **Brief description**

The Baptism Site “Bethany beyond the Jordan” is located in the Jordan Valley, north of the Dead Sea. The site contains two distinct archaeological areas, Tell el-Kharrar, also known as Jabal Mar Elias, and the area of the Churches of St. John the Baptist. The property is believed the location where Jesus of Nazareth was baptised by John the Baptist and is a popular pilgrimage destination for Christians. Physical remains associated with the commemoration of this event include a water collection system and pools as well as later built churches, chapels, a monastery, hermit caves and pilgrim stations.

### **Category of property**

In terms of categories of cultural property set out in Article I of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *site*.

## **1 Basic data**

### **Included in the Tentative List**

18 June 2001

### **International Assistance from the World Heritage Fund for preparing the Nomination**

None

### **Date received by the World Heritage Centre**

27 January 2014

### **Background**

This is a new nomination.

### **Consultations**

ICOMOS has consulted its International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management and several independent experts.

### **Technical Evaluation Mission**

An ICOMOS technical evaluation mission visited the property from 21-25 September 2014.

### **Additional information received by ICOMOS**

ICOMOS sent a letter to the State Party on 7 October 2014 requesting additional information with regard to development projects in the property, the management plan as well as monitoring procedures established. A second letter was sent on 19 December 2014 requesting further information on boundaries, a construction moratorium for the site, maintenance, visitor- and disaster management, as well as once again monitoring procedures.

The State Party responded by letters of 2 November 2014 and 4 February 2015, submitting additional information on all the requested items, including a management plan prepared for the site and revised maps of the property and buffer zone.

### **Date of ICOMOS approval of this report**

12 March 2015

## **2 The property**

### **Description**

The archaeological site “Bethany Beyond the Jordan” is located on the eastern banks of the Jordan River, nine kilometres north of the Dead Sea. The property has a size of 533.7 hectares and includes two principal archaeological areas, Tell Al-Kharrar, also known as Jabal Mar Elias (Elijah’s Hill), and the area of the Churches of St John the Baptist near the Jordan River.

The property includes archaeological structures of Roman and Byzantine origin, such as churches and chapels, a monastery, hermit caves and pools in which the act of baptism was celebrated. The archaeological remains will be described in four parts, focusing on Tell Al-Kharrar (Elijah’s Hill), the churches of the Zor area (Churches of St John the Baptist), the caves and the tombs.

The archaeological area of Tell Al-Kharrar (Elijah’s Hill) is located two kilometres east of the Jordan River. As the name indicates, according to tradition Elijah’s Hill is the place from which the Prophet Elijah ascended to heaven and hence a Byzantine monastery was built at the location, the Monastery of Rhetorios in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The hill was occupied during the Roman and Byzantine periods. Excavations revealed three churches, three baptismal pools and a circular well in addition to an outer wall which surrounded the hill. Archaeological investigations also revealed the presence of ceramic pipes transporting water from springs further east to the baptism site, which continue to provide water to the property at present.

The churches of the Zor area includes the Pillared Hall, a basilica church referred to as the Church of St John the Baptist, the Lower Basilica Church, with geometrically patterned marble floors, the remains of the Upper Basilica Church, the Marble Steps, the four piers of the Chapel of the Mantle, the Small Chapel, the Laura of St Mary of Egypt and a large pool. Noteworthy are the marble steps,

including 22 authentic black marble steps, which were constructed around 570 CE and which lead from the Upper Basilica to a baptismal pool. This pool is surrounded by four piers, which are assumed to have once supported the Chapel of the Mantle.

A cluster of monk caves carved into the Qattara Hills, also called hermit cells, is located at 300 metres distance to the Jordan River. These caves were in the past accessible from the western and south-western sides by ropes, ladders or staircases which no longer exist. Semicircular niches are carved into the eastern wall of each cave, which was divided into two rooms, assumed to have been reserved for praying and for living.

A number of tombs were identified adjacent to or within the churches. They seem to be burial places of monks or individuals closely associated with the churches. Most graves are rectangular and adequate in size to receive a single outstretched body. The burials have been dated to the Byzantine and early Islamic periods (5<sup>th</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> century CE). The property revealed archaeological finds, including coins and ceramics and serves as an epigraphic reference.

