

THE HERMITAGE OF ST. JOHN THE HESYCHAST IN THE GREAT LAURA OF SABAS

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The Great Laura was the largest and most important of the Judean Desert laurae in the Byzantine period. It was founded in 483 CE by Sabas, one of the outstanding leaders of the monastic movement in Palestine in the first half of the sixth century.¹ One of the famous monks who lived in the laura at this time was John the Hesychast (the recluse). The story of his life was recorded by Cyril of Scythopolis, the hagiographer of the other desert fathers: Euthymius, Sabas, Theodosius, Cyriac, Abraamius, and Theognius.²

John was born on January 8, 454 in Nicopolis,³ in the Roman province of Armenia Prima, to a wealthy noble family, whose sons were noted statesmen, military commanders, municipal magistrates, and officials in the imperial administration. His brother Pergamius served the Emperors Zenon (474-491) and Anastasius (491-518) in many positions with distinction, and

1. The remains of the laura were surveyed in 1981-1983 as part of Mar Saba Map archaeological survey conducted on behalf of the Archaeological Survey of Israel, the Israel Authority of Antiquities. Sabas' enterprise stands at the focus of my forthcoming book: *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism: A Comparative Study in Eastern Monasticism, Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, *Dumbarton Oak Studies XXXII* (Washington, D.C.: 1994). The team of the archaeological survey included Erez Cohen and Benny Levenstein (surveyors), Asaf Ron, Micha Cohen, Efrat Shechter, and Hamutal Kishon. The plans and cross sections of the hermitage were prepared by Erez Cohen, and the reconstructions by Leen Ritmeyer. The plan and cross section of the water supply system were prepared by Benny Levenstein. I wish to extend my thanks to the entire team.

2. E. Schwartz (ed.), *Kyrrillos von Skythopolis* (Leipzig: 1939) (all the following references to *Vita Ioanni*, *Vita Sabae*, and *Vita Euthymii* are from this edition); for a French translation of these Greek hagiographies see: A. J. Festugière, *Les Moines d'Orient III*, 1-3: *Les Moines de Palestine* (Paris: 1962/63). An Hebrew translation, unpublished yet, was prepared by Leah Di Segni on behalf of the Research Department of Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem. My thanks to the translator and to the Institute for permission to use the translation before publication. In recent years an English translation and an Italian one appeared in press: Cirillo di Scitopoli, *Storie monastiche del deserto di Gerusalemme*, tr. R. Baldelli – L. Mortari, *Abbazia di Praglia* 1990; *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis*, trans. by R. M. Price, *Kalamazoo, Mich.* 1991.

3. At present Devrighi, in Pontus, Turkey, on the south bank of the Lycus River.

his nephew Theodorus⁴ who bore the title most-glorious was regarded in high esteem in the court of Emperor Justinian I (527-565) during the time of Cyril's writing (558).⁵ Both the inhabitants of Byzantium and those of Armenia were praising the achievements of the members of this family. His father Encratius and his mother Euphemia were Christians, and from early childhood he received a Christian upbringing. Upon the death of his parents he received a large inheritance.⁶ Devoting himself to God, he established in Nicopolis a church dedicated to Mary Theotokos (the "Mother of God"),⁷ and in his eighteenth year (471) he entered the monastic life, gathering ten brothers to found a coenobium. During his entire youth he refrained from excessive food or sleep, conducted himself in a modest and humble fashion, and served as an exemplar for the members of his congregation, whom he prepared for monastic life. At the beginning of his twenty-eighth year (481), his fame reached the Metropolitan (Archbishop) of Sebasteia,⁸ the capital of Armenia Prima, and after having served in all the lower ecclesiastical ranks, he ordained him bishop (*episcopos*) of Colonia, upon the request of the inhabitants of this city. Even in this post, which he did not assume of his own free will, he continued the ascetic life of a monk.

His austere life during this period was influenced by the asceticism of the monks of Syria, Armenia's neighbor to the south. He refrained from washing himself, so that he would neither display nor see his naked body,⁹ thinking that abstinence from washing was one of the greatest virtues. He greatly engaged in fasts and prayers, acted modestly regarding all the demands of the body, and avoided evil thoughts. His brother Pergamius and

4. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 3, pp. 202-203.

5. For this title and post - most glorious (*endoxotatos antigraphheus*), see: Festugière, vol. III.3, p. 15, n. 13.

6. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 2, pp. 201-202.

7. An act which was perceived in this period, only a few years after the Council of Chalcedon (451), as being an anti-Nestorian act. See also: A. Cameron, "The Theotokos in Sixth Century Constantinople," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 29 (1978), pp. 79-108; D. Baldi, "I Santuari Mariani di Terra Santa," *Liber Annuus* 3 (1952-53), pp. 219-269.

8. At present Sivas, Turkey.

9. For the attitude of the monks and the Pythagoreans regarding the uncleanness of the body, see: A. Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient II* (Louvain: 1960), pp. 275-277. Ephraim the Syrian maintained that washing the body dirties the soul. For the negative attitude towards washing the body in the Late Roman period, see: P. Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1978), p. 44.

his nephew Theodorus,¹⁰ who filled many government posts, were influenced by his deeds and way of life, which they sought to emulate.

Nine years after his appointment as bishop, his brother-in-law Pasinicus was appointed Governor of the province, and began to trouble the Church over which John presided.¹¹ He attempted to limit the authority of Church officials, and violated the asylum right of the church precinct, forcibly removing those who sought refuge therein.¹² Despite John's requests to desist from such acts, the situation worsened from day to day, especially after the death of Mary, John's sister. Eventually, John resolved to go to Constantinople, to intercede there on behalf of his church. After he had settled all the affairs of his church (ca. March 491), with the help of Euphemius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who fought for his case, he decided to retire to the holy city of Jerusalem where he would live as an anchorite, far from the tumult of the world. He dismissed the priests and officials in his entourage, giving them the orders he had received from the Emperor, and secretly boarded a ship, sailing for the Holy Land.

He arrived in Jerusalem and stayed in the hospice for the old founded by Eudocia outside the Holy City. In this home, which also served as a hostel for the poor and pilgrims, there was a prayer house in honor of the Martyr George.¹³ After abiding there for some time, a divine revelation led him to the laura of Sabas, where he arrived in 491 at the age of 38.¹⁴ He found there a community of 150 monks led by Sabas, who lived a life of poverty and want, as was fitting for monks, and who were content with their lot. Sabas entrusted him to the steward (*oikonomos*) of the laura. As a novice John carried out every task imposed upon him: he would bring water from the stream bed, cook for the builders, and assist them in

10. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 3.

11. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 4, p. 203.

12. For the right of asylum held by church buildings, see: Festugière, p. 16, n. 14. Festugière lists various laws, also prior to Justinian, which sought to prevent debtors and fleeing slaves from finding asylum in churches. For this see also: Ioannes Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale* 166, *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, 87.3, ll. 3032-3033, who speaks of a robber and murderer who sought to be accepted in the Monastery of Firminus.

