

Executive Summary

Site description: The Baptism Site “Bethany Beyond the Jordan” (Al-Maghtas) is located in the Southern Jordan Valley on the east side of the Jordan River around 9 km north of the Dead Sea and is part of the District of South Shunah in the Governorate of Al-Balqaa. The site is located a few kilometers to the east of the oasis and ancient site of Jericho and ca. 50 km west of Amman, the capital of Jordan, at coordinates 35°32'50" East; 31° 50'12" North. The site covers an area of 533.7 hectares where five archaeological sites dating back to the Roman and Byzantine periods have been discovered. The precise limits of the archaeological remains are undetermined, although all identifiable cultural traces are included in the protected area. The site is protected by the Law of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as well as by the Jordan Valley Authority Law and their respective amendments, including a buffer zone where activities are limited to farming and to a bird nesting protected area. The buffer zone of the site covers an area of 773.2 ha.

The site is characterized by two distinct archaeological areas, Tell el-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. Although early occupation is known in the area, the main period of use and occupation of the site was between the 5th and the 8th century AD, with some structures still in use as late as the 15th century. The complex includes churches, chapels, a monastery, hermit caves, pilgrim stations, water collection systems, and pools, all associated with its use for the commemoration of the baptism of the Lord Jesus by John the Baptist, and with its performance by Christian pilgrims. Besides this major event in the Christian belief system, the site is also associated with episodes of the life of prophet Elijah (Elias), of St. John the Baptist, and of Saint Mary the Egyptian, who lived here a life of repentance.

Excavations conducted at the site since 1997 have revealed extraordinary features witnessing the use of the site in conjunction with the rite of baptism, including unique architectural elements, such as a major church built on piers to protect it from the floods of the Jordan River and the remains of the Chapel of the Mantle, built over four piers above the waters of the river. These peculiar features find confirmation in the accurate descriptions of pilgrims and early travelers who

witnessed the existence of these buildings when still in use, between the 6th and the 11th century.

After excavations and consolidation of the archaeological remains conducted without introducing modern materials, the site was opened to the public, allowing also pilgrimages and ceremonies to take place there. Many Christian denominations have recognized officially the site as being the true location of the Baptism of Jesus, and the visit of two popes (John Paul II in 2000 and Benedict XVI in 2009, to which one must add also the programmed visit of pope Francis II in 2014) provides an indication of the importance that the Catholic Church attaches to the site.

Some modern infrastructures have been provided to serve the needs of the visitors. These are mostly concentrated around the visitor centre, situated away from the archaeological area, to which one can access only via minibuses. The site is under the management of the Baptism Site Commission, an independent administrative body. The Commission has recently prepared a Site Management Plan which will provide the required elements for the sustainable conservation, protection, maintenance, interpretation, and presentation of the site. In the course of the preparation of the plan, a conservation assessment has identified the factors, natural and man-made, that affect or may impact the site if not properly managed. A series of policies and strategic actions have been identified to minimize impact while allowing visitors and pilgrims to enjoy the site in its authentic and untouched setting. The construction of several structures to perform religious services and allow pilgrims to stay in the vicinity of the site have been allowed, once the absence of archaeological remains or of negative impacts such as visual pollution have been proven. These structures will also relieve the pressure on the site itself, especially at times of increased visitation, such as at the time of Epiphany or at Easter.

Justification for inscription: The site is being nominated under criteria (iii), (iv), and (vi). According to these criteria the Baptism Site, “Bethany Beyond the Jordan” (Al-Maghtas):

iii) bears unique testimony to the cultural and religious tradition of baptism and the importance it holds in the Christian belief system;

(iv) exhibits outstanding examples of buildings and architectural ensembles which illustrate a fundamental event in the history of one of the world’s great religions;

(vi) is directly associated with the Christian tradition of the baptism of Jesus, an event of universal significance. It is also associated with characters and events of high significance for all Abrahamic religions.

The comparative analysis with major pilgrimage centres directly associated with major religious events, such as Patmos in Greece (associated with the writing of the Gospel and the Apocalypse by Saint John), Bethlehem in Palestine (associated with the birth of Jesus), or Lumbini in Nepal (associated with the birth of Lord Buddha) show that the Baptism site, besides having an intangible spiritual value derived from its association with the lives of Jesus and of Saint John the Baptist, and for being the place where Christianity originated, has also tangible values due to the presence of installations, features, and buildings dedicated not only to the commemoration, but also to the performance of baptism, marking an extraordinary coincidence between tradition, belief system, and physical remains.

The integrity and authenticity of the Baptism Site derive from archaeological remains which can be correctly interpreted thanks to their state of preservation, along with accounts of pilgrims, travelers and historians over the centuries, and with the religious texts and belief system of the Christian community. The site meets the test of authenticity under several criteria, especially form and design, as the structures were specifically designed to perform baptism and perpetuate the tradition allowing pilgrims to be baptized in the same location where the baptism of Jesus took place. The location and setting of the site is particularly evocative and authentic to its original aspect, close to the Jordan River and among a thick grow of natural reeds. The association of the site to a fundamental event in the Christian belief system, that of the baptism of Jesus, hence to the very origin of Christianity in this location, means that the use and the function of the site and the structures found there are authentic since they all relate to ritual practices conducted to commemorate that event since at least the Late Roman / Early Byzantine period. For all these reasons the spirit and feeling at “Bethany Beyond the Jordan” (Al-Maghtas) are particularly powerful, as each single archaeological remain and the entire physical landscape are imbued with the beliefs of the pilgrims who come to the site to witness in person the root of their faith.