The Hermit Caves in Bethany Beyond the Jordan  
(Baptism Site)

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Abstract

The many natural and artificial caves found in the region of Bethany Beyond the Jordan, east of the Jordan River, were used by monks for various purposes. Impressive new remains of five caves have been discovered in the vicinity; two close to the river and three near the Byzantine monastery on Elijah’s Hill, the core of the settlement and the place from which the Prophet Elijah is said to have ascended to heaven.  
One of the three caves on Elijah’s Hill eventually came to function as the apse of a Byzantine church. Based on the archaeological evidence, tradition, and the contents of Byzantine and medieval texts written by pilgrims who visited the site, it is suggested this may originally have been John the Baptist’s cave. The church which was later built there may have been intended simply as a place for the monks to venerate St John; alternatively it could have been set up by orthodox monks to counter and compete with a monastery and church established by the Monophysite Byzantine emperor Anastasius on the west bank of the Jordan nearby.

Introduction

The core of the ancient settlement of Bethany Beyond the Jordan was situated on a small, low hill on the southern bank of Wādī al-Kharrār. This location is at the immediate start of the wadi, a point where several freshwater springs emerge from the surrounding arid valley plains. This rather striking environment gives the site much of its special atmosphere. In the midst of the quite dry, barren landscape, a beautiful oasis of tamarisks, palm trees and reeds suddenly emerges around the hill. From here the
Wādi al-Kharrār stream makes its way for about 2 km to the Jordan River, its entire route marked by the sound of flowing water and the sight of thick, green vegetation and an assortment of wild animals and birds. The unique and exciting ecology of this site may have played a role in its being given a spiritual dimension in antiquity.

The hill at the heart of modern Tall al-Kharrār and Roman-Byzantine Bethany Beyond the Jordan has long been identified (since the fourth century AD) as the spot where the Prophet Elijah ascended to heaven in a whirlwind, on horses of fire. The Jordan River ford nearby and near Esbus-Jericho road is also said to be the place where Joshua crossed the river and where Elijah and Elisha stopped the water and walked over it. The traditional site of John the Baptist’s monastery (Qasr al-Yahud) on the west bank remains one of the major pilgrims’ stations on the journey from Jerusalem to the river. Recent excavations on the east bank of the Jordan have revealed a walled monastery that includes at least three churches, a prayer hall, an elaborate water conveyance, a storage system, three pools, and a surrounding protective wall.

Archaeological survey and excavation directed by the author (Waheeb) has identified over 20 different sites or structures in the region around Wādi al-Kharrār. They were mostly situated on or near the established Roman-era communication route that linked Jerusalem and Jericho, where the John the Baptist church (Qasr el-Yahud) stood west of the river and the sites of Bethany Beyond the Jordan.

The Architectural Remains

The main hill of Tall al-Kharrār (Bethany Beyond the Jordan) is composed of white Lisan marl mixed with brown-red sediment. Its eastern, western and northern slopes drop sharply into the valley. The only easy approach to the hill is from the south. A protective wall was built around the ancient monastery, along the middle of the hill, and was mainly intended to prevent erosion rather than as a defensive measure. The wall extended to the south as far as associated structures including the prayer hall and a church.

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1 Khoury 2001, pp. 37–44.
3 Kopp 1965.
4 Piccirillo 1996; see also Piccirillo 1987.
The hill accommodates three churches. The largest and best-preserved of these was built on a platform cut from the marl on the north side of the site. It is about 13 m long and 4 m wide and still shows the remains of its chancel area, nave, and the entrances in its north and west walls. Its mosaic floor has been well preserved in parts, including a five-line Greek inscription near the altar area that reads, “By the help of the grace of Christ our God the whole monastery was constructed in the time of Rhotorios, the most God-beloved presbyter and abbot, may God the Saviour give him mercy.” The main nave mosaic included cross motifs and geometric designs with a surrounding frame. Pillars along the north and south walls supported the roof and the internal walls were covered with smooth white plaster. A few associated buildings north of the church were partly destroyed in antiquity.8 The church is broadly dated to the Byzantine period (fifth to sixth century AD).

