

SABASTIYA



THE FRUITS OF HISTORY
AND THE MEMORY OF
JOHN THE BAPTIST

A PROJECT OF ARCHAEOLOGY, CONSERVATION AND LOCAL COMMUNITY IN PALESTINE

Curators

Osama Hamdan

Carla Benelli

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The two videos of the exhibition are available at:

<http://www.proterrasancta.org/sabastiya-frutti-della-storia/>





THE EXHIBITION IS DEDICATED TO FATHER MICHELE PICCIRILLO

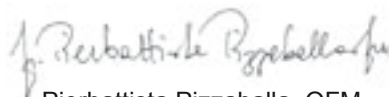
Father Michele Piccirillo was a gift from God for the Custody of the Holy Land. Just as Francis strove to find the stones to restore the Church, Father Michele searched all his life for the stones to build the house of God, where everybody could enter and find peace. Father Michele has offered fundamental knowledge not only from an academic and cultural point of view, but also for our living stones today to get to know their own past and their own history.

Very often, when coming to the Holy Land, only the main sanctuaries are visited. Today they are still perhaps the most visible to everybody. But Father Michele always insisted on presenting and also exploring the many small local aspects, intertwinements of life and intense communications, showing how the Christians were present not only in the main centres, but everywhere in the country.

His work had the strength to show how the roots of the people living in the Middle East are above all Christian. But here is also where the traditions of the three great monotheistic religions meet; here we witness a common background that shall encourage mutual respect and understanding. Just like in Sabastiya, a place of extraordinary cultural stratification, today a small Muslim village, where John the Baptist is worshipped by the local people as Prophet Yahia.

This exhibition is an opportunity to remember Father Michele Piccirillo's work for the preservation of the Holy Land's cultural heritage, but also to recall how he always made efforts, especially to make the preservation of this precious cultural heritage bring benefit to the local populations, notwithstanding their religion.

Finally, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all those who have supported and keep supporting us. My gratitude goes in particular to the numerous volunteers and collaborators. I encourage everybody, following St. Francis' steps, to visit the Holy Land and become pilgrims in the Sites where Jesus lived.



Pierbattista Pizzaballa, OFM
Custodian of the Holy Land



WHY SABASTIYA

Sabastiya, in spite of its immensely valuable Roman archaeological site, the tomb of John the Baptist and its beautiful landscapes, is today rarely visited by the numbers of pilgrims and visitors coming to the Holy Land.

The village takes its name from Sebaste, the town founded in 25 B.C. by Herod the Great on the site of ancient Samaria, the capital of the Northern Israeli kingdom. Archaeological excavations have brought to light spectacular remains, still visible atop the acropolis, the Hellenistic tower and the Roman remains of the temple dedicated to Emperor Augustus, the forum, the basilica, the theatre, the stadium, the walls and the colonnaded street. The village became famous during the first Christian period as the site of John the Baptist's tomb. A Byzantine church, rebuilt during the crusader period, was built on the tomb and is today the village's main mosque, dedicated to Prophet Yahia, the Muslim name for John the Baptist.

For several years now, ATS pro Terra Sancta¹, NGO of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land², has been working together with the Municipality of Sabastiya and the Mosaic Centre Jericho to preserve and enhance the village's cultural heritage and support the local community.

The involvement of ATS Pro Terra Sancta and the Custody of the Holy Land in Sabastiya was strongly encouraged by Father Michele Piccirillo, a Franciscan friar and professor of archeology at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, who recently passed away.

Starting first from a small group of buildings, the conservation action has widened gradually to include a good part of the historical centre, all the while trying to support the village's suffering economy by employing Palestinian artisans in the construction sites and training local workers. The activity became particularly interesting when, after cleaning the area from ruins and debris, a massive fortification came to light together with a tower with a spiral staircase, and finally a chapel, probably dating back to the crusader period, i.e. the beginning of 12th century. Also in summer 2009 two fragments of floor mosaics of exquisite craftsmanship were discovered, probably the remains of the Byzantine monastery next to the church.

Apart from conservation and valorization, the project also supports a series of training activities for the local population, in particular women and the young. It includes the creation of a guesthouse, recently opened, to provide accommodation for pilgrims and tourists both in the renovated historical buildings and in the village family houses as well as the organi-



zation of vocational training courses to train young local tour guides and to support the production of typical products to be sold in a shop created inside one of the renovated buildings next to the crusader cathedral.