13. Vincent and Abel identify it with a chapel in the Nikephoria compound, on the site of the present-day YMCA. See: H. Vincent and F. M. Abel, *Jerusalem Nouvelle* II (Paris: 1926), pp. 911, 929, 966. It is not inconceivable, however, that these are the remains of the large structure recently discovered in excavations in Jerusalem, to the west of the Crusader moat of the citadel of Jerusalem.

14. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 5, pp. 204-205.

carrying stones and in the other tasks involved in the building of the laura hostel, which was under construction at that time. John was not sent for any period of time to a novitiate; the Small Coenobium, meant for the training of adult novices, had not yet been built, but Sabas did not direct John to the Coenobium of Theodosius, which could serve for the same function neither. The reason apparently was the need in the laura for manpower to assist the builders in their work.

In his second year in the laura, John, along with others, took part in the construction of the monastery of Castellion, on the ruins of the Hasmonean-Herodian fortress of Hyrcania.¹⁵ After this (starting in September 1, 492), he served as hostler and cook; since the Small Coenobium was built at this same time (492), he was also responsible for cooking for the masons, and twice a day he would carry the cooked food and other supplies on his back to the workers, a distance of ca. 10 stadia (2 km) from the hostel.¹⁶ At the end of the year in this office, Sabas gave him a cell of seclusion. Until that stage therefore, John had lived in a cell in the core of the laura, as a novice, on whom various service tasks were imposed, which he was required to fulfill each day. From then on, for a period of three years (September 1, 493-August 31, 496), he lived as a laura monk, spending five days a week in his cell, and coming on Saturday and Sunday with his fellow monks for communal prayer in the church. John was noted for his asceticism during this period. During the five weekdays no food would enter his mouth, and he was the first to enter and the last to leave the church.

At the end of this period he was appointed steward of the laura. This period, which also lasted three years (September 1, 496-August 31, 499) was one of prosperity for the community. Then Sabas decided to ordain him as a priest.¹⁷ He took John with him to Jerusalem and presented him to the Patriarch Elias, so that the latter would ordain him. Now John was forced to secretly reveal to the Patriarch that he was not only a priest, but a Bishop, a fact which he had sought to conceal until then, in order to serve

15. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 6, pp. 205-206.

16. For the Small Coenobium, see: J. Patrich, note 1 above. It is to be identified with Ras Baqqoq - the summit of an elongated hill to the south of Wadi Baqqoq (map reference 1821 1250).

17. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 7, pp. 206-207.

the fathers in the lura as long as he was capable of this. The ordination did not take place, and by order of the Patriarch, from then on John was permitted to live as a recluse in his cell, exempt from the obligation to attend the church, and without need to come in contact with anybody, except for his attendant.¹⁸ Only on the day of the consecration of the great church of the lura, dedicated to Mary mother of God (*Theotokos*) (on July 1, 501), to which the Patriarch Elias also came, was John compelled to leave his cell to greet the prelate.

At the end of four years, in the wake of Sabas' first voluntary exile from the lura to the region of Scythopolis, to escape the rebelling monks, John also fled the rebellious community and went forth to the wilderness of Rouba, where he lived in seclusion in a cave for six years (503-509), living an extremely ascetic life. Only once every two-three days did he obtain nourishment from *melagria*,¹⁹ a wild plant consumed by the anchorites,²⁰ which he would gather with his hoe. In the beginning he would go astray on his way back to the cave, but as time passed he became accustomed to his harsh environment. At times he would be joined by one of the brothers from the lura, who came to be instructed in this way of life. But even in this remote location, he did not exist solely on *melagria*. Once, before Easter, the old man was visited by someone he did not know, who came with a donkey loaded with loaves of fresh white bread, and other provisions: wine, oil, fresh cheeses, eggs, and a jar of honey. The stranger unloaded the animal and left. John regarded this as an act of Divine Providence.²¹ It is not inconceivable, however, that it was the steward of the lura, or another brother entrusted with this task, who sent the supplies. In the eighth century we hear of a monk by the name of Thomas who was entrusted with the task of carrying food to the anchorites living in the wilderness.²²

18. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 8, p. 207.

19. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 11, p. 209; *Vita Euthymii*, chap. 38, pp. 56-57.

20. It has been proposed to identify this plant with *Asphodelus microcarpus*. See: R. Rubin, "Laurae in the Byzantine Judean Desert", *Cathedra* 23 (1982), p. 35, n. 49 (Hebrew).

21. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 12, pp. 210-211. One time John went astray in his wanderings in the wilderness and found himself a distance of 5 miles from his cave; he returned only in a miraculous manner, by being carried through the air, as happened to the prophet Habakkuk. See: Additions to the Book of Daniel 3: Bel and the Dragon, 34, in: A. Kahana (ed.), *The Apochrypha I* (Tel Aviv: 1956), p. 571 (Hebrew).

22. F. Halkin, "Saint Jean l'Eremoplite," *Analecta Bollandiana* 86 (1968), pp. 16-17.

In 506, three years after the conquest of Amida in Mesopotamia by the Persians (January 503), Almandurus (Al Moundhir) son of Sikika, king of Hira, was crowned as king of the Arab tribes, under the aegis of the Persians. He raided Arabia and Palestine, causing much bloodshed, robbery and pillage. The Arab tribes menaced to reached the confines of the Judean Desert, and the chiefs of the desert tribes, who were in charge of the peace and security in the region, warned the monks of the expected invasion. The fathers of the laura urged John to leave Rouba and return to his cell in the laura; even though the laura was not surrounded by a wall, it nevertheless provided more protection than remaining alone in a cave in the desert. John preferred to remain in the desert, where, it is related, a lion joined him and protected him from the barbarians.²³

After Sabas returned to the laura from his second voluntary exile to Nicopolis (end of 506), establishing the New Laura (507), and starting to build the Monastery of the Cave, he went to John in his cave at Rouba, and persuaded him to return to his cell in the laura. This event took place in 509, when John was 56 years old.²⁴ Back in the laura, John lived as a hesychast (recluse)²⁵ in his cell for 48 years, until his death on January 8, 559.²⁶ At the beginning of his period of *hesychia*, Sabas and all the monks of the laura learned about John's life prior to his arrival to the laura, his wealth, and his term of episcopacy. John did not leave his cell even for Sabas' funeral (December 5, 532) in the twenty-fourth year of his seclusion. This long period of seclusion was interrupted only once, for seven months (beginning in February 547), when the Origenists took control of the laura.

23. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 13, pp. 211-212. About keeping peace in Palestine in the Byzantine period by establishing alliances with the desert tribes, see: P. Mayerson, "The First Muslim Attack on Southern Palestine (A.D. 633-634)," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 95 (1964), pp. 159-169; idem, "The Saracens and the Limes," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 262 (1986), pp. 35-47.

24. *Vita Ioanni*, chaps. 14, 28, pp. 212, 222.

25. The term *hesychia* denotes silence and tranquillity essential for inner contemplation.

26. G. Garitte, "La Mort de S. Jean l'Hesychaste d'apres un texte georgien inedit," *Analecta Bollandiana* 72 (1954), pp. 75-84; see also below, n. 44.

27. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 15, p. 213.

28. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 19, p. 216; chap. 21, p. 218; chap. 23, p. 219. Cf.: Ioannes Moschus 137, l. 3000; 160, l. 3028.

The second construction phase of his hermitage (see below) apparently is to be ascribed to this prolonged period as a hesychast. It is reported that during this period his hermitage was sufficiently large to accommodate a distinguished visitor for two days.²⁷ His cell had a built small window with a shutter,²⁸ through which he could talk to and instruct those who came to him; only close to his death did his disciples enter, so that they could treat him.²⁹ The vessels with him in the cell included a bowl and a censer,³⁰ which apparently belonged to the chapel which was part of the hermitage, where the Eucharist could be celebrated.³¹ For many years in his old age his nourishment consisted of porridge, in which ashes from the censers were mixed, in accordance with the verse, "For I have eaten ashes like bread" (Psalms 102:9). Once Cyril brought him his eukration (a drink brewed from anise, pepper, and cumin).³² His link with the outside world was maintained by two disciples: Theodorus and John. Once the latter went on a mission to Livias, across the Jordan River;³³ they also brought him petitions and questions of pilgrims, and transmitted his messages to them.³⁴ John was active in the Origenist controversy, and corresponded with Cyriac - the most celebrated monk in the Old Laura.³⁵ Cyril was sent by his mother to John (November 542), so that the latter might serve as his spiritual mentor and protect him from the spread of the Origenist heresy.³⁶ Cyril frequently visited John, from whom he heard many details about Sabas and the history of the Great Laura. John instructed him to begin his monastic career in the Monastery of Euthymius (July 543), and later advised him to move from the New Laura to the Great Laura (556). Cyril's parents would send an annual donation to John, his disciples, and the monks of the Laura.³⁷

29. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 26, pp. 220-221.

30. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 19, p. 216.

31. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 23, p. 219.

32. See Festugière, vol. III.2, *Vita Sabae*, p. 61, n. 99.

33. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 18, p. 215.

34. *Vita Ioanni*, chaps. 23, 24, pp. 218-220.

35. *Vita Cyriaci*, chap. 11, p. 229; *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 27, p. 221.

36. *Vita Ioanni*, chaps. 20, 21, pp. 216-218.

37. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 20, p. 217.

Theologically, John was like a solid rock to whom the monks turned to receive an advice, a blessing, a prayer, and guidance during time of crisis.³⁸ The holy old man was known as a wonder worker and as one who possessed curative powers. Cyril relates a story, to which he was an eyewitness, regarding the healing of a sick youth possessed by a spirit, by means of prayer and anointment with the oil of the True Cross.³⁹ His reputation spread far and wide. His admirers and the pilgrims who came to him for advice and counsel included Aetherius, the head of the church in the province of Asia, i.e., the Metropolitan of Ephesus; he was the one who informed Sabas that John had already been a bishop, and of his life prior to his arrival at the laura.⁴⁰ Another admirer was Basilina, a woman of Cappadocian origin, who was a deaconess of the Great Church of Constantinople.⁴¹ She came to him accompanied by a nephew of exalted rank, who embraced the heresy of Severus, the leader of the Monophysites. The deaconess asked John to uproot the Monophysite heresy from the heart of the youth, in which he was successful.⁴² John was gifted by the grace of prophecy,⁴³ and like other saints, he foresaw the day of his death.

The Georgian translation of *Vita Ioanni* by Cyril of Scythopolis contains an additional section, written by Cyril himself, which is not preserved in the extant Greek manuscripts. This passage indicates that John died on a Wednesday, on the eighth of January. This data is consistent with the year 559, which was his 105th birthday.⁴⁴

38. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 22, p. 218: the story of Abba Eustace, the abbot of the Monastery of the Cave, how he turned to John during a time of crisis and received from him a blessing, which removed his doubts about his faith and way of life.

39. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 21, p. 218.

40. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 15, pp. 213-214.

41. The Great Church of Constantinople comprised four churches with a joint administration and shared priesthood: the churches of Hagia Sophia, Hagia Helene, Hagios Theodoros, and the Church of the Virgin built by the Empress Verina. See: A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284-602* (Norman, Oklahoma: 1964), pp. 900-901.

42. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 23, pp. 218-219.

43. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 23, p. 219; chap. 24, p. 219.

44. See above, n. 26. The Georgian manuscript is preserved in the British Museum, and was copied in the eleventh century in the Monastery of the Cross near Jerusalem. The Georgian translation apparently had been made by a monk of the monastery of Sabas in the late seventh-early eighth century, when *Vita Sabae* was translated into this language as well. In

The Location of John's Hermitage in the Great Laura

In the mid eighth century, Leontius of Damascus described the location of the cell in *Vita Stephani Sabaitae*,⁴⁵ indicating that the memory of the site of John's hermitage was preserved by the monks of the laura for ca. 200 years after his death. According to this text, it was located to the north of the laura, on the east side of the brook, which corresponds to the site currently exhibited as the cell.

The chapter relating of John's miraculous success in growing a fig tree on the barren cliff⁴⁶ contains the following description: "The spot where the holy elder was enclosed has to the west a very high cliff, which the roof of the cell rests against."⁴⁷ Since the extant tradition regarding the location of John's hermitage on the east bank of the stream seems to be authentic, it may be concluded that this fig tree grew on the southern or northern cliff, to the west, or in front of the cell. Cyril mentions that the cliff was smooth, with no cracks, thus emphasizing the miraculous deed.⁴⁸ Only caper bushes are visible at the site today, with no fig tree. This phenomenon, however, of a fig tree growing in a seemingly miraculous manner from the face of a cliff can be seen today above cell no. 11 of the Great Laura. (Fig. 2 Section A-A).

most of the Greek manuscripts a verse, not written by Cyril, is added to his text, which speaks of the death of John on December 7. Only in the Greek manuscript from Sinai is the date given as January 8; Schwartz, however, was of the opinion that this is a mere echo of the date of his birth, and the authenticity of this report is questionable. The Georgian translation indicates that this is indeed the correct date of his death, and that the date of December 7, mentioned also in Greek *Synaxaria* and in the *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (*Acta Sanctorum, Propyleum ad Acta Sanctorum Novembris*, cols. 288-295) along with other dates (December 3, 8, or 9) apparently derives from the proximity to the date of Sabas' death on December 7, and from the desire to establish adjoining memorial days. See Garitte, *op. cit.* p. 84, n. 1.

45. Leontius Damascenus, *Vita Stephani Sabaitae*, ed. G. Garitte, "Le debut de la vie de S. Etienne le Sabaite retrouvé en arabe au Sinai," *Analecta Bollandiana* 77 (1959), chap. XIX, pp. 368-369.

46. *Vita Ioanni*, chap. 25, p. 220.

47. *Ibid.*, chap. 25, p. 220, ll. 5-7 (translation by Leah Di Segni).