A second, slightly bigger church, some 13 x 13 m, was located around the corner. A retaining wall was erected on another platform, amidst the natural rock and Lisan core of the hill. The apse of the church cut into the hillside; it was actually a cave located underneath some water pools. The nave and two side aisles extend to the west, with only some arch bases left from the original Byzantine church.9 The floor was once covered with coloured mosaics, but only fragmentary remains reveal some of the original small cross motifs. The question here is why this mosaic was badly damaged while the other, nearby mosaic was much better preserved. The preliminary field assessment revealed that the destruction was caused by treasure hunters. On the northwestern corner of the hill, a small, square mosaic platform was built. The hill’s outer wall served also as the western wall of the mosaic floor. A doorway was built in the northern wall of the hill, along with a mosaic platform and a staircase that is still in situ and served to link the hill with the spring area in the valley. The room with the coloured mosaic floor possibly functioned as a prayer hall during the Byzantine period.10

The third church is located south of the main hill, on a saddle of land connecting the hill and the surrounding plain. This structure was rectangular and measured about 13 x 9 m, but little of the original building remains. There are some foundation walls, floor patches with cross-deco-
rated coloured mosaics, and some stones from walls resting on a lime-plastered surface above a carefully prepared rubble stone and mortar base. Arches once supported the roof. This building seems to have been a small chapel with an associated courtyard. Its main entrance may have been in the north side. Pottery sherds suggest it dates from the fifth to sixth centuries AD.

In this same area, south of the main hill, the excavations identified another rectangular building, made of undressed field stones and measuring nearly 12 x 8 m. The simple white mosaic floor was slightly disfigured by ashes from the building’s final destruction. These were probably the remains of burnt roof beams, which means this structure should be interpreted as a prayer hall rather than a chapel on the basis of the construction style as well as its location. Evidence from the excavations suggests a slightly earlier date for this structure than the other parts of the site. Based on the pottery sherds, white mosaic floor, and method of construction, the prayer hall and the two rooms at its northeastern corner date to the third to fourth centuries AD.11

Bethany Beyond the Jordan is the sole place where churches in the Byzantine period were built continuously regardless of earthquakes and floods, and the monks who dwelt in the area carved their places in the rock.12 These small caves became places for prayer, where the monks emulated the lives of the first believers. We should not disregard what travelers and pilgrims said about the existence of the monastery of Sapsas (Saphsaphas), in addition to Elijah’s and John’s caves, in this place through which many saints and prophets have passed.13

About 300 m east of the Jordan River and just beyond the thick belt of tamarisk trees and bushes called the “Jungle of the Jordan”, the landscape suddenly changes to a soft chalky and stark whitish marl (Lisan marl formation), the product of sedimentation at the bottom of a freshwater lake in ancient times. This barren place is called the “wilderness” in the Bible. Archaeological survey and excavations in the area revealed the presence of five caves that had been dug out and transformed into hermit and monk cells, or sometimes chapels. Two of the caves were discovered near the Jordan River, while the remains of the other three were found during the excavation seasons conducted on Elijah’s Hill (Tall al-Kharrār) in 1999.

11 Abel 1932, pp. 237–263.
The Two Caves near the Jordan River

The two caves near the Jordan were dug into the upper part of the Lisan marl cliffs which overlook the thick vegetation (Zawr) area and are situated about 300 m east of the river (Fig. 1). The location of the two caves reflects the aims and functions they served. The monks leading their monastic lives in these caves in the white cliffs were able to control the whole surrounding area, especially the ford which crosses the Jordan River and lies directly opposite. In addition, the monks tried to avoid the flooding of the river in winter and spring, and to stay far away and safe from the threat of wild animals. Some of these threats were depicted on the Madaba Mosaic Map. The comprehensive study made of the caves and the surrounding area during 1998 revealed that some caves were artificial, carved out of the rock by the monks. It is clear that much use was made of artificial caves fashioned in the soft Lisan marl formation during the pre-Byzantine period. The available evidence, including pottery sherds and comparative studies of caves found on the western bank of the 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. The monks would climb down to the complex from the flat area at the top of the cliff; in order to ease their decent, they carved several steps in the natural rock—none of these is in existence now. To facilitate climbing up, they used a rope ladder. Wood is available in Wādi al-Kharrār, especially on the Jordan River banks, and gathering it was an easy task. Manufacturing ladders, windows and doors for the caves were jobs for the monks and might be considered part of the daily routine in Bethany Beyond the Jordan. The two caves probably housed a group of monks who had something in common over and above their commitment to monastic life.