Sabastiya is still today, in spite of the long and complicated ongoing conflict, a Christian pilgrimage destination point, as it has been for centuries. The village has been reopened to tour buses and is recording a good deal of local tourism from schools, universities and Palestinian families going to visit the village.

ATS Pro Terra Sancta wants to continue the conservation action of this Holy Site, also to keep on supporting the village economy and educating the local population to appreciate beauty and care for art. Particular importance will be given to the action involving children and women of the village, by offering cultural activities and training courses. ATS Pro Terra Sancta also wants to pursue the implementation of safety measures and the urban renovation of the historical centre to give it back to its community and the pilgrims that, hopefully, will come in great numbers to discover Sebaste.

ATS Pro Terra Sancta

¹ ATS Pro Terra Sancta is the non-profit NGO of the Custody of the Holy Land. The President of ATS Pro Terra Sancta is the Custodian of the Holy Land. ATS Pro Terra Sancta gives voice to the desire of the Custody to create wholesome collaboration to support the Christian presence in the Holy Land and to preserve the Holy Sites, source of beauty, hope and peace for the entire world. The activities and projects supported by ATS Pro Terra Sancta are always directed to everybody with no discrimination in terms of language, country, race or religion.

² Custody of the Holy Land is the name today for the Franciscan Friars of the Order of Friars Minor, who have lived in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea since the beginning of the Order, founded by St. Francis in 1209 and are custodians of the Holy Sites upon the will and mandate of the Catholic Church. The Franciscan action in the Holy Land acts on three main axes: praying in the Holy Sites, welcoming the pilgrims, the custody of the Holy Sites and the support of the poor.



NEW DISCOVERIES IN SEBASTE IN SAMARIA IN THE NAME OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

From SBF News 23.3.2007

“Four miles south of Jenin is the city of Sebaste, once known as Samaria, when it was the capital of ten tribes called Israel; now because of its sin, it has no house, apart from 2 churches built in honour of John the Baptist. But one, the main church and cathedral, was converted into a mosque by the Saracens, especially the sepulchre of the same Blessed John the Baptist, which was made in marble in resemblance with the sepulchre of the Lord.... That church is on the mount side on the slope. The Saracens worship greatly the Blessed John after Christ and the Blessed Virgin, and have great respect for him.... They say John was a great and saint prophet”

This is what in 1283 the Dominican Father Burchard of Mount Sion wrote after visiting the almost empty village with St. John's Church already turned into a mosque after the Crusaders' defeat by Saladin in 1187. The visit, together with the veneration for the tomb of the Baptist, gave him the opportunity to recall for his European Christian readers the admiration the Baptist enjoyed as a prophet among the Muslim population, in the continuation of an ancient tradition. In Bethlehem around the year 390, St. Jerome, while translating in Latin the Onomasticon of the Holy Sites written between the end of the III and the beginning of the IV century by the Greek Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, adds about Samaria/Sebaste: “where the remains of John the Baptist are guarded”. The same author recalls the tomb of St. John in Sebaste in his account of St. Paula's pilgrimage to the Holy Sites.

Rufinus of Aquileia, who lived in Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* dedicates one long page to what happened in Sebaste in 361-362 at the time of Julian the Apostate. The pagans in Sebaste destroyed the venerated tomb of the Precursor and dispersed his ashes, just like in Antioch where the remains of St. Babylas were taken from the oratory built in his name and transferred by the Caesar Constantius Gallus to Daphne, next to the Castalia source and the Apollo sanctuary. Part of the remains were saved by some passing monks who took them to the hegumenos, Philip, in Jerusalem. “At the times of Emperor Julian [...] in Sebaste, city of Palestine, the pagans invaded John the Baptist's sepulchre: they first dispersed his bones, but then they collected them again to burn them; they mixed the sacred ashes with dust and dispersed them all in the



countryside and villages. But for God's will, some monks came along from Philip's monastery in Jerusalem ... they mixed up with those who were collecting the bones to burn, they collected some too with carefulness and pious devotion, at the best of their ability, and they went away stealthily ... bringing the venerable remains to the saint Father Philip".