48. *Ibid.*, chap. 26, p. 221. It is also related of Elpidius, the Abbot of the monastery of Douka, above Jericho, that he succeeded in enrooting a vine-twig in a miraculous manner. See: Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* (ed. Butler, 1898), chap. 48, p. 143.

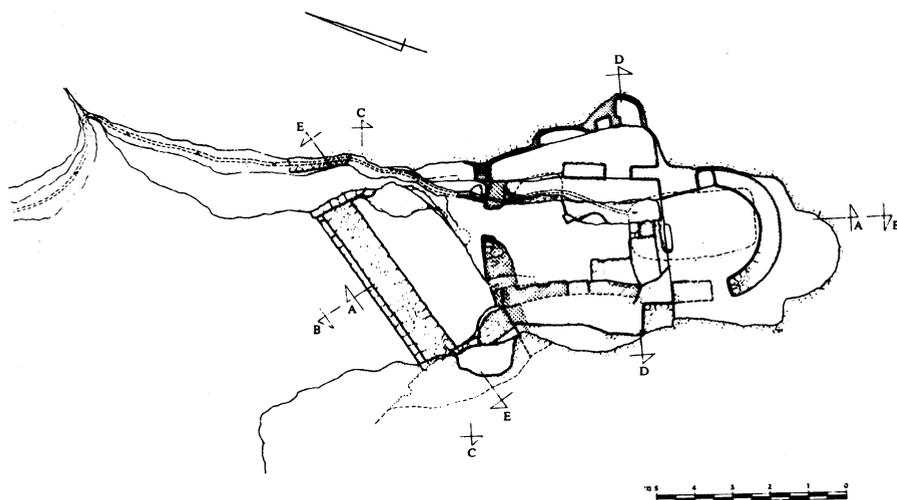


Fig. 1 Plan of the hermitage of St. John the Hesychast in the Great Laura.

The Archaeological Remains

The hermitage is built on the cliffs of the east bank of the Kidron, between Mar Saba and the site listed in the maps as “Sophia House” (map reference 18165 12385; Phot. 1). Its western part (Fig. 1) consists of a ladder-tower resting against a high wall, which encloses the cleft in which the hermitage is built. In the eastern section there are two levels: the lower level containing a dwelling chamber and a cistern, and an upper level which served as a chapel.

The Ladder-Tower

The ladder-tower was meant to provide easy access from one level to the other by wood ladders. The wall that encloses the cleft is 11.5m high, and is thicker in its lower part (Figs. 2, 3). The bottom section of the wall is incorporated in the bedrock itself. It has two faces, and is built of courses 20-25 cm high which are leveled by the addition of small flat stones. The blocks are only partially drafted (Fig. 4) and are cemented by mud clay. A small patch of white plaster on the outside (Phot. 2) attests that originally the entire wall was plastered (Fig. 5). The entrance is set at a height of more

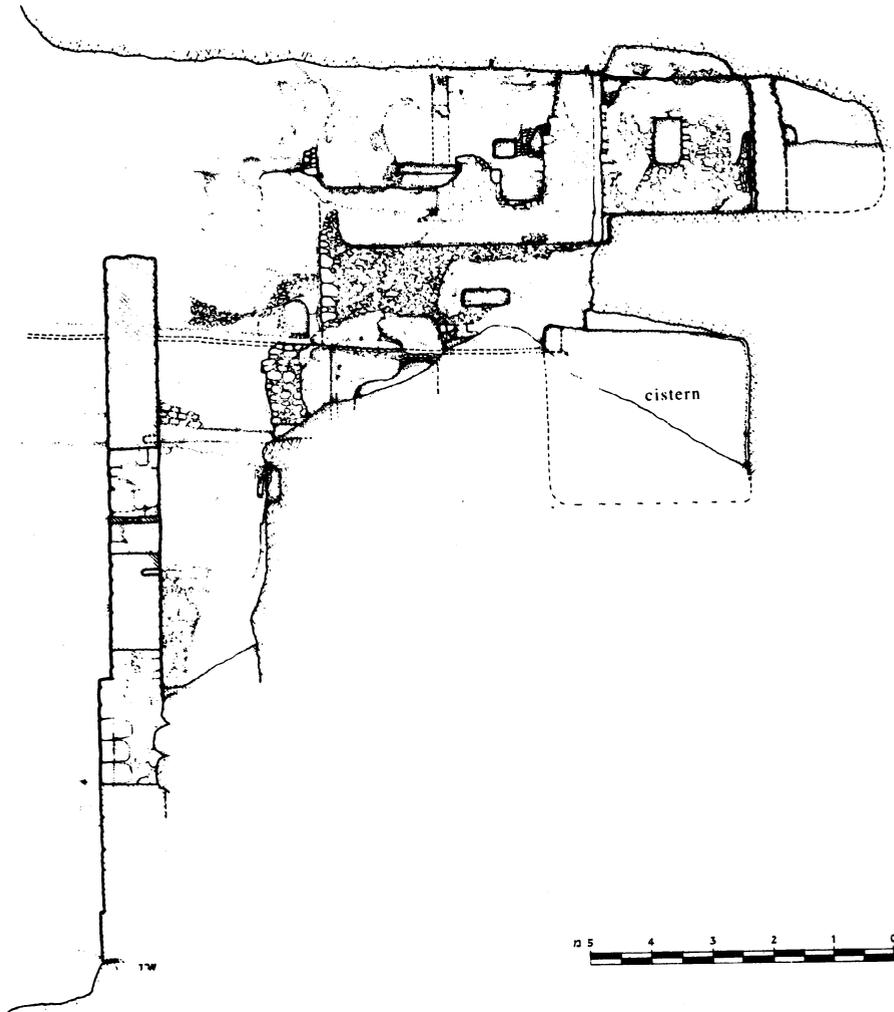


Fig. 2 Section A-A.

than 3m above the external ground level. The jambs of the opening are built of combed-drafted ashlar (Phot. 3). The lintel is missing, and the threshold is built of two stones. An inner recess is carved in the doorjambs as a door stopper. The wall here is about 1m thick. A recess for a locking bolt is hewn in the right doorjamb.