#### **History and development**

Based on the archaeological evidence, the site was first inhabited in the Chalcolithic period (ca. 3500 BC) by a small farming community. The subsequent settlement remains date to Hellenistic times, but the key development of the site occurred during the Roman and Byzantine eras, in the 1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, with the main structures dated to after the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity was declared the official state religion. The site flourished as a pilgrimage site especially during the Byzantine period; however, all buildings of this time were destroyed as a result of earthquakes and floods and rebuilt multiple times in later periods until the site was abandoned by the late 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The Byzantine occupation clustered in two areas, along the east bank of the Jordan River and around the hill of Tell Al-Kharrar, often called Elijah's Hill. The first church of St John the Baptist was built by the Byzantine Emperor Anastasius in the period 491-518 CE. It was destroyed by floods and earthquakes twice, until the third church reconstruction and the chapel on piers collapsed during a major flood in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. The main buildings on Elijah's Hill date to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Several of the Byzantine structures continued to be used during the early Islamic period. An Orthodox monastery was established in the 13<sup>th</sup> century on the remains of the earlier Byzantine but it is uncertain how long it continued to be used. The number of travellers dropped at the time and most elements of the property fell into disuse. A pilgrim visiting the site in 1484 reported it to be in ruins. It appears that the property was hardly visited between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when a small chapel dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt, a hermit from the

Byzantine period, was built but then again destroyed in the 1927 earthquake.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the site was used by a local community of farmers, and after the Six-Day war in 1967 it became a closed military zone until the signing of a peace treaty between Jordan and Israel in 1994. In the 1990s the archaeological excavation of the site started, and basic conservation and restoration works began in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Visitor structures and facilities were established outside the archaeological areas, which include a car park, a ticket office, management offices, a conference centre, a store, souvenir shops, a wastewater treatment plant and a desalination plant.

### **3 Justification for inscription, integrity and authenticity**

#### **Comparative analysis**

The comparative analysis is divided into two main sections. The first section considers sites of relevance to historical events of Christianity as well as sites that have become pilgrimage destinations to Christian communities. This comparison is predominantly focused on the region and considers sites like Mount Nebo, according to tradition the place where Moses looked at the promised land, Deir ain Abbata, supposedly the cave where Lot and his two daughters stayed after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route in Bethlehem, Palestine, (2012, criteria (iv) and (vi)), Saint Catherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai, Egypt (2002, criteria (i), (iii), (iv), and (vi)) and several other sites, especially in the Jordan Valley.

The State Party concludes in this section that several other sites are comparable or even superior in material remains but that "Bethany beyond the Jordan" has unique and exceptional significance in terms of its association with the baptism of Jesus. ICOMOS considers that the judgment concerning the lack of exceptionality of the physical remains is appropriate and that the site – in comparison to the places compared – gains its exceptionality through its association to the historic event and the practice of pilgrimage over two millennia. ICOMOS further notes that historical structures associated with the baptism of Jesus exist on the western banks of the Jordan River. However, it seems that pilgrimage of most churches is focused on "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" as the likely baptism site as a result of the wilderness character, described as the setting of the baptism, which seems lacking on the opposite banks.

The second section of the comparative analysis considers on a global scale sites of religious significance and pilgrimage, with emphasis on properties already inscribed on the World Heritage List. Properties compared on the basis of their religious significance include the island of Pátmos, Greece (1999 criteria (iii), (iv), and (vi)) and Lumbini, the Birthplace of the Lord

Buddha, Nepal (1997, criteria (iii) and (vi)). ICOMOS considers that other sites of religious pilgrimage, such as Mount Wutai, China (2009, criteria (ii), (iii), (iv) and (vi)), the Rock-Hewn Churches, Lalibela, Ethiopia (1978, (i), (ii) and (iii)), the Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodhi Gaya, India (2002, criteria (i), (ii), (iii), (iv), and (vi)), the Bolgar Historical and Archaeological Complex, Russian Federation (2014, criteria (ii) and (vi)) or the Bahá'í Holy Places in Haifa and the Western Galilee, Israel, (2008, criteria (iii) and (vi)) could have been added for further comparison. However, ICOMOS considers that none of these would have led to a different result than that the Baptism Site "Bethany beyond the Jordan" is unique in its association to the sacrament of baptism in Christian faith.

