



# Executive Summary

## Executive Summary

### State Party

Palestine

### State, Province, or Region

Governorate of Deir Al-Balah, Gaza Strip

### Name of Property

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer

### Geographical coordinates to the nearest second

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer: Central Point (E 34° 21' 56.518" N 31° 26' 48.758" (UTM-36N))

### Textual description of the boundary (ies) of the nominated property

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer, is situated on the sand dunes along the main sea road near the city of Nuseirat, approximately 10 km south of Gaza City. It is close to both Wadi Gaza, an important source of fresh water, and 10 km south of the port of Gaza, where pilgrims from the Western Mediterranean arrived. This location made it a crucial transit point for Christians visiting the Holy Land from the 4th to the 8th century. The site is an important archaeological and historical landmark, combining natural and cultural elements, including ancient ruins and significant artefacts from the 4th to 8th centuries AD. The monastery is divided into two main sections: the ecclesiastical complex to the south and the bath and hotel to the north.

The boundaries of the nominated World Heritage Property are defined by the current fenced boundaries of the Saint Hilarion Monastery archaeological park, covering approximately 1.33 hectares. This boundary includes all the main attributes carrying Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and encompasses two distinct architectural complexes: the ecclesiastical section in the south, covering approximately 4,650 m<sup>2</sup>, and the thermal baths and hotel to the north, spanning about 3,650 m<sup>2</sup>, ensuring the site's authenticity and integrity.

Surrounding the nominated property zone is a buffer zone of approximately 7.32 hectares, designed to include any potential future significant archaeological discoveries and to preserve the site's authenticity and integrity. This buffer zone acts as a protective measure, mitigating potential negative impacts from surrounding activities, such as urban development, infrastructure projects, and other threats. The buffer zone is sufficiently wide to prevent urban encroachment and protect the visual integrity of the site. It must be integrated with local urban planning frameworks to ensure its effectiveness and minimize negative impacts.

Given the above, the table below summarizes the dimensions and rationale for the delineation of the buffer zone boundaries:

Direction	Dimension from the Property Zone Boundaries
East	90-95m
North	146-150m
North and northwest	173-177m
West	125-137m
South Direct	45-47m
South and south-west	139-141m

Therefore, the total area of the nominated property, including the buffer zone, is 8.652 hectares. Integrating the buffer zone within the urban physical spatial plan of Nuseirat ensures adequate protection and management of the site's authenticity and integrity.

A4 or A3 size map(s) of the nominated property, showing boundaries and buffer zone (if present)



Code	Longitude	Latitude
<b>NOMINATED PROPERTY</b>		
P1	34° 21' 56.518" E	31° 26' 48.758" N
P2	34° 21' 56.603" E	31° 26' 46.178" N
P3	34° 21' 59.289" E	31° 26' 48.667" N
P4	34° 21' 59.053" E	31° 26' 48.927" N
P5	34° 21' 59.258" E	31° 26' 49.960" N
P6	34° 21' 59.101" E	31° 26' 50.125" N
P7	34° 21' 58.450" E	31° 26' 50.404" N
P8	34° 21' 58.089" E	31° 26' 50.205" N
P9	34° 21' 58.028" E	31° 26' 50.157" N
P10	34° 21' 57.538" E	31° 26' 50.389" N
P11	34° 21' 56.287" E	31° 26' 51.203" N
P12	34° 21' 54.121" E	31° 26' 49.298" N
P13	34° 21' 53.407" E	31° 26' 48.482" N
P14	34° 21' 54.035" E	31° 26' 48.080" N
P15	34° 21' 54.598" E	31° 26' 47.709" N
<b>BUFFER ZONE</b>		
B1	34° 21' 59.037" E	31° 26' 43.958" N
B2	34° 22' 4.075" E	31° 26' 48.073" N
B3	34° 22' 0.165" E	31° 26' 51.809" N
B4	34° 21' 58.411" E	31° 26' 53.677" N
B5	34° 21' 56.228" E	31° 26' 56.001" N
B6	34° 21' 49.690" E	31° 26' 50.695" N
B7	34° 21' 46.752" E	31° 26' 47.872" N
B8	34° 21' 51.338" E	31° 26' 46.231" N

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer  
Nominated Property



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Prepared by: Younes Rjoub  
GIS Expert & Environmental Researcher  
Email: younesrjoub2004@gmail.com



## **Criteria under which property is nominated (itemize criteria)**

### **Criterion (ii, iii, and vi)**

#### **Cultural Landscape**

The property is a cultural property.