John Rufus, disciple and biographer of Peter the Iberian, bishop of Majuma in Gaza, is the first to recall a church, around 515, built on the Baptist's tomb in Sebaste: "This site, in fact, was a particular chapel of the church, enclosed within gates because it contains two urns covered in gold and silver, in front of which burn perennial lamps: one is John the Baptist's, the other is Prophet Elisha's; a throne covered with a drape where nobody ever sat is in that place". The remains were then transferred to the superior church where the pilgrims saw them in crusader times.

What lacks in these accounts is how and when St. John's remains got to Sebaste in Palestine after John was killed in the fortress of Machaerous in Transjordan, according to historian Flavius Josephus.

Apart from the important hint by Burchard that this was the cathedral, there is no mention at all in the pilgrims' accounts about the bishop's palace or a bell tower or about their locations. The village inhabitants have continued to indicate the jarasiyah, the bell tower, in a well-built four-sided building made of neatly squared blocks ten meters far from the church southern wall, beyond the small door, now blocked, that once granted access to the church from south. Later on, simple houses were built in the area, leaning on the crusader side wall of the church-mosque. The abandoned houses had been in ruins for decades and the site was inaccessible. The locals would also whisper of a jinn (a genie) which scared away the children that happened to walk there.

The miracle happened in six months of efforts carried on by the Italian restoration experts and work done by the men of the village, who had been isolated and unemployed for years in this forgotten area, and were more than happy to face the jinni to bring home food for their families. Thanks to a fund allocated by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the generosity of a professor of Nablus University who donated to the Municipality the ruins belonging to his family property, the Consul General of Italy in Jerusalem inaugurated on June 8th the new Cultural Centre of Sabastiya, with the Mayor and all the local community gathered on the stone paved courtyard before the sanctuary entrance. The Cultural Centre aims at be-



coming a meeting point and is also a small museum created by Architect Osama Hamdan. At the entrance and inside a beautiful vaulted hall some capitals are on display, which were found during the works and originally belonging to the Byzantine basilica. The cross within a circle with the apocalyptic letters Alpha and Omega, very rare in Palestinian churches, is carved on the leaves of the Corinthian capitals. The other capitals have been left in place where the crusader master builders and their modern successors used them as building materials.

The vaulted hall brought back to its splendor with its wide molded basement, connecting the church wall and the crusader building, has nothing in common with the poor rooms built by the villagers. Its technical high quality shows that it could belong to the cloister or even to the house of the Bishop, who had his seat here. This new structure could be the first important hint of this, and will be clarified with continuation of the works. In crusader times, the guesthouse would also host Muslim princes, as accounted in the memoirs of Usamah ibn Munqidh, emir of Shaizar in central Syria, who came to Jerusalem to visit his friend, the Grand Master of the Knights Templar: "I visited the tomb of Yahia, Zaccharia's son – God bless both! – in the village of Sabastiya in Nablus. After my prayers, I entered an enclosed space in front of the tomb site. I found a half-closed door, I opened it and entered the church. Inside there were ten old men, their bare heads as white as combed cotton. They looked east and had on their chests rods ending with iron stripes curling up like the back of a saddle, and they leaned on them. And they give hospitality. Their devotion moved me greatly, but at the same time I felt sorry and bitter, since I had never seen such zeal and devotion in the Muslims."

Michele Piccirillo

SABASTIYA

*Sabastiya position on the map
of the West Bank*





Aerial photograph of the Sabastiya area, the acropolis at the centre, the village on the right



*The archaeological excavations in 1908-10
(Harvard excavation at Samaria 1908-1910, Volume II: Plate 19b)*



*The archaeological excavations in 1908-10
(Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-matpc22581: G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection)*

SAMARIA - SEBASTE AT THE CENTRE OF THE WEST BANK

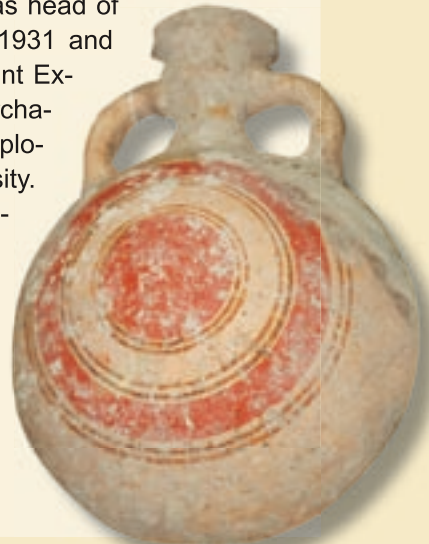
Surrounded by fertile valleys, the village of Sabastiya is about 10 km north-west of Nablus, on a hill 463 metres above sea level.