---

ICOMOS considers that the comparative analysis justifies consideration of this property for the World Heritage List.

---

### **Justification of Outstanding Universal Value**

The nominated property is considered by the State Party to be of Outstanding Universal Value as a cultural property for the following reasons:

- The Baptism Site "Bethany beyond the Jordan" is tangibly associated with the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century.
- The site is also associated with the life and ascension of Elijah (also called Elias and Elisha), which is of common relevance to the monotheistic religions as well as the last years of the life of St Mary of Egypt.
- The special significance attributed to the baptism of Jesus encouraged generations of monks, hermits, pilgrims and priests to reside in and visit the site, and to leave behind testimonies of their devotion and religious activities, dating to between the 4<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE.
- The continuous reconstruction of churches destroyed by floods and earthquakes illustrates the enormous importance that was attributed to the site, despite the fact that the location was not suitable for permanent constructions.

ICOMOS considers that the evidence provided in the nomination dossier does not doubtlessly prove that the archaeological structures of Jabal Mar Elias and the churches near the Jordan River are indeed related to the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth, while also noting that several locations along the Jordan River have historically made similar claims. However, ICOMOS notes that the Baptism Site "Bethany beyond the Jordan" is of immense religious significance to the majority of denominations of Christian faith, who have accepted this site as the location in which Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist. The archaeological structures testify to the early beginnings of this attributed importance which initiated the construction of churches and chapels, habitation of hermit caves and pilgrimage activities.

ICOMOS considers that the above justification is appropriate in relation to the significance attributed by Christian believers.

### **Integrity and authenticity**

#### **Integrity**

The area proposed for inscription corresponds to the area administered by the Baptism Site Commission. It is maintained as a wilderness area and locates within all the known archaeological remains relevant to the significance proposed. The size of the property allows the whole valley to be viewed and appreciated by visitors and in most directions integrates the wider setting of the Jordan Valley, from the vista points established for such purpose. All the elements necessary to read and understand the values conveyed by the property are still present and are encompassed by the nominated area.

However, towards the north-east and south-west, the initially proposed property included areas, free of archaeological remains which have been designated for the establishment of religious, administrative and visitor infrastructure. At the request of ICOMOS these areas have been excluded from the property. The construction area is now located in the buffer zone of the property. ICOMOS requested the removal of the above areas to allow for a construction moratorium to be issued for the remaining site, which is yet to happen.

ICOMOS notes that despite the exclusion of the above named areas from the property scrutiny needs to be applied to the approval of any future projects envisaged in these. The planned pilgrimage village should further be considered through comprehensive Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA) before any approval is granted for its construction. The commitment of the State Party to present any plans to the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies before approval is helpful in this context. ICOMOS further recommends the development of construction guidelines for the churches to provide a shared framework of scale, designs and construction schemes.

In the past the property has been prone to flooding, causing the architectural structures to be destroyed several times. Most recently flooding occurred when dams upstream on the Jordan were opened to relieve high water levels in the dam lakes. Agreements have been put in place to control and coordinate these releases to avoid flooding in the future. The flow of the Jordan is now controlled so that flooding due to natural climatic events is no longer possible.

#### **Authenticity**

The site of "Bethany Beyond The Jordan" (Al-Maghtas) is considered by the majority of the Christian Churches to be the location where John the Baptist baptised Jesus. The continuing pilgrimage and veneration of the site is a credible expression of the spirit and feeling attributed to it and the atmosphere, which the property conveys to the

believers. As the location of Jesus' baptism is described as wilderness, the preservation of the Zor, the green wilderness along the Jordan River, is essential to maintain this attribution. Despite the large volume of visitors to the site, a wilderness feeling still exists, which is enhanced by the natural materials and simple local construction technology that are used to build the shelter structures and visitor rest areas.

