

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

View of Manger Square
looking east towards the
Church of the Nativity and
its *ensemble*



State Party

State of Palestine

State, Province or Region

Bethlehem

Geographical coordinates to the nearest second

Latitude 31° 42' 04" N to 31° 42' 32" N

Longitude 35° 12' 03" E to 35° 12' 35" E

Textual Description of the boundary(ies) of the nominated property

The boundary defines the proposed property, consisting of, to the east, the architectural ensemble of the Church of the Nativity and the three Convents: the Greek Orthodox, the Franciscan and the Armenian Convents, together with a small area of land immediately to its east; and, to the west, the Pilgrimage Route, in total 712 m long, now defined by Star Street, part of Paul VI Street and the north side of Manger Square. The Buffer Zone around the proposed property consists essentially of the Historic City of Bethlehem.

Justification, Statement of Outstanding Universal Value

This nomination is of a property valid in its own right for inscription on the World Heritage List; it is also the first part of a serial nomination which will include sites inside and surrounding Bethlehem, particularly those related to the story of the birth and life of Jesus. It is brought forward with the agreement of the three Churches responsible for the Church of the

Nativity and its architectural ensemble. The second nomination will include the Historic Town of Bethlehem, here basically the Buffer Zone, and further nominations could include such as the Historic Town of Beit Sahour, the Shepherds' Field, Beit Sahour, and Mar Saba Monastery in the Desert to the east.

Justification

Since at least the 2nd century AD people have believed that the place where the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem, now stands is where Jesus was born. One particular cave, over which the first Church was built, is traditionally believed to be the Birthplace itself. In locating the Nativity, the place both marks the beginnings of Christianity and is one of the holiest spots in Christendom.

The original basilican church of 339 AD (St Helena), parts of which survive below ground, was arranged so that its octagonal eastern end surrounded, and provided a view of, the cave. This church is overlaid by the present Church of the Nativity, essentially of the mid-6th century AD (Justinian), though with many later alterations. It is the oldest Christian church in daily use.

Since early medieval times the Church has been increasingly incorporated into a complex of other ecclesiastical buildings, mainly monastic. As a result, today it is embedded in an extraordinary architectural ensemble, overseen by members of the Greek Orthodox Church, the Order of St Francis and the Armenian Church in a partnership (the Status Quo) established by the Treaty of Berlin (1878).

For most of the last 1500 years, Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity have been, as is still very much the case, a pilgrim destination. The eastern end of the traditional route from Jerusalem to the Church is along what is now officially called the Pilgrimage Route, that is, along Star Street, through the Damascus Gate, and along a short stretch of Paul VI Street and Manger Square. This route is still followed ceremonially each year by the Patriarchs of the three Churches at their several Christmases. The Christian Christmas, centred on Bethlehem, is the most widely-celebrated religious festival in the world.

Immediate Justification

The immediate justification for inscription is the World Heritage Committee's encouragement, formally recorded in 2002 at its 26th Session in Budapest, after the Church of the Nativity had been involved in military action. The Committee resolved that this Church and the Old City, Bethlehem, together with other major heritage sites in Palestine, should be better protected. As a result, a survey and assessment of Palestine's cultural and natural heritage in 2002–04, part-funded by UNESCO, led to the publication in 2005 by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, of an Inventory of Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites of Potential Outstanding Universal Value in Palestine (to meet demand, reprinted in Arabic as well as English, 2009). The Committee received this at its meeting in 2005. The Inventory ranked 20 properties by their potential outstanding universal value; Bethlehem came first.

Since 2005, greatly encouraged by the Committee's interest and support, much work (survey, assessment and conserva-

tion) has been carried out in Bethlehem. A first nomination can, therefore, now be made from a position of knowledge and strength

Statement of Significance

*'... the Palestinian City of Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus Christ
and one of the most historic and significant sites on earth'*
(UN General Assembly, 53rd Session, Agenda item 157,
53/27,
Bethlehem 2000; Annexes 2 and 3).

It is tempting to let the above quotation stand as the Statement of Significance without further elaboration. The following merely provides a gloss to it, adding some appropriate detail.

The essence of Bethlehem is that it is the birthplace of the founder of one of the world's major religions. As it has been for some two millennia, Bethlehem is a focus of Christian belief and worship; with Jerusalem, it is at the heart of the Christian world. Christmas, the most widely celebrated religious festival in the world, is based on the story of Jesus' birth which occurred here. Jesus' role as Issa, the divinely inspired prophet in Islamic belief, is also significant and underscores the sanctity of the place.

For two thousand years, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem has touched the beliefs of millions of people around the world, both Muslim and Christian. In addition, it drew the attention of Christians to the little town that was privileged to be the place of the Nativity. Bethlehem became a pilgrimage des-

tinuation, and then changed, particularly from the mid-19th century onwards, from a small agricultural village to a major tourist destination.

The ensemble of religious buildings above and clustered around what is believed to be the place of Jesus' birth is also unique, including as it does parts of the oldest known church building in the world still in daily use, the Basilica of Justinian. The ensemble contains buildings and spaces of the three Orders which look after the Holy place: Greek Orthodox, Franciscan and Armenian. The open area east of the Church is all land traditionally associated with, and still owned by, those three Orders. Not yet systematically examined below ground, the area is included in this nomination in particular because of its high potential as a scientific research resource of information about the millennium either side of the 1st century AD.

The pilgrims' route to the 'Holy Land' starts in Jerusalem, heading north to Hebron through the town of Bethlehem. That approach to Bethlehem is the only traceable route leading to the town during Iron Age and earlier times. The eastern end of that same route, the approach to and into the town, is that traditionally followed by Mary and Joseph on their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem; it is now followed each year during Christmas celebrations by the Patriarchs of the Western, Eastern and Armenian Churches, processing along Star Street and part of Paul VI Street to enter Manger Square and what was formerly the atrium in front of the west door of the Church.

Apart from route-related reasons, Star Street/Paul VI Street,

principal streets in the historic city, are also included in this nomination as an expression of the intention to include appropriate parts of the historic city in a subsequent nomination. This will be presented once the current detailed survey and evaluation of the historic fabric and urban landscape are completed and the recently agreed Guidelines (Annexe 12) for the management of historic Bethlehem and its surroundings have been tested in practice.

Criteria under which property is nominated

iv. The Church of the Nativity is an outstanding example of an early church in a remarkable architectural ensemble which illustrates both a significant stage in human history in the 4th–6th centuries AD and in later stages up to the present century.

vi. The Church of the Nativity, and the Pilgrimage Route to it, are directly associated with events and beliefs of outstanding universal significance.

Name and information of official local institution/ agency:

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Nomination boundaries and Buffer Zone