The First Cave / Jordan River (Fig. 2)

This cave measures about 5 m east-west and 4 m north-south, with an average height of 180–200 cm. The interior of the cave is divided into two chambers. To the right of the entrance, a low bench measuring 3 m east-west and 1 m wide is carved into the natural rock and was probably used as a seat. The eastern wall of the entrance was carved in an apse shape. The larger chamber is the living area and is accessible through a doorway which

14 Avi-Yonah 1954.
is 60 cm wide and 170 cm high. The chamber itself measures 2 m east-west by 2.70 m north-south. The second chamber represents the prayer hall. It is accessible through a doorway, again measuring 60 cm wide and 170 cm high. This chamber’s measurements are 1.10 m east-west by 2 m north-south. It is clear that the prayer room occupied the inner section of the cave.

Openings for windows were carved out of the Lisan marl rock whenever possible. Small recesses for oil lamps were found in the living room and the prayer hall. Additional light for the prayer hall came through an opening in its southern wall, through the entrance area. It is clear that doors and windows of monks’ cells such as this were cut at the same time as the cave to ensure air and light. A few pottery sherds found during the work in and around the caves dated the cave broadly to the Byzantine period. It is clear that this cave and the next were not equipped with water storage systems. On the other hand, the three caves on Eijah’s Hill did have such facilities, which were also comparable to those of Arcadius’ cell, not far away from Mar Saba on the western bank of the Jordan River.15

The Second Cave/Jordan River (Fig. 3)

The second cave is located at the same level as the first, to its north. The cave measures 5.20 m north-south by 2.70 m east-west. It consists of two chambers and an entrance. The entrance of the cave faces the Jordan River and is 2.50 m long x 1 m wide and 1.60 m high. The entrance leads to two chambers and an apse-shaped wall which is carved into the eastern side of the cave. On the right side is the first chamber, which is almost rectangular in shape. The doorway of this room measures 1 m wide and 1.60 m high. The southern wall of the room is the one in an apsidal shape. The room measures 1.30 m east-west by 1.10 m north-south. The second chamber is located on the left side of the entrance and the way it has been carved is identical to the first room. The doorway of this chamber is carved slightly away and not directly opposite to the doorway of the first chamber; it measures 1 m wide and 1 m high. The chamber measures 1.60 m north-south by 1.10 m east-west. The recovered datable material in this room comprised some body sherds of the Byzantine period.

Caves of Elijah’s Hill (Figs 4, 5 and 6)

A complex of three artificial caves carved in Lisan marl rock was discovered on the western side of Elijah’s Hill (Tall al-Kharrár) during the 1997–1999 season of excavations. The three caves were carved into the cliff that faces west toward Wādi al-Kharrár. The location of the caves at the bottom of the cliff were linked to the valley and its springs by a staircase built using local field-stones. Only two steps of this staircase remain in situ. The spring that today descends for two kilometres toward the Jordan River comes from this area near Elijah’s Hill and not far away from the Monastery of Rhotorios. The three caves were all carved at the same level and extend north-south in a linked series.

The First Cave

Located near the southwestern corner of Elijah’s Hill, this cave is approached from the south via an arched entrance that was built later, during the Byzantine period. Most of the cave’s architectural elements have been destroyed by natural forces such as seasonal erosion; only the eastern apsidal wall of the cave remains. It is difficult to imagine the general shape of the cave based on the available remains. Two courses of well-cut ashlars were added to the inner eastern side of the cave during the Byzantine period to prevent more erosion.

The Second Cave

Located about 2.50 m to the north of the first cave, this cave has also suffered severe damage from natural forces such as seasonal erosion and earthquakes. The apsidal inner eastern wall of the cave is the only feature which remains in situ. It measures about 2.50 m north-south, indicating that the cave consisted of more than one chamber. The height of the cave is about 1.80 m.

The Third Cave

This cave is located on the northwestern, middle slope of Elijah’s Hill, near the entrance to the Byzantine (Rhotorios) monastery. The cave is approached by means of steep stone steps built on the slope. These steps link the cave with the valley below and the springs that still water the plant cover today. The location of the cave at a junction of footpaths suggests its
connection either with monks in the Roman period or pilgrim traffic in the Byzantine period. This cave is located 6 m to the north of the second cave. It has a rounded shape. The width at its mouth is 1 m, its maximum depth is 2.25 m, and its height is approximately 2 m.