As an important religious site, several Christian Churches desire to have their presence in places of veneration and accordingly locations just outside the property have been and continue to be allocated for the construction of churches. Although these recent structures could be seen as compromising the authenticity of the setting of the site, they do not presently impinge on or negatively impact the central area containing the archaeological remains.

The archaeological areas have been preserved in their original materials, but have in many places been restored adding similar materials from the area to allow for easier interpretation or use of the structures. In some cases archaeological fragments have been reassembled by means of anastylosis. ICOMOS considers that the restoration undertaken does in some places reduce the authenticity in material and workmanship. However, ICOMOS considers that this reduction of material authenticity does not affect the significance or credibility attributed to the site by Christian believers.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the condition of integrity has been met. ICOMOS further considers that although material authenticity is at times compromised, authenticity in relation to the property's associated significance as the location of Jesus' baptism and the cultural tradition of pilgrimage has been met.

---

#### **Criteria under which inscription is proposed**

The property is nominated on the basis of cultural criteria (iii), (iv) and (vi).

Criterion (iii): *bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the archaeological remains illustrate the continuous use of the site over millennia for pilgrimage and provides a unique testimony to the cultural and religious tradition of baptism and the importance it holds in the Christian belief system. The State Party further claims that recent discoveries demonstrate that the Baptism Site, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Al-Maghtas) is the site of Jesus' baptism by John, and its association with the life of John the Baptist, with the ascension to Heaven of Prophet Elias/Elijah, and the life of St Mary of Egypt,

ICOMOS considers that the property best represents the tradition of baptism, an important sacrament in Christian faith, and with it the continuous practice of pilgrimage to the site. This tradition is illustrated by the archaeological

evidence, which references the practice of baptism since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a practice that is continued again at present time. ICOMOS considers that the claims concerning the authenticity of the site as the baptism site of Jesus or the location of Elijah's ascension cannot be confirmed from an archaeological point of view but have been accepted by the majority of Christian connotations, which seems more relevant for the historic and present practice of the cultural tradition.

---

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has been justified.

---

Criterion (iv): *be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the Baptism Site, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" exhibits outstanding examples of buildings and architectural ensembles which illustrate a fundamental event in the history of one of the world's great religions. The State Party explains that the buildings illustrate specific construction techniques, such as building on piers to protect churches from flooding or the use of marble staircases. These structures match the descriptions of early pilgrims and travellers who visited the baptism site of Jesus of Nazareth.

ICOMOS considers that the collection of historic structures which were added to the property over several centuries can hardly be described as a specific type of architectural ensemble. ICOMOS also considers that the archaeological evidence of the site as baptism site of Jesus remains questionable and that the ongoing practice of religious communities is better recognized under criteria (iii) and (vi).

---

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has not been justified.

---

Criterion (vi): *be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance;*

This criterion is justified by the State Party on the grounds that the Baptism Site, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Al-Maghtas) is directly associated with the Christian tradition of baptism as well as being associated with important individuals and events in the three monotheistic religions. These include the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, the ascension of Elijah (also called Elias and Elisha) and the last years of life of St Mary of Egypt.

ICOMOS considers that the property is indeed of high significance to several Christian denominations as the baptism site of Jesus of Nazareth and for millennia has been a popular pilgrimage destination. ICOMOS considers that the associations to this historic event, believed to have taken place in the property, and the

contemporary beliefs still associated allow for justification of this criterion.

---

ICOMOS considers that this criterion has been justified.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the nominated property meets criteria (iii) and (vi) and the conditions of authenticity and integrity.

---

#### **Description of the attributes**

The attributes of Outstanding Universal Value are in the landscape features of the Jordan River and the natural vegetation perceived as wilderness which support the association of the location to the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth by John the Baptist. The archaeological remains are attributes of the early practices of pilgrimage, hermit life and religious veneration that were responses to the associations of this location. In addition the continuing visits of Christian communities to the site highlight the continuation of the cultural tradition of baptism and pilgrimage to its place of origin.