#### **Draft Statement of Outstanding Universal Value**

##### **a) Brief synthesis**

The ruins of Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer represent one of the earliest and most significant monastic sites in the Middle East, dating back to the 4th century. Founded by Saint Hilarion, it is the first monastic community in the Holy Land, laying the groundwork for the spread of monastic practices throughout Palestine and beyond. Situated on the coastal dunes in Nuseirat Municipality, approximately 10 km south of Gaza City and 10 km from its port, the monastery occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of major trade and communication routes between Asia and Africa. This prime location facilitated its role as a hub of religious, cultural, and economic interchange, exemplifying the flourishing of monastic desert centres during the Byzantine period.

The first settlement on the site was established during the Roman period on Wadi Gaza, close to the seashore. It appears on the sixth-century Madaba Mosaic Map, labelled with the name of Tabatha. The monastery holds potential Outstanding Universal Value due to its exceptional historical, religious, architectural, and cultural significance. It provides significant insight into the development of monastic life in the desert centres of Palestine during the Byzantine period, evidenced by well-preserved architectural elements, including a complex of five superimposed churches, a crypt, baths, water systems, heating systems, residences, and roads. These attributes collectively highlight its significance in the spread of Christian monasticism in the Holy Land and beyond.

Saint Hilarion Monastery began with solitary hermits (anchoritic phase) and evolved into a thriving coenobitic community by the fifth and sixth centuries until its decline during the early Islamic period. Under Saint Hilarion's guidance, the monastery established a model of communal living centred on spiritual guidance and intellectual exchange. The community maintained earlier monastic traditions while developing its intellectual and ascetic practices, attracting scholars and monks from across the Byzantine Empire and fostering an intellectual community known as the Monastic School of Gaza, established in the 5th century AD. This hub enriched theological discourse and propagated monastic ideals, transcending theological boundaries and leaving a lasting impact on Christian traditions. In the fifth century, following the Council of Chalcedon, the monastic centre in Gaza became a stronghold of anti-Chalcedonian struggle. This attracted intellectual monks and strengthened ties with Gaza's intellectual centre. Despite theological differences, the monastic school of Gaza emerged as a complex and thriving centre whose legacy

transcended boundaries, highlighting the monastery's significant role in the political and ecclesiastical landscape of the time.

The architectural innovations and artistic contributions, particularly in mosaic art, underscore the site's exceptional value. The historical layers of the site illustrate its architectural evolution and technological advancements, continuously developing between the 4th and 8th centuries. It is one of the most complex and complete monasteries from the fourth century and the largest of its kind in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also contains complex ecclesiastical spaces, including one of the largest crypts in the region, as well as a hostel with adjacent baths, making it a key witness to the sophisticated monastic community that once thrived there. The site's role in the distribution and development of Christian monasticism across the region further justifies its Outstanding Universal Value. Saint Hilarion Monastery is not only a monument to early Christian monasticism but also a testament to the enduring spiritual and cultural legacy of Saint Hilarion. His influence on monastic practices and the spread of Christianity in the Middle East, combined with the site's rich artistic and architectural heritage, make it a site of distinctive Outstanding Universal Value.

The ruins of Saint Hilarion Monastery exemplify the highest levels of integrity and authenticity, preserving its Outstanding Universal Value through meticulous conservation efforts and a management system. The site's significance is rooted in its status as the first and oldest monastic establishment in Palestine, founded by Saint Hilarion, a pivotal figure in early Christian monasticism. This historical precedence sets it apart from other monastic sites in the region.

## **b) Justification for Criteria**

**Criterion (ii): to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design.**

The monastic complex of Saint Hilarion Monastery/Tell Umm Amer exemplifies a significant interchange of human values in architecture and religious practices between the 4th and 8th centuries AD, during the emergence of Christianity in the Holy Land. Its strategic location on a major trade and pilgrimage route made it a melting pot of religious and cultural influences, reflecting cross-cultural interactions between Christian monastic traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean and the broader Greco-Roman world. This interaction is evident in the adaptive reuse of classical architectural elements in the construction of monastic buildings and the architectural features of the property.