What distinguishes this cave from the others is that the second church was built in front of it during the Byzantine period; the cave became the apse of the church. Two niches found carved into the north and south interior walls of the cave probably held oil lamps. A wall with a door was built in front of the cave, forming the typical Byzantine-era chancel screen, which separated the apse from the nave of the church. The church measures 13 x 13 m. The excavation has also clearly identified the square bases of stone arches that supported the roof of the nave. Only small portions of a mosaic floor, still in situ, were found in the church, representing part of a destroyed surface.

An intriguing piece of evidence discovered during the excavation is a man-made water channel that starts in front of the cave and extends for about 6 m until it empties into the the Wadi al-Kharrar from its south bank. It is 66 cm wide and 20 cm high, and in some places is still covered with stone slabs. The water channel was cut into the natural marl formation and plastered with a lime layer that is distinctively Byzantine in style and colour. The water channel was built beneath the floor of the Byzantine church, apparently at the same time as the church was constructed. It is not clear if the water that fed the channel originated at the cave entrance itself, from the natural hill behind and above the cave, or from several man-made pools at the summit of the hill above the cave. Several natural cracks and fissures in the cave’s interior may also have been the source of the water. The two caves adjacent to this cave and church were badly eroded (as mentioned above), but showed no evidence of water channeling or churches built around them. Furthermore, those caves lacked datable material; only a few diagnostic pottery sherds were found nearby, and they were very close to the church foundation connected with the third cave (Figs 7 and 8). Three possibilities regarding the presence of the water channel seem to be the most likely: The channel may have carried away 1) spring water that was used for baptisms in the church; 2) spring water that flowed naturally from the cave and was used for baptisms in or near the adjacent wadi; or 3) water that seeped down into the cave from the man-made pools located at the summit of the hill.

Not far from the entrance of the cave on the left-hand side, a pit 60 cm square by 60 cm deep and covered with a limestone capstone was discovered during excavation. A human skull was found in the pit. The skull is that of a man aged around 20 years. The lower jaw is missing and was
reburied beneath the church floor during the Byzantine period. The skull is interesting because it exhibits a rare natural condition whereby the lines of convergence of the plates at the back form the shape of a cross.\textsuperscript{16} The skull could have been that of Rhotorius or one of the many monks who lived in this area during the Byzantine period; that is, the area that covers both banks of Wādī al-Kharrār and housed many hermit monk cells in the Byzantine period. This location was mentioned in numerous Byzantine and medieval texts by pilgrims who visited the region.

\textit{Travelers and Pilgrims Description}

Theodosius (writing \textit{ca.} 530 AD) said that the place where Christ was baptised was marked by a marble column topped by an iron cross and that there was also a monastery with a Church of St John the Baptist constructed by the emperor Anastasius (491–518 AD) in the area. This discussion of the documentary sources considers the possibility that there was an early church and monastery on the west side of the Jordan River, as indicated by the Madaba Map, and that this may have been the one built by the emperor Anastasius. An earlier church on the east bank was presumably in ruins by then and the marble column toppled—the symbols given on the Madaba Map on the east side of the river are generally thought to represent a cave in a hill and a tree. Ruins on the east bank were attested by later pilgrims; these are quite possibly what were excavated and are now displayed (under a shelter) as the Byzantine ruins of St John’s Church.\textsuperscript{17}

Antoninus Martyr (writing \textit{ca.} 560 AD), an early pilgrim who referred to this place, stated that it was east of the Jordan and about two miles from the river. He mentioned a small spring to the east of the river beside the low hill, near to which many hermits resided.\textsuperscript{18} The Pilgrim of Piacenza (writing \textit{ca.} 570 AD), after his description of the eastern bank of Jordan River, said, “In that part of the Jordan is a spring where St John used to baptise, and which is two miles from the Jordan river, the whole valley is full of hermits.”\textsuperscript{19} John Moschus, in his seventh-century book, \textit{The Spiritual Meadow}, mentions a monastic complex (or laura) in this area, with many cells inhabited by hermits. He recounts the story of the monk John from the monastery of Abba Eustorgius near Jerusalem, who was on a pilgrimage to Sinai via Aila (al-’Aqaba). The monk suffered a fever and took refuge in one of the caves east of the river. John the Baptist appeared to him in a

\textsuperscript{16} Nabulsi 1998, pp. 1–10.