The village takes its name from Sebaste, the city founded in 25 B.C. by Herod the Great on the site of ancient Samaria. The city was rebuilt many times, while its main transformation started during the Iron Age.

THE HISTORY OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS

The site was explored by two main archaeological missions. The first, the Harvard expedition, was led initially by Gottlieb Schumacher in 1908 and then by George A. Reisner in 1909 and in 1910. The second mission, known as “the Joint Expedition”, was composed of 5 institutions, led by John W. Crowfoot, with Kathleen Kenyon as head of the acropolis excavations, between 1931 and 1935. The main institutions of the Joint Expedition were the British School of Archaeology of Jerusalem, the Palestine Exploration Fund, and the Hebrew University. In the '60s, minor archaeological investigations were directed by Fawzi Zayadine on behalf of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

*Flask in bichrome ceramic
(VIII – VII century B.C.)*





Archaeological remains on the acropolis viewed from the top of the Temple of Augustus

Archaeological remains of the acropolis walls and Omri's buildings

North view on the remains of the acropolis



The casemate defensive wall





FIRST SETTLEMENTS SINCE THE IRON AGE (AROUND 1200 B.C.)

The hill is marked by cisterns and cuts in the rock forming pits and wells of various dimensions and was probably at the centre of an important production of oil and wine during the Iron Age. The overall extension of this productive area is not yet fully known, but presumably it was a great commercial enterprise, since the capacity of the recorded pits is of around 350,000 litres.

SAMARIA - THE CITY OF OMRI

Samaria – The city of Omri

The Bible Book of 1 Kings says that Omri, king of Israel (885-874) bought the hill from Semer, built a city, with the name of Samaria from its owner, and transferred there the new capital of his kingdom from Sichern (today's Nablus). The location of the city was good, on two commercial roads, enclosed within valleys on all its sides. To reinforce commercial and political relations with the neighbouring kingdoms, Omri's son, king Ahab (874-853) married Jezebel, daughter of Et-Baal, king of Sidon, and built a temple in Samaria dedicated to the god Baal, thus expanding and enriching the city.

The Harvard expedition found ruins of a palace and a surrounding casemates wall, made by two parallel walls subdivided into small rooms. The walls superstructures have long disappeared but the ruins show how the building style was typical of the Phoenicians during the Iron Age. Among the decorative ornaments brought to light during the excavations, there are a number of fragments from ivory plaques, of Phoenician production and Egyptian influence.



View from the Hellenistic tower



In the Hellenistic tower, all the stones are set on the head to strengthen the defense





THE CONQUEST OF THE EMPIRES

During the VIII century B.C., the Assyrian Empire conquered the entire region. According to some Assyrian inscriptions, Sargon II conquered the city during the first year of his kingdom (721 B.C.), expelled the citizens, rebuilt the city *“more splendid than ever”*, repopulated it with people from other conquered territories (Arabs) and made one of his Officials local governor.

After the conquest, the city, already part of the Assyrian Empire, continued to play a dominant role in the North of Palestine, even though just few finds date back to that period as well as to the following periods, the Babylonian (VII-VI centuries) and the Persian (V-IV century).

In 331 B.C., Alexander the Great conquered the city and settled there some thousands of Macedonians soldiers and the city became Hellenistic. Three big round towers, dating back to that period, have been discovered together with a massive defensive wall with squared towers.

The Macedonian defensive wall was partly destroyed by the Hasmonean King John Hyrcanus in 108 B.C., when the city was conquered and destroyed. Probably recolonized by his son, Alexander Jannaeus, the city went back to its previous inhabitants and their descendants under General Pompeius Magnus, after the conquest of Jerusalem in 63 B.C., and was annexed to the Roman province of Syria. The city was rebuilt in 57-55 B.C. by Gabinius, the Roman governor.