The architectural complexity of Saint Hilarion Monastery, characterized by its superimposed churches and well-organized bath facilities, represents an outstanding example of the evolution of ecclesiastical architecture and construction techniques. The historical layers of the site illustrate its architectural evolution and technological advancements, continuously developing between the

4th and 8th centuries. It is one of the most complex and complete monasteries from the fourth century and one the largest of its kind in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The layout of the monastery, designed to guide pilgrims through its sacred elements, demonstrates innovative planning and reflects the spiritual journey of early Christian pilgrims. The site contains intricate ecclesiastical spaces, including one of the largest crypts in the region, and a hostel with adjacent baths, making it a key witness to the sophisticated monastic community that once thrived there. The site's beautiful mosaics with geometric, floral, and animal decorations showing the high level of craftsmanship and artistry of the monastic community, highlighting their exceptional skill and artistic expression.

Furthermore, the architectural and artistic contributions of Saint Hilarion Monastery are crucial for understanding the distribution and development of Christian monasticism across the region. Its architectural complexity and exceptional mosaics, demonstrate the site's outstanding universal value. The historical significance of the site, its role in the development of Christian monastic traditions, and its influence on subsequent religious architecture in the Middle East firmly establish its importance.

The architectural ingenuity of Saint Hilarion Monastery influenced the development of monastic architecture throughout the Middle East, setting a precedent for future religious complexes. Beyond architecture, the monastery played a crucial role in the cultural and spiritual landscape, preserving early monastic traditions while advancing intellectual and ascetic practices. It attracted scholars and monks from across the Byzantine Empire, fostering the Monastic School of Gaza in the 5th century AD. This hub enriched theological discourse, propagated monastic ideals, and left a lasting impact on Christian traditions.

The well-preserved monastic complex, including the large basilica, domestic and communal buildings, and sophisticated water system, stands as a testament to the significant interchange of human values in monastic architecture and religious practices. Its architectural innovations and cultural significance exemplify the impact of cross-cultural interactions in the development of monastic traditions and the broader spiritual heritage of the Middle East.

Overall, Saint Hilarion Monastery testifies to the significant interchange of human values in monastic architecture and religious practices during a formative period in Christian history. Its contributions to ecclesiastical architecture, its role as a centre of spiritual and cultural exchange, and its influence on Christian monasticism affirm its outstanding universal value.

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

The ruins of Saint Hilarion Monastery/Tell Umm Amer are among the oldest and most archaeologically complete monastic sites in the Middle East, providing exceptional insights into early Christian traditions and monastic life. Founded by the hermit Hilarion, who is revered as the

founding father of monasticism in Palestine and studied under Anthony of Egypt, the monastery holds significant historical and religious importance as the oldest in Palestine and beyond.

Dating back to late antiquity, Saint Hilarion Monastery evolved continuously between the 4th and 8th centuries, culminating in its expansion and development into the largest monastic complex of its time in the region. This growth is reflected in its expansive ecclesiastical spaces, which include a substantial crypt—one of the largest found in the Eastern Mediterranean—and a hostel with adjoining baths. The monastery's architectural layout, intricately designed to accommodate religious practices and communal living, serves as a testament to its organizational complexity and spiritual significance.

Abandoned and buried under sand for centuries, the monastery was rediscovered and has since been meticulously preserved with international support. The preservation efforts have revealed not only the architectural prowess of early Christian builders but also the sophisticated infrastructure designed to sustain a monastic community in a semi-desert environment. Of particular note is the monastery's advanced bath complex, which shows the ingenuity and adaptive skills of its inhabitants in managing water resources—an essential element for sustaining life in such an arid setting.

Overall, Saint Hilarion Monastery/Tell Umm Amer exemplifies exceptional architectural and archaeological attributes. These features provide unparalleled insights into the development and practices of early Christian monasticism, offering a clear evolution from solitary asceticism to communal religious life. The site's enduring significance underscores its Outstanding Universal Value, serving as a pivotal link in the broader narrative of Christian history and cultural heritage in the Middle East.

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

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer holds profound significance in the history of Christianity in Palestine and the Middle East, intimately connected to pivotal events, traditions, beliefs, and artistic works of Outstanding Universal Value. Founded by Saint Hilarion in the 4th century AD, the monastery not only preserves the physical remnants of early Christian monasticism but also embodies the enduring legacy of Saint Hilarion's teachings and influence. It marks a transformative phase in Christian monasticism, evolving from solitary hermitages to a thriving communal centre by the 5th and 6th centuries. This transition not only preserved early monastic traditions but also advanced intellectual and ascetic practices, influencing communities across the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Saint Hilarion's influence echoes through the cultural and religious traditions still observed in regions like Sicily, Cyprus, and Croatia. His impact, documented in texts such as "Vita Sancti Hilarionis" by Jerome, continues to inspire spiritual devotion and intellectual inquiry.