#### **4 Factors affecting the property**

Development pressures are low due to the application of national and regional laws pertaining to land use and building development along with the bylaws of the Baptism Site Commission. Any threat to the site from planned or illegal development is extremely remote. The construction of religious buildings near the property is confined to specific areas in the buffer zone that is tightly controlled by the Baptism Site Authority, which has full control over all aspects of design, form and building consent. However, Heritage Impact Assessments should be conducted for any future development in the larger setting as well as for any visitor infrastructure added on site.

The main environmental factors affecting the site are large temperature fluctuations and salt crystallisation on the exposed archaeological materials. Conservation strategies have been designed to mitigate the impact of these environmental conditions and reduce the result of the deterioration processes. Flooding was a recurrent threat in the past, but analysis of flood damages allowed building small dikes around the archaeological remains to hold back flood water and reduce the impact of flooding. In view of natural disasters, earthquakes remain possible in the area and had negative impact on the site in the past. Wildfires could affect the vegetation in the Jordan Valley which retains the imagination of wilderness.

While the visitation of the site by pilgrims contributes to its significance, a massive increase of visitors and tourism activities could have negative impacts on the site. Based on past records of visitor numbers, the Baptism Site Commission undertook studies to determine the approximate carrying capacity of the site. The study highlighted that even a considerable visitor

increase would still remain within the limits of acceptable change. As the site is fenced and the entrance secured by ticket offices, the Baptism Site Commission has the ability to prevent visitors beyond the calculated benchmark amount.

---

ICOMOS considers that the main threats to the property are major floods, earthquakes, wildfires and uncontrolled visitor increase.

---

### **5 Protection, conservation and management**

#### **Boundaries of the nominated property and buffer zone**

The boundaries of the property are clearly delineated and correspond in part to the perimeter of the designated site. The boundary also partly corresponds to tarmac and dirt roads that surround it and a barbed wire topped, chain-link fence which encloses the site. Sections of the initially designated site to the north-east and south-west have been designated for development of churches by the religious communities and other visitor infrastructure and have therefore been defined as buffer zone, to allow for a construction moratorium to be applied to the remaining parts of the site. The moratorium should prevent the construction of any architectural structures with a exceptions of structures created with the sole purpose of protection of archaeological elements. This legal commitment is yet to be issued. Sufficient archaeological research has been undertaken at the site and the extent of the relevant archaeological remains is well established.

ICOMOS is satisfied with the delineation of the boundaries in terms of inclusiveness. At the suggestion of ICOMOS the areas set aside for the establishment of modern church buildings, the proposed pilgrim village and the current administration centre have been designated as buffer zone and are now no longer within the property boundary. Archaeological excavations have shown that these areas contain no significant archaeological remains so that constructions can be permitted in the area according to guidelines which need to be drawn up.

The buffer zone surrounds the site towards the north, east and south with a distance of approximately 600 metres to each direction. It is zoned as either agricultural land or natural protected area in which no development is permitted. There is no buffer zone foreseen to the west, where the Jordan River defines the national border. Given the topography of the site and the importance of the Jordan River in its historical context, it appears that a number of important views and view sheds are towards the west pointing at the opposite banks of the Jordan River. ICOMOS acknowledges that these are not included in the buffer zone as they fall outside the Jordanian territory. However, ICOMOS considers that international cooperation for the protection of essential views across the River should be encouraged to ensure protection of the property's landscape character in all directions.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the boundaries of the property include all attributes of Outstanding Universal Value. ICOMOS further considers that the buffer zone is adequate but that protection of the western banks of the Jordan River would be desirable in the future to protect important view sheds across the River.

---

### **Ownership**

The property ownership is divided between two parties. The key areas are defined as Christian Waqf (endowment) belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church. The remainder of the surrounding area belongs to the management authority, the Baptism Site Commission.