The staircase of the Roman Temple of Augustus



Children from the village in the Roman basilica



SEBASTE

THE HERODIAN TRANSFORMATION

In 30 B.C. Emperor Augustus gave the city to Herod the Great, who called it Sebaste in his honour (Augusta in Greek) and soon after started the construction of the main buildings, including a temple dedicated to Rome and Augustus inside a wide enclosure, a stadium, a theatre and other public buildings. He repopulated the city and brought in 6000 new inhabitants; veterans who had fought for him. He gave them good lands, a special statute and fortified the city with bigger walls.

The city was already connected with Herod, having been a refuge for his mother and his children, who had been helped and rescued from Masada. In 37 B.C., in Samaria, Herod married Mariamne, descendant of the Hasmonean dynasty and the great priests of Jerusalem. After Herod's death, Sebaste passed on to his son Archelaus and remained among his possessions until he lost his power and was exiled by Augustus in 6 A.D. .



The Roman colonnaded street



The theatre

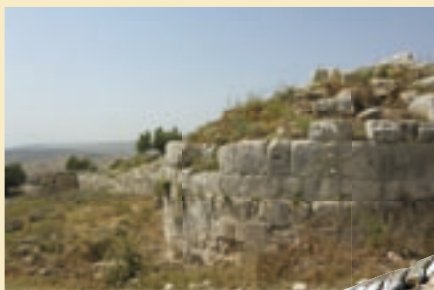


THE ROMAN COLONY

The city was rebuilt in the II century A.D. by Emperor Septimius Severus, when it received the title of Roman colony *Lucia Septimia Sebaste*. During the battles for supremacy of the Empire between Septimius Severus and Pescennio Nigro, Sebaste fought with the former who rewarded it with the status of colony.

The notable ruins of the present archaeological site of Sabastiya belong to that period: the Augustus, the Theatre, the Temple of Kore, the Stadium were all rebuilt monumentally and the city area was extended with a forum, basilica and colonnaded street.

All the buildings were rebuilt using local hard limestone and were decorated with colonnades, with Attic basements, monolithic shafts and Corinthian capitals. The city was surrounded by a new defensive wall with massive towers connected with the western and northern gates.



The tower of the Roman city wall

Sarcophagi of the Roman tomb of the II century A.D.





The mosaic of the IV/V century A.D. discovered during the excavations in July 2009, south of John the Baptist's tomb.

Frescoes in the church of "the Invention of John the Baptist's head"



THE ARRIVAL OF CHRISTIANITY ERA AND THE REMAINS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Christianity arrived in Sebaste at its very origins. In the region of Samaria, the preaching of deacon Philip was soon to be followed by the Apostles Peter and John. During the first Christian period, the tradition began about the remains of John the Baptist being buried in Sebaste, next to prophets Elisha and Obadiah's tombs. We do not know how and when St. John's body arrived in Sebaste. According to Flavius Josephus, John had been beheaded by Herod Antipas in Machaerus fortress, in East Jordan. His head was handed over by Salome to her mother Herodias and we have to suppose that John's disciples, having taken what remained of the body, left the tetrarchy, where Herodias could still persecute them. During the first centuries of Christianity, John's disciples, called the Baptists, were everywhere in Samaria.

Two sanctuaries were dedicated to the Baptist. The first, his sepulchre, is in the current village, once just outside the city walls. A second small basilica, built in the V century, was excavated by the archaeologists on the southern side of the acropolis. According to the Orthodox-Christian tradition, it marks the spot where John the Baptist was beheaded.

The weli (sanctuary) of Sheikh Sah'le, rebuilt on an ancient building, which according to a still visible Greek inscription had been built by Sebaste Byzantine bishop in honour of prophet Elijah.

The Byzantine church of "the Invention of John the Baptist's head"





*Prophet Yahia's mosque
(St. John's Crusader
cathedral)*



*Inner courtyard of the Ottoman palace
(XVIII century), Qasr al Kaid.*



*Detail from the traditional lime
work on the Ottoman palace
(XVIII century), Qasr al Kaid*



*Trademarks on John
the Baptist's church,
from the Crusader time*





REVIVAL