Saint Hilarion himself, influenced by Anthony of Egypt, played a foundational role in establishing monasticism in the Holy Land. His rigorous ascetic lifestyle and spiritual teachings shaped the religious landscape of the region. Situated strategically along a major trade and pilgrimage route, the monastery became a hub of cultural exchange, attracting diverse influences and fostering the renowned Monastic School of Gaza. This centre was instrumental in theological discourse, especially during the debates following the Council of Chalcedon in the 5th century AD, where Saint Hilarion Monastery became a bastion of anti-Chalcedonian confrontation.

Architecturally, Saint Hilarion Monastery evolved continuously from the 4th to the 8th centuries, culminating in its expansion to become the largest monastic complex of its time in the region. The site's physical remains, including churches, communal buildings, and exceptional, mosaic floors and a substantial crypt—one of the largest found in the Eastern Mediterranean, provide tangible evidence of its historical and cultural significance. Notably, the monastery features one of the largest crypts in the region, alongside a complex with a hostel and adjacent baths, showing advanced ecclesiastical architecture and artistic expression.

Saint Hilarion Monastery/Tell Umm Amer stands as a site of exceptional importance, directly associated with significant events, traditions, beliefs, and artistic achievements in early Christian monasticism. Its profound impact on the development of Christian religious practices, its pivotal role in theological discourse, and its enduring cultural legacy collectively affirm its pivotal position in the history of Christianity in the Middle East. It serves not only as a testament to early Christian monasticism but also as a symbol of the enduring human quest for spiritual enlightenment and communal harmony.

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### **c) Statement of Integrity (for all properties)**

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer exemplifies a robust level of integrity within its property zone boundaries, maintained through meticulous conservation efforts led by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA), the French NGO Première Urgence Internationale (PUI), the French School of Biblical Studies, and the UNESCO Ramallah Office. Despite being buried under sand for centuries, the site has been carefully preserved and protected with minimal impact on its

original fabric and authenticity. Key interventions, such as the installation of an archaeological cover over the bath area and temporary shelters in the ecclesiastical section, have effectively maintained its integrity, ensuring structural stability and safeguarding against environmental degradation.

The nominated property demonstrates completeness and maintains its integrity, encompassing all attributes of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) within its boundaries. Encompassing a complex of five superimposed churches, a crypt, baths, water systems, heating systems, and residences, the property provides a comprehensive representation of its OUV attributes. Ongoing scientific and professional interventions guided by UNESCO frameworks are integral to preserving the site's integrity and authenticity. The recent preliminary CMP integrates conservation strategies, monitoring systems, and measures to mitigate potential threats, demonstrating a proactive approach to long-term conservation.

Regular monitoring over the past decade by PUI and the UNESCO office, in collaboration with MoTA, ensures continuous compliance with integrity requirements, essential for safeguarding the site's universal value and addressing its vulnerabilities on the international stage. Saint Hilarion Monastery stands as one of the oldest and best-preserved monasteries in the holy land, meeting the stringent conditions of integrity. It serves as a testament to the successful application of international conservation principles and practices, reaffirming its recognition as a site of exceptional universal value.

#### **d) Statement of authenticity for properties nominated under criteria (i) to (vi)**

Saint Hilarion Monastery exemplifies a high level of authenticity, supported by interventions guided by approved conservation principles and meticulous monitoring. Excavations revealed structural instability after centuries under sand, necessitating careful anastylosis interventions in key areas. For example, from 2018 to 2022, extensive restoration was undertaken in the crypt, focusing on the west wall and vault of the south vestibule, incorporating over 850 new blocks. Similarly, interventions in the baptismal chapel (2021-2022) addressed the east part of the south wall with seven layers of blocks, alongside repairs to the top of the apse and north wall using more than 120 new blocks. In the pilgrim hostel (2021-2022), upper walls were reconstructed with 1 to 3 layers, totalling around 450 new blocks.

These anastyloses strictly adhered to international conservation standards, employing original materials such as Gaza stone, quarry sand, and lime, and utilizing traditional stone-cutting techniques. The reconstructions were intentionally set slightly back from the original structures to ensure clear differentiation. These interventions served as crucial structural consolidation measures, particularly in vulnerable lower areas of the site disposed to stormwater flow, thereby preventing collapse and enriching visitor comprehension of the site's historical significance.