### **Protection**

Both the property and buffer zones enjoy legal protection at all levels. At state level the property is designated as an antique site according to Antiquities Law 21/1988, art. 3, par 8. This law prohibits destruction, damage or alteration of the antiquity itself and regulates development works around it, so as to avoid major impact on the antiquity and on its contextual perception. ICOMOS recommended to the State Party that a construction moratorium be issued for the nominated property, which is intended to prevent any structures except those exclusively dedicated to the protection of archaeological remains. The State Party's response accepted the boundary changes suggested to allow for the moratorium but did not indicate if or when this would be issued.

On a regional level the property and buffer zone are protected by the Jordan Valley Authority Laws and on the site level by the By-Laws of the Baptism Site Commission. The objective of these laws is to protect the property from potential future threats, focused mainly on development and tourism projects that might jeopardize the nature and character of the Site and its immediate surroundings. Irrespective of ownership indicated above, the Baptism Site Commission has full legal control of the site.

Although not indicated in the nomination dossier, the veneration of the place, the presence of several church communities and the continuing pilgrimage add a level of traditional protection. It is not in the interest of the Christian communities that the property changes its character and accordingly visitation is arranged with respect to the site's significance. The protection measures of both the national level and in particular the Baptism Site Commission are effective and will, if consistently implemented, prevent negative impacts to the property.

---

In conclusion, ICOMOS considers that the legal protection in place is adequate.

---

### **Conservation**

The property has been well described, documented and inventoried in 2012, with records and archives available at the Baptism Site Commission archives and at the Department of Antiquities in Amman. The present state of conservation is good. The managers and staff at the

Baptism Site Commission are versed in current approaches to the conservation of archaeological sites, understand the processes of deterioration that occur on the site and are implementing conservation strategies to mitigate the effects.

The general approach to active conservation is based on minimal intervention focusing on consolidation and stabilization rather than reconstruction. Any stabilization designed to recreate a weather resistant condition for the archaeological remains is distinguished from the original fabric and completely reversible. This also includes the introduction of protective shelters which were constructed in three locations of the site. These shelters are designed to be self-supporting and clearly designed as new additions to the site rather than trying to mimic a historic architectural style.

Conservation projects are programmed on an annual basis and a maintenance team is present on site. Visitors access the property accompanied by guides, who are asked to report all problems they observe back to the conservation manager. The Department of Antiquities supplies conservation expertise whenever specialized knowledge is required. In such cases the site conservation and maintenance team receive on the job training from these experts as part of their work. At present, the site does not seem to require major conservation intervention and ICOMOS considers that the conservation measures in place are effective.

---

ICOMOS considers that the conservation approaches and expertise applied are adequate and effective.

---

### **Management**

Management structures and processes, including traditional management processes

The authority responsible for the Baptism Site, "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" is the Baptism Site Commission, which is directed by an independent board of trustees appointed by H.M. King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein and chaired by H.R.H. Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad. The day-to-day management is guided by the Director-General of the Baptism Site Commission and his deputy, who is in charge of conservation. Both are based on site full time and guide a team of 55 employees.

The Board of Trustees meets at regular intervals and receives update information on all relevant issues on site. They have full decision-making authority without referring to any other government agency. All revenues generated on site are utilized for the administration and management of the property. As result of these adequate financial resources, the management team is well staffed and qualified.

Risk preparedness has not been a key focus of the management but the State Party has provided additional material on risk management and maintenance

procedures, which ICOMOS recommends to be integrated in the overall management system.

Policy framework: management plans and arrangements, including visitor management and presentation

At the request of ICOMOS the State Party submitted the management plan of the property. Although a voluminous document, large parts of it are repetitive of the nomination file. The management plan remains analytical and descriptive and gives little emphasis to maintenance schemes as well as future strategies, activities and actions. It does also not address the future risks and threats it has identified. As such, the management plan is a comprehensive analytical tool of the present state of conservation and services but does not qualify as a strategic management document.

Considering the adequate management arrangements already in place, ICOMOS in its letter requesting additional information suggested that the State Party may wish to give priority to documenting the present management system and developing plans for maintenance, visitor management and disaster response rather than revising the entire management plan. The State Party submitted additional information on aspects currently considered for visitor and disaster response management. ICOMOS recommends that these are formally integrated in the management system.