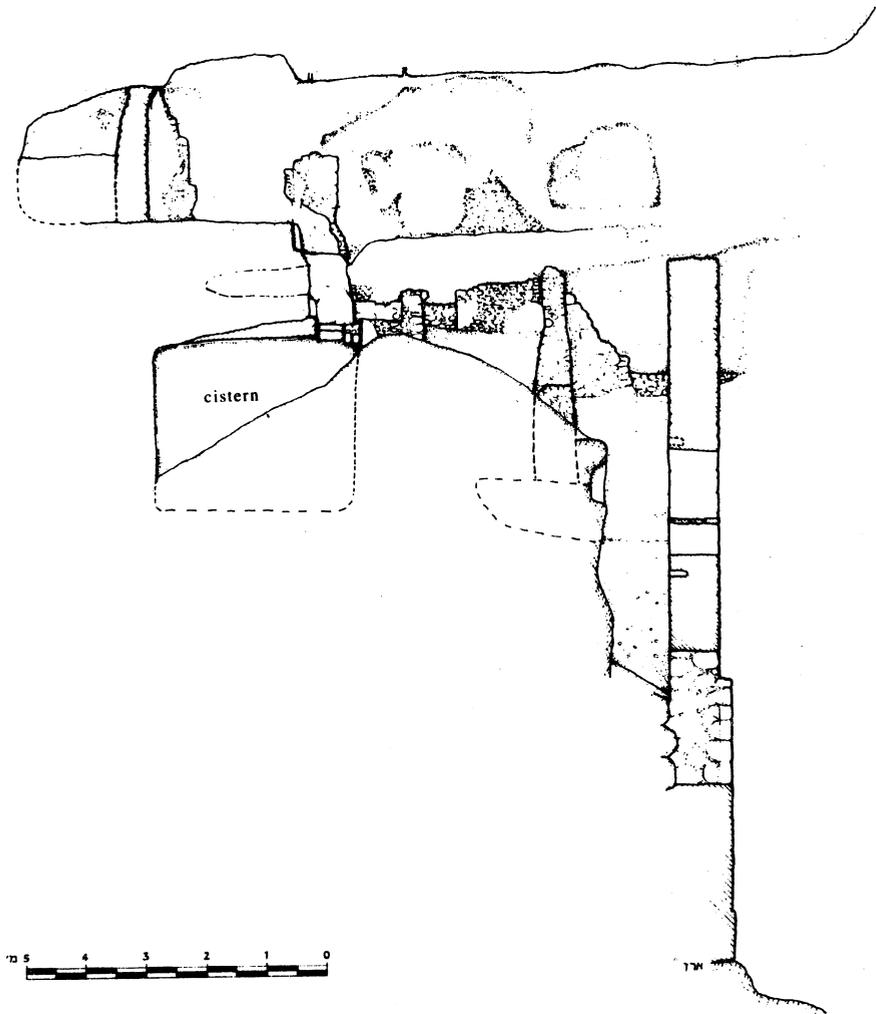


Fig. 3 Section B-B.

Three recesses, up to 30cm deep (Figs. 2, 3, 6) denote the ceiling level of the first story, which was 3.5m high. The recesses held wooden beams the other end of which rested on the opposite rock wall. The upper part of the enclosing wall, from this level and up, is 75cm thick. The inner face is covered with a smooth layer of plaster and mud. At the level of the second story is a long window with two smaller windows flanking it below. An-

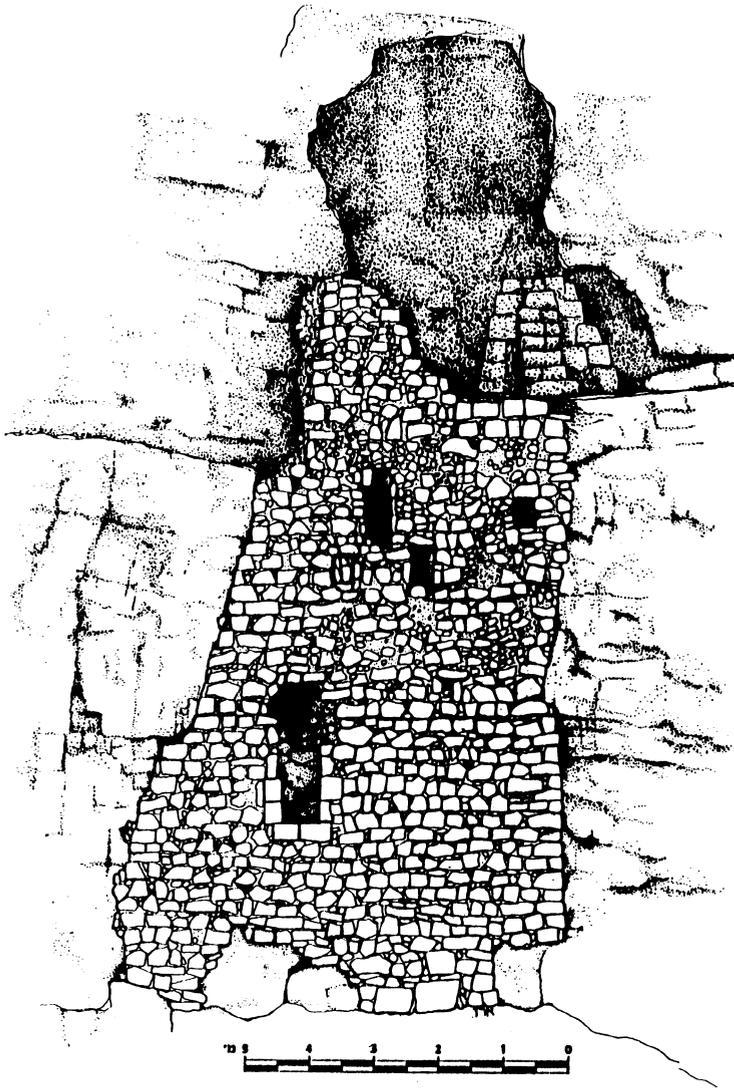


Fig. 4 External view of wall enclosing the hermitage.

other window is located farther to the south. The window jambs and lintels are made of undressed stones, larger than ordinary. Farther away and above, adjoining the southern corner, is a breach in the wall, possibly an upper entrance (Fig. 5). In the rock wall beyond the breach are two shallow alcoves, to the right of which is a blocked tunnel-like entrance penetrating into the bedrock.



Fig. 5 Reconstruction of the outer wall enclosing the hermitage.

A row of five recesses, ca. 20cm deep, marks the level of the ceiling of the second story, which was 2.2m high (Figs. 2, 3, 6). Here as well wooden beams were inserted, the other end of which was supported by the facing bedrock. These beams supported the floor of the third story of the tower. Opposite the wall is a rock ledge on which is built the wall enclosing the dwelling chamber. The ledge is worn smooth, providing convenient access to the room entrance. Along the northern cliff wall are the remains of a built water channel, which runs along a rock ledge which provided also

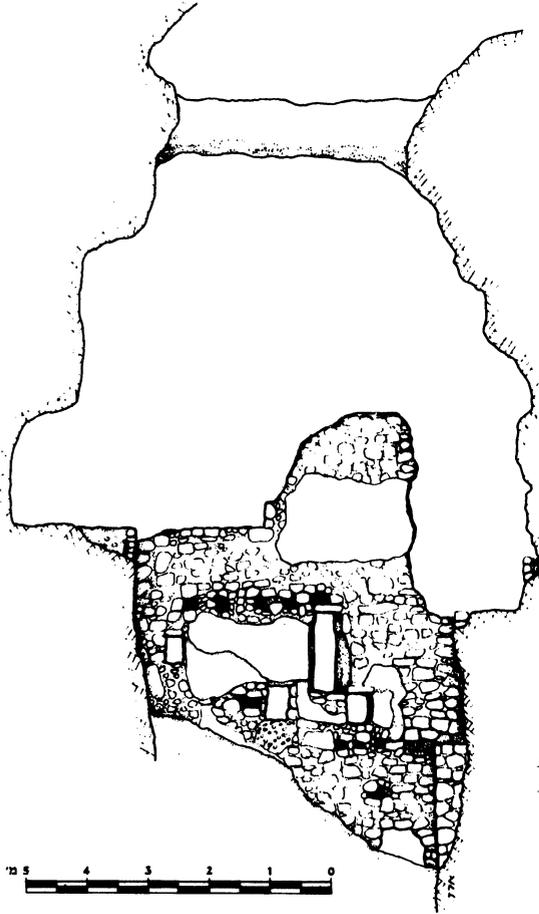


Fig. 6 Interior view of enclosing wall (section E-E).