Most attributes of the nominated property authentically and credibly express its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), as well as its historical and cultural significance. This authenticity is manifested through the property's original form, design, materials, techniques, and associated cultural practices. Furthermore, the site effectively evokes a genuine sense of time and place, offering visitors an authentic experience of its historical and cultural context.

Thus, Saint Hilarion Monastery unequivocally attains a high level of authenticity, meticulously preserved through approved conservation practices and rigorous monitoring. The interventions, particularly the anastylosis efforts in critical areas such as the crypt, baptismal chapel, and pilgrim hostel, have ensured that the site authentically represents its historical, cultural, and architectural significance. Through the use of original materials and adherence to international conservation standards, the monastery vividly conveys its original form, design, and associated cultural practices. This authenticity allows visitors to genuinely experience the historical context and significance of Saint Hilarion Monastery, affirming its recognition as a testament to early Christian monasticism in Palestine and worldwide.

#### **e) Requirements for protection**

Saint Hilarion Monastery/ Tell Umm Amer is owned by the State of Palestine and managed by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA). It benefits from robust protection under Palestinian national heritage laws and is actively managed by local and international conservation bodies. The property is fully safeguarded by the Decree Law of Tangible Cultural Heritage (No. 11, 2018). This legal framework aligns Palestinian standards with international conventions, unifying the legal basis for protecting tangible cultural heritage while enhancing its management, conservation, and promotion efforts.

MoTA is empowered to comprehensively manage tangible cultural heritage sites, including World Heritage Properties. The law clearly defines the roles of stakeholders involved in the conservation and management of cultural properties. It grants MoTA authority to interpret the law, identify archaeological materials, delineate site boundaries, settle disputes, list heritage assets, and supervise conservation interventions effectively.

The recently preliminary Conservation and Management Plan (CMP) for the nominated property (see Annex One) integrates multiple conservation objectives, strategies, and a management system to ensure the sustainable protection and conservation of the property's Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and its associated values and attributes. This plan includes provisions for archaeological research, community engagement, sustainable tourism initiatives, systematic monitoring to mitigate environmental and human impacts, and visitor management strategies aimed at safeguarding the property.

The buffer zone surrounding the nominated property is protected under the Building and Planning Law (no. 28, 1936) and its Modified Building Bylaws in Gaza Strip 2020, which governs building and zoning in towns and villages, supplemented by the municipal physical spatial urban plan of Nuseirat

Municipality. This plan regulates urban development to prevent conflicts with the archaeological site's integrity, focusing on enhancing the surrounding urban infrastructure while preserving the privacy of the site.

However, the current urban plan lacks a designated buffer zone for the archaeological site. Establishing buffer zones within the zoning plan is essential to create a protective barrier against potential negative impacts from nearby development activities, such as construction, pollution, or encroachment. Additional challenges include recent conflict impacts on the buffer zone and the necessity for further excavations to confirm integrity in specific areas. Long-term strategies prioritize adaptive management, continuous monitoring, and collaborative efforts to sustain the site's Outstanding Universal Value while addressing vulnerabilities and threats to its authenticity and integrity.

Under Palestinian national cultural heritage legislation, Saint Hilarion Monastery is designated as a high-priority site for protection and preservation. MoTA controls and monitors all interventions at the site according to international conventions and charters. Although much of the buffer zone is privately owned, it is safeguarded from inappropriate development by the Protection Law of Tangible Cultural Heritage (No. 11, 2018) and by the physical spatial plan of Nuseirat Municipality. These provisions control the buffer zone's land use, new developments, and new buildings. MoTA collaborates closely with related local and international organizations to ensure the safeguarding of this significant site, thereby reinforcing its role as a testament to early Christian monasticism in Palestine and worldwide

#### **Name and contact information of official local institution/agency**

Organization: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities

Address: P.O. Box 534, Bethlehem, Palestine

Tel.: + 972 (0)2 274 1581/2/3

Fax: + 972 (0)2 274 3753

E-mail: [rjooba2@gmail.com](mailto:rjooba2@gmail.com); [marwa.adwan@yahoo.com](mailto:marwa.adwan@yahoo.com)

Web address: <http://www.travelpalestine.ps/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/travelpalestine>

<https://www.facebook.com/palestinemota>