\textsuperscript{17} Waheeb 2009.

\textsuperscript{18} Antonius 1869.

\textsuperscript{19} Procopius 1896, pp. 1–178.
vision and told him to cancel his trip and stay in the cave, saying that “this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself has come in here to pay me a visit.” The feverish monk recovered and in gratitude converted the cave into a church for the hermits living in the area. John Moschus said that the area was called the Laura of Saphsaphas, or Sapsas. The sixth-century Madaba Mosaic Map gives the name of Bethany beyond the Jordan as “Ainon” and “Saphsaphas”. On the river bank is a church of the Forerunner and in the apse of the church is a stone where the Forerunner stood when he baptised Christ. And across the Jordan River, about a mile away, is the cave of the Forerunner.

St Helena built churches over caves or grottos, such as the Church of the Nativity and another church in Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives. According to the *Bios di Constantine* (ninth century), St Helena crossed the Jordan and built a church over the cave that the Baptist had inhabited and another opposite it, upon “a higher place” where Elijah had ascended to heaven. The same arrangement appears in an eleventh-century AD Greek manuscript, and Xanthopulos reports in an earlier source that it was possible that St Helena built a church over the cave. John Phocas (writing *ca. 1177 AD*) stressed the fact of the smallness of the cave, and said: “Beyond the Jordan, opposite to the place of our Lord’s baptism is the grotto of John the Baptist.” The early twelfth-century traveller Abbot Daniel mentioned a grotto of St John on the eastern bank: “A beautiful stream of water, which flows over pebbles into the Jordan is found here, the water is very sweet and very cold, and it was drunk by John, the forerunner of Christ, when he inhabited this sacred cavern.” Grethenios (writing *ca. 1400 AD*) heard that it was supposed to lie “on the far side of the Jordan,” but he did not venture there “for fear of the Arabs.” Maurommitos (writing *ca. 1511–1516 AD*), another pilgrim, says that the ascension of Elijah took place near it as well.

The Madaba Map situates “Aenon where now is Sapsaphas” in the Wādi al-Kharrār, directly opposite the present baptism place on the east bank of the River Jordan. The name Sapsaphas is derived from the Semitic word for willow (Arabic *safsaf*). The symbol underneath the name on the map shows an enclosed spring and something shaped like a conch.

According to Kopp, describing Elijah’s hill (Tall al-Kharrār):

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20 Avi-Yonah 1954.
21 Wilkinson 1977, p. 121.
23 Phocas 1894.
24 Daniel 1895, pp.1–82.
[T]he contours of the hill were constantly being changed by the caprice of wind and rain, the slopes are strewn with sand. I have seen a solitary stone sticking up on the edge of this hill, and pottery or pieces of mosaic from the Byzantine period. Perhaps to begin with they had been washed down by the rain.26

John the Baptist’s cave was probably located at the bottom of the mount of Elijah. Most likely he would not have lived at the top, the place from where his model had ascended to heaven, but more modestly at the bottom, in its shadow. Tradition may well imply the truth in saying he lived at the foot of the hill. There is a mixture of gravel and sand there and it could accommodate a natural cave or one made by a hermit. There are springs everywhere,27 hence the name “Aenon Bethany” for “Beth Ainon” (“house of a spring”) could have got into the Bible manuscripts at an early date. The original form of the name may have been lost forever in the destruction which afflicted the area and the Byzantine monks might arbitrarily have named the place Aenon.28