convenient access along a built path coming from the north (Fig. 5). Here there most probably was an upper entrance to the hermitage. A built block adjoining the southern rock cliff predates the large wall of the tower. Above it, to the south, is preserved a section of the wall that enclosed the third story. This story, ca. 3m high, also had a long window, of which only the threshold and the northern jamb survive. White plaster patches on the rock walls to the right and the left of the upper end of the built wall indicate that originally it extended up to the rock ceiling, and that there was a fourth story to the tower. Passage from one story to another was provided by wood ladders (Figs. 7, 8).

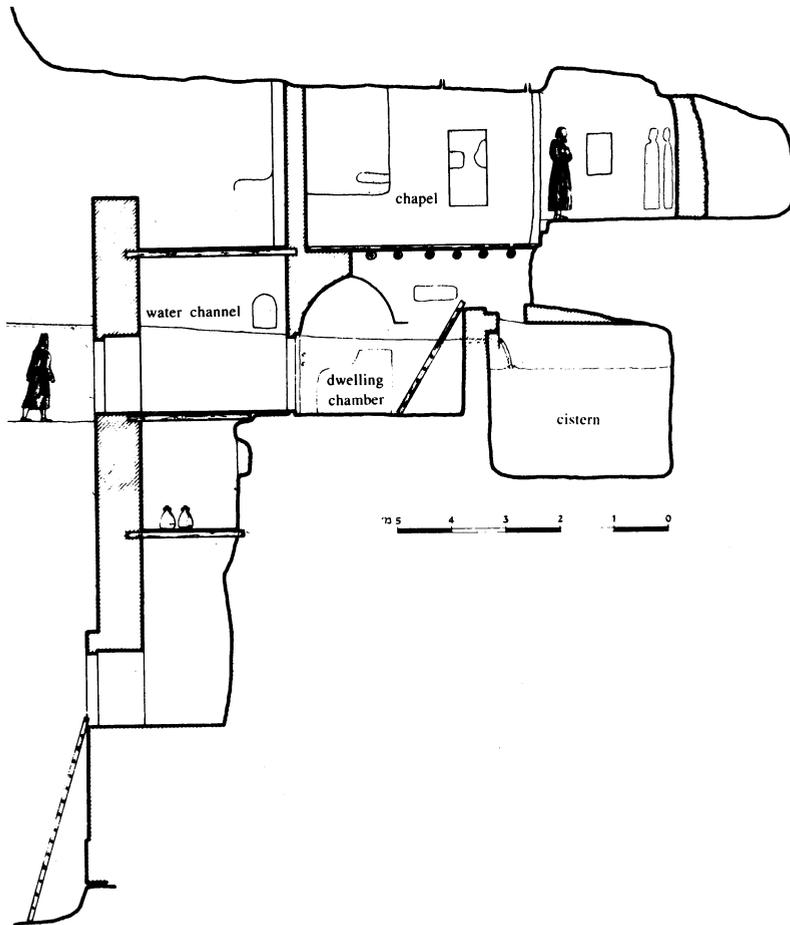


Fig. 7 Reconstruction of hermitage along section A-A (looking northward).

The Dwelling Chamber

The eastern part of the hermitage has two levels. The dwelling chamber comprised the lower level. It was entered from the third story of the ladder-tower, being separated from it by a built wall, in the northern part of which, adjacent to the rock-wall, was an entrance. This wall is mostly collapsed, due to an underlying crack in the bedrock (Fig. 9). The upper

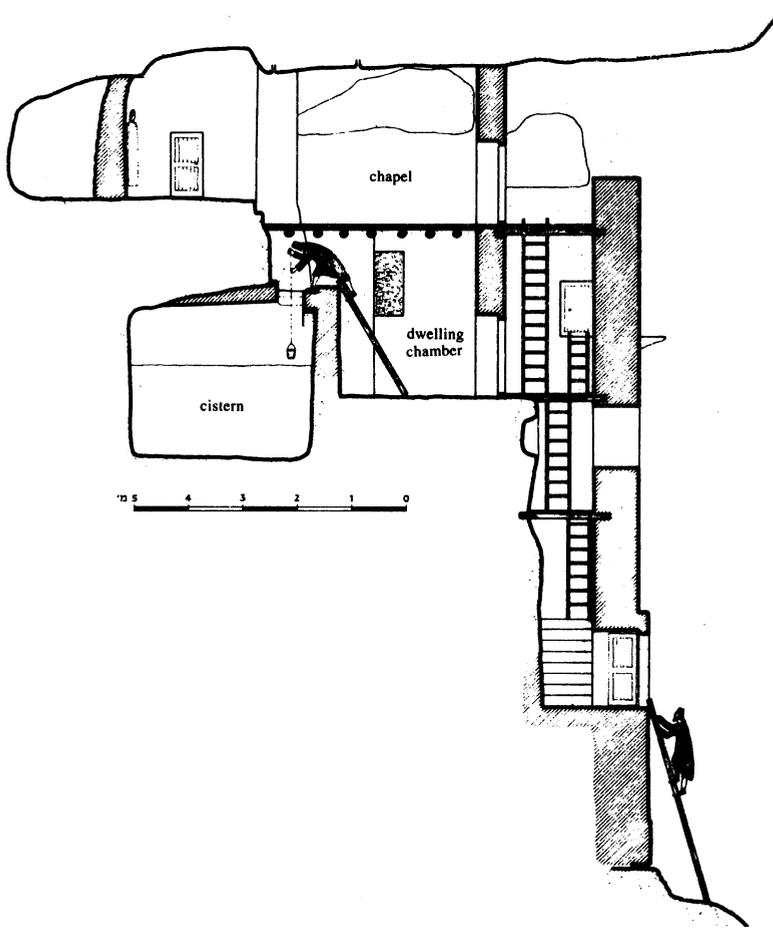


Fig. 8 Reconstruction of hermitage along section B-B (looking southward).

part of the northern rock-jamb is bisected by the built water channel. The south jamb was masonry built.

Beyond the entrance is a room 4m long, 2m wide in the west and 1.5m wide in the east. The room is mostly blocked by debris and bird dropping. In its eastern end there is a square, built opening of a cistern (Phot. 1, Fig. 10), and a fragment of the cistern cover lies nearby. The rock-cut vaulted cistern is coated with the pinkish hydraulic plaster, composed of tiny

Fig. 9 Section C-C.