Visitor access is controlled at one single entrance gate, which allows not only for the control of visitor numbers but also for the distribution of information. Maps and information leaflets are available at the entrance and the site features an audio guide system. From the entrance gate visitors use a shuttle bus which transports them to the starting point of the walking path. Almost all visitors join guided tours, in which the guides convey all necessary information. Occasional information panels in English and Arabic are also available. Specific paths are laid out on site for the visitor walks and pilgrim processions.

Involvement of the local communities

The Baptism Site Commission is keen on spreading awareness and knowledge about the site and its significance to the local community and general public. They presented public lectures to different audiences and held training sessions on site. Furthermore, several workshops were held where invited local community members and general public discussed the topic of religious tolerance and coexistence between different religions in Jordan. A number of staff members of the administration team are from the local community which allows the site to be perceived as a source of income and support.

ICOMOS considers that the management system is well founded and able to address most of the current challenges. However, ICOMOS considers that the management plan presented does not qualify as a

strategic planning document and recommends that processes which are currently being prepared to address maintenance schemes, visitor management and disaster response strategies will be utilized to augment the management system.

---

ICOMOS considers that the management system for the property is mostly adequate but recommends that processes currently prepared for maintenance, visitor management and disaster response should augment the existing management system.

---

## 6 Monitoring

The nomination dossier presented a number of aspects that would be considered in monitoring but did not include specific measures or indicators. At the request of ICOMOS, the State Party submitted in two steps further information on the monitoring procedures including a set of indicators, methods of measurement and periodicity of review. The additional information further highlights that a full monitoring programme is developed as part of an annual maintenance plan.

---

ICOMOS considers that the monitoring indicators presented cover relevant areas and that the monitoring programme should be integrated in the annual maintenance plan.

---

## 7 Conclusions

ICOMOS considers that the Baptism Site "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Al-Maghtas) presents an exceptional testimony to Christian religious practice through its association with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and in general terms the Christian sacrament of Baptism. Although ICOMOS cannot follow the archaeological arguments presented to prove the authenticity of the exact location where the baptism of Jesus took place, ICOMOS notes that the Baptism Site "Bethany beyond the Jordan" is of immense religious importance to the large majority of Christians, who have accepted this site to be the very location from which the sacrament originated.

The archaeological remains testify to the beginnings of this importance which led to the construction of churches and other religious structures used for hermitage or pilgrimage. The topography of the Jordan River and the vegetation, perceived as a landscape of wilderness, support the association to the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth by John the Baptist. The pilgrimage activities of Christian visitors highlight the continuation of the cultural tradition of baptism at its assumed place of origin. ICOMOS considers that the property justifies criteria (iii) and (vi) and meets the conditions of integrity and authenticity.

The site is well protected by its national designation as an antique site and appropriate development restrictions at a

regional and local level. Conservation measures follow current international standards for archaeological conservation and maintenance is undertaken according to annual planning tools. The state of conservation is adequate and no major conservation interventions seem required at present. Responsible for the management of the site is the Baptism Site Commission, guided by a board of trustees and managed on a day-to-day basis by its director and deputy who are both based on site. Since the site can directly utilize its revenues from ticketing, adequate financial resources are available.

The management plan presented remains descriptive and analytical but does not provide strategic guidance for future management. Following the recommendation of ICOMOS the State Party has prepared an initial overview of procedures in relation to maintenance, visitor management and disaster response. ICOMOS further recommends that the monitoring procedures be integrated in the annual maintenance schemes.

While the site boundaries are adequate in terms of inclusiveness of all archaeological remains, the State Party followed the recommendation of ICOMOS to exclude the areas in which construction of churches, administration offices and pilgrimage accommodation and other visitor infrastructure is foreseen. ICOMOS further recommended to apply a construction moratorium to the remaining parts of the site, which would prevent any construction except those exclusively dedicated to the protection of archaeological structures. However, the State Party has not yet provided indications as to if and when such moratorium might be formally issued. The buffer zone provides adequate protection towards the North, East and South, but no buffer zone is foreseen to the West across the Jordan River, which is the national boundary. Given the importance of the Jordan River in its historical context and significance, a number of important views are pointing at the opposite banks. ICOMOS acknowledges that these fall outside the Jordanian territory, however, ICOMOS considers that international cooperation for the protection of essential views across the river should be encouraged by the World Heritage Committee to ensure protection of the property's landscape character in all directions.