What supports our hypothesis is that the gospels stress that the Baptist wanted to act in the spirit of Elijah. For this reason he even imitated his dress; he probably felt himself obliged to live in this area. Finally, the area of the caves and the side of Wādi al-Kharrār have little shelter and they are subject to continuous change. An exception to this is Elijah’s Hill, as observed by many pilgrims and visitors. There the ground is more unchanging, as demonstrated by the ruins having not completely disappeared despite much destruction inflicted by time and man. Byzantine traditions place at Elijah’s Hill a cave and a church to honour St John the Baptist. Up to now only five caves have been discovered that could be taken into consideration, three on the hill and two near the river. It is reasonable to assume that the three caves discovered on Elijah’s Hill were carved during the early Roman period (the first century AD), as indicated by recovered pottery sherds and coins (see Fig. 7). These caves were known to the monks and believers who dwelt in the area in the second and third centuries AD. When the Byzantines officially adopted this location in the fourth century AD,29 a campaign was organised to develop the whole site, including the hill and the surrounding area down to the Jordan River, along the valley that was depicted on the Madaba Mosaic Map and called “Aenon where now is Sapsaphas” (in the fifth to sixth centuries AD).30

26 Kopp 1963, p. 128.
27 Harding UD, pp. 9–11.
28 Federlan 1902, pp. 129–132.
29 Finigan 1969, p. 63.
30 Avi-Yonah 1954; see also Donner 1965.
The systematic excavations on the western side of Elijah’s Hill under the direction of the author in 1998 revealed the presence of Byzantine artefacts and architectural remains which indicate the importance of the caves and the great purpose they served. It seems clear that a church was built around the cave on the west side of Elijah’s Hill and with reference to the documentary sources, the most likely account is that of John Moschus, who recounted that he had been told by local monks that a monk, John, from a monastery near Jerusalem visited Sapsaphas (in about 500 AD, according to Wilkinson) and converted the cave into a church. The cave was identified by the hermits living around it at that time as the place where St John the Baptist had lived. Whether the church was built at the cave merely to provide a place for the monks to venerate St John the Baptist, or whether the aim was to set up a place of pilgrimage in competition with the monastery and church built by the emperor Anastasius at the Jordan River, is still debatable.

Anastasius was against the 451 AD decision of Chalcedon (he would later be considered a Monophysite) and was not popular with orthodox monks. The monk John from the monastery near Jerusalem and the hermits living around Elijah’s Hill were likely to have been orthodox. This could explain their desire to authenticate the cave as the traditional site of John’s baptising activities, particularly if the east bank church had been the preserve of the orthodox and was in ruins at that time. The Monophysite/orthodox issue could explain why there may have been two churches at the Jordan River, as attested by later sources including Epiphanius Monachus, one dedicated to John the Baptist and one to the Holy Trinity.

The area of the caves was reshaped by the Byzantine architects and a retaining wall was erected to prevent any collapse or erosion. In addition, a wide wall was constructed in front of the first and second caves to provide space for those who used the area, while the church was built on the third cave. A point about the dating of the churches on top of the hill that have cross motifs in the floor mosaics is that there was an edict by the emperor Theodosius II in 427 AD that prohibited the use of the cross and other Christian symbols in pavements, which would be walked on. This is relevant in the context of the tradition that St Helena decreed that a sanctuary to the Prophet Elias should be built on the hill long before 427 AD (Fig. 9). The entrance area was made by building three arches and a wall that surrounded the whole hill, sometimes supported by buttresses, especially on the western side opposite the cave. The buildings around the caves from the south, north, west and on top of the hill over the caves represent a complete Byzantine monastery that was established in the fourth century AD and flourished during the sixth century AD.
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Fig. 1: The two caves east of the Jordan River.
Fig. 2: Cave no. 1, Jordan River (after Dajah 1998).

TOP PLAN
CAVE NO. 1
1. BENCH
2. ENTRANCE
3. APSE
4. LIVING CHAMBER
5. PRAYER ROOM

SECTION OF THE EASTERN WALL (PRAYER ROOM)

SECTION OF DOORWAY

Fig. 2: Cave no. 1, Jordan River (after Dajah 1998).
Fig. 3: Cave no. 2, Jordan River (after Dajah 1998).
Fig. 4: General view of Elijah’s Hill.

Fig. 5: The western sector of Elijah’s Hill showing the three caves.
Fig. 6: Top plan of church built around the third cave on Elijah's Hill using the cave as its apse (drawn by Dajah, Dassuwe, and Kabajab).
Fig. 7: Pottery sherds (1–15) dated to the Early Roman period.
Fig. 8: Pottery sherds (1-14) dated to the Early Byzantine period.
Fig. 9: The obverse of Byzantine coin from Tell Mar Elias.