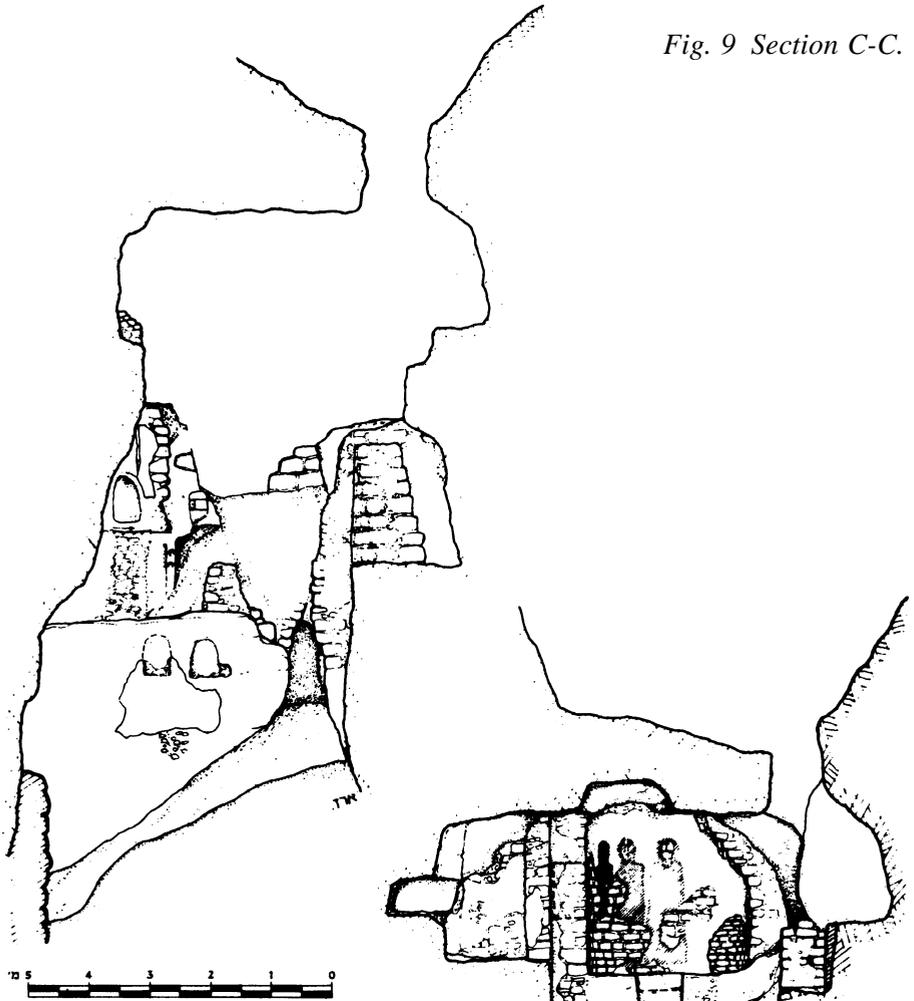
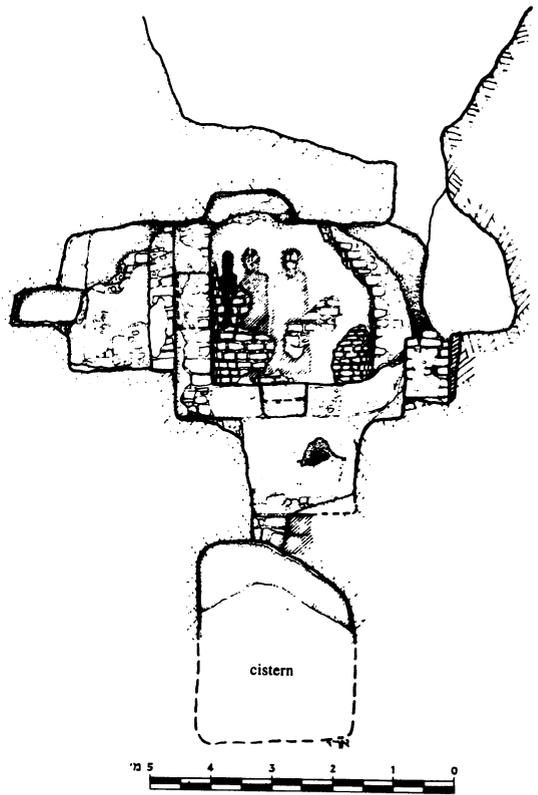


Fig. 10 Section D-D.



sherds, characteristic of the Byzantine period. It is ca. 3m long, 1.8m wide, and is partially blocked by debris more than 2m deep. The built water channel passes along the room, adjacent to the upper part of the northern wall (Fig. 1), and empties into the cistern through an embedded round clay pipe. In the north side of the room is an entrance, blocked almost to the lintel, which leads to a cabin or a deep niche, hewn like a cave (Fig. 2). East of this and high up on this side of the room is an additional niche. This part of the room was roofed by a semidome, which rested on the western wall. On the south side, a plastered wall, 35 cm thick, built of small undressed stones, separates the room from a narrow and elongated cell. Presumably, in the first phase, before the construction of the ladder-tower, a ladder installed in this cell provided access to the chapel on the upper level. In the second phase the cell and its entrance were blocked with earth and small stones (Phot. 1, Fig. 3).

The thin wall separating the dwelling chamber from the southern cell also served to support the ceiling beams of the southern side of the room. In the southeastern corner of the room, alongside the opening of the cistern, is a sort of a seat and an additional built installation, of undetermined nature.

The Chapel

Two phases may be discerned here as well (Fig. 1). In the first phase the walls of the chapel and the apse were rock-cut, and its area was $4 \times 2.8\text{m}$ (without the apse). The bedrock of the early apse still retains patches of white plaster and building remains. In the first phase, the entire area in front of the chapel, on top of the dwelling room, apparently served as an open living space - a sort of porch, in whose rock walls a number of plastered alcoves were installed. In the later phase, when the ladder-tower was erected, a new, horse-shew-shaped apse, ca. 2.25m wide, was built over the entire area of the early chapel. On its north side a prothesis niche was installed, and on its south side, an entrance providing passage to the rear space, from where it was also possible to ascend to a rock terrace and to the space above the rock ceiling of the chapel.

The floor and walls of the apse are coated with plaster. The top of the apse wall touches the plaster that covered the ceiling of the earlier chapel (Phot. 5). The white plaster of the ceiling was laid over a gray bedding that covered the bedrock itself. The white plaster of the apse lacks a gray bedding. Three figures are drawn on the apse. Repeated painting led to

distortion of the shapes of their bodies. There are indications of deliberate distortion of the faces, causing the plaster to fall. Vertical Greek inscriptions in yellow paint flanking each figure identify them.