## 8 Recommendations

### Recommendations with respect to inscription

ICOMOS recommends that the nomination of the Baptism Site "Bethany Beyond the Jordan" (Al-Maghtas), Jordan, be **referred back** to the State Party in order to allow it to:

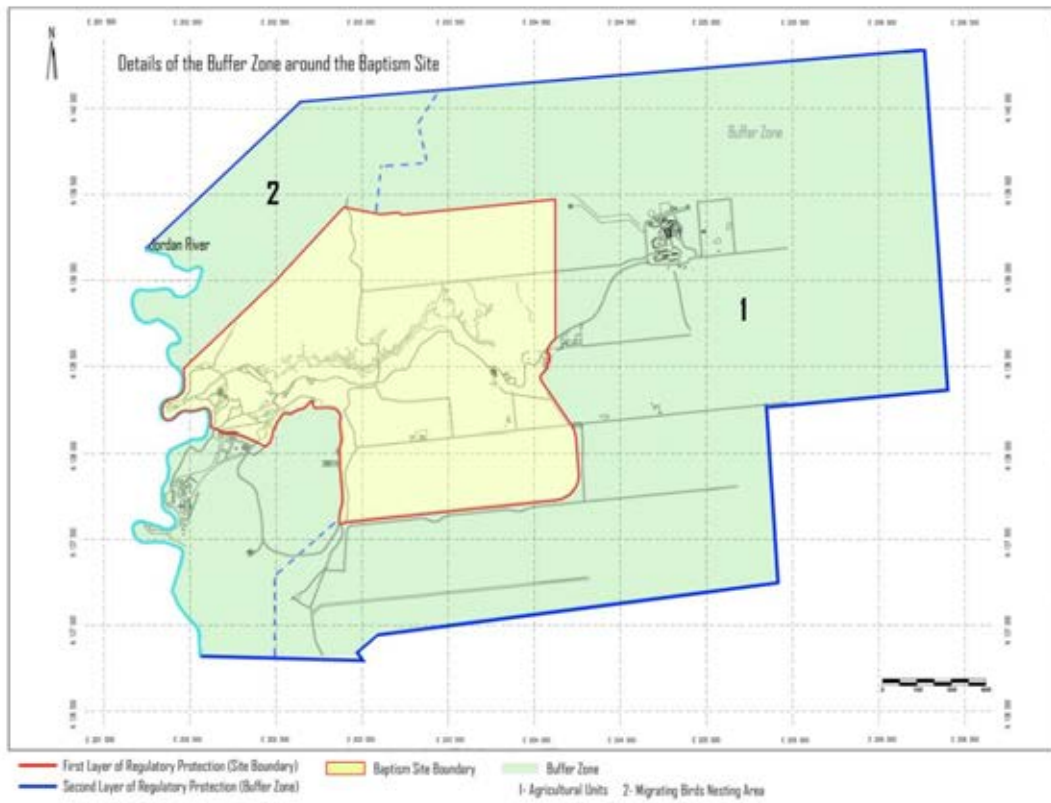
- Issue a construction moratorium for the property, which prevents any construction except for architectural structures created solely to protect archaeological remains;

- Integrate the management procedures on maintenance, visitor management and disaster response in the management system;
- Develop design and construction guidelines for the Churches which are to be constructed in the buffer zone.

### Additional recommendations

ICOMOS further recommends that the World Heritage Committee encourages all concerned State Parties to ensure the protection of the western banks of the Jordan River to preserve important vistas and sightlines of the property.





Revised map showing the boundaries of the nominated property



Aerial view of the Baptism Site and the Jordan River



The Church of Saint John the Baptist, remains of the first church



Visitors and pilgrims



Zor area with Churches of St. John the Baptist and baptism pool