Alongside the figure to the left is the Greek inscription Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΑΝΑΝΙΑΣ (Hananiah the holy); alongside the middle figure: Ο ΑΓ(ΙΟΣ) ΖΑΧΑΡΙΑΣ (Zechariah the holy); and alongside the right-hand figure: Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΙΣΑΗΛ (Mishael the holy). The reference is to the three youths, the companions of Daniel, who were tried in the furnace. To the left of the figures is an additional inscription in yellow paint, but horizontal: ΙΟΑΝΝΟΥ ΚΟΛΟΝΙΑΣ ([the chapel] of John of Colonia). Colonia was the name of the city in Armenia in which John served as Bishop prior to his coming to live as an anchorite in Palestine. To the right of the figures is the lower arm, triangular in shape, of a red cross.

The figures are painted in red, and the halo around the head is yellow. The heads of Zechariah and Mishael were disfigured, as mentioned above. A line of red paint delineates the eastern jamb of the entrance that had been set in the south side of the apse. The corners of the apse facing the chapel hall also are marked by a painted red line.

On the north a built wall separates the prayer hall from a cell and a low, elongated alcove. The walls of the cell and the alcove are thickly coated with white plaster. Two steps descend from the apse to the prayer hall, which is 50cm lower than the level of the apse. A narrow horizontal band of plaster is all that remains of the bottom step. The floor of the chapel and the apse was of plaster, large portions of which survive up to a line ca. 50cm distant from the northern wall. The white plaster patches extending along the ceiling indicate the location of the wall enclosing the chapel on the west, and the patches of white plaster on the rock walls, extending westward, attest that the ladder-tower had also a fourth story, with direct access from the chapel. An elongated alcove is hewn on the south side of the prayer hall, high up.

The cleft continues to ascend, and forms a bridge above the ladder-tower (Fig. 6) before continuing to rise. These higher levels also were carefully examined by us, but no traces of construction or artificial rock-cutting were found (bird dropping cover a large part of the area, and are likely to conceal such traces). Despite the absence of clear indications, the rock bridge apparently was an integral part of the hermitage, serving as a sort of porch providing a view of the cliffs on the opposite bank of the Kidron. There was relatively easy access to this "porch," with only a wood plank needed to cross the deep cleft leading to it.

The Water Supply System

The built cistern within the hermitage, with its opening in the dwelling chamber was fed by a built channel coming from the north, from two reservoirs, ca. 40m distant from the hermitage. The water reached the reservoirs through a gutter in a damming wall, ca. 20m long, built on a rock terrace ca. 9m above the reservoirs.

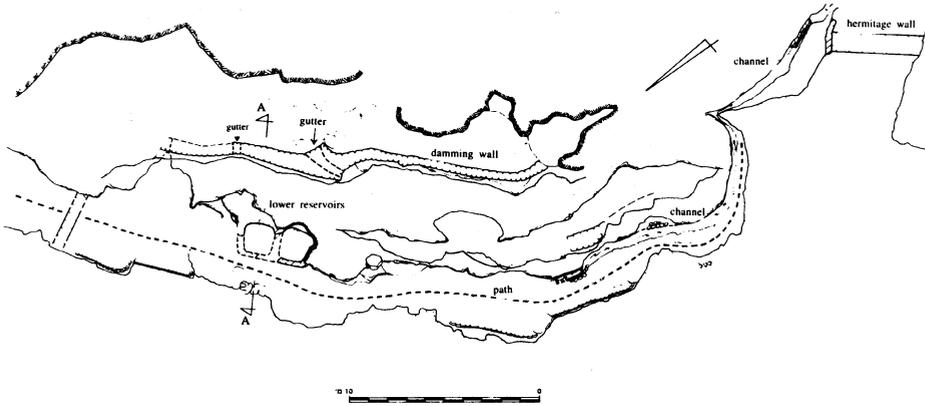


Fig. 11 Line of cliff, path, and water supply (plan).

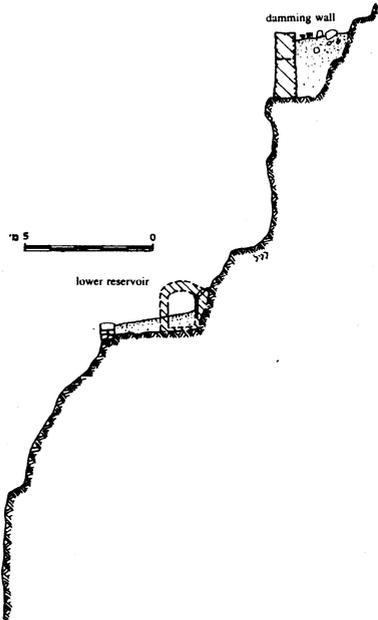


Fig. 12 Water supply system



Fig. 13 General view of hermitage, damming wall, and rock terrace, along which the access path and water channel are built.

Summary

The remains indicate two phases in the history of the hermitage. In the first phase, the chapel was rock-cut and plastered, and the dwelling chamber underneath already had a cistern at its rear end, fed by a channel. Communication between the two levels was by means of a ladder set in the narrow cell to the south of the dwelling chamber. Access to the hermitage was provided by a built path along the northern cliff (Figs. 1, 5, 11). The water channel also ran parallel to the path.

The later phase saw the installation of the large wall, housing the ladder-tower. This change permitted a private access to John's hermitage, while the early access along the path, was blocked by a wall built across the terrace (Fig. 11), which completely halted all approach to the hermitage and its water system from the north. Since the erection of the tower added living space to the west in several levels, the chapel could now be moved

westward. The apse of the later chapel was built on the location of the early chapel, and in front of it a new prayer hall was built. In this phase the chapel was entered directly from the fourth story of the tower (Fig. 8). Consequently, the cell narrow to the south of the living chamber was sealed. This closure also contributed to reinforcing the wall bearing the supporting beams of the floor of the chapel overhead.

The two constructing phases can be distinguished in the plaster as well. In the first phase the rock face was covered with a layer of white plaster over a gray cement-like bedding. In a few places an additional layer of mud plaster was applied beneath the gray bedding. In the later phase, the white plaster covering the walls was laid directly over a layer of mud plaster.

Both phases should be dated to the period when John was still alive. Possibly, the second phase was constructed when John attained the status of a recluse, who was not to be disturbed, and who was exempt from any administrative task in the laura. At this stage it became necessary to provide a separate access to his cell, and to block the path that had enabled anyone to pass by John's cell. In the "ladder tower" an entrance was installed high up, and not in its very bottom, to make access difficult.

This impressive building project apparently was financed by John's property and by donations from his admirers. Constructing a cell by one's own funds was regarded as an act of great piety. Sabas viewed this as an act equivalent to the establishment of a church of God, and therefore monks who could afford it were regarded this as a great religious virtue.⁴⁹

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49. *Vita Sabae* chap. 28, p. 113. Cyril erected his cell in the Great Laura by his own funds. (*ibid.* chaps. 75, 82, pp. 181, 187). A similar episode is related about the monk Anthimius (*ibid.* chap. 43, p. 133).

The article was translated from the Hebrew by Edward Levin. For the Hebrew version see: M. Heltzer et al. (eds.), *Studies in the Archaeology and History of Ancient Israel*, Haifa University Press, Haifa 1993, pp. 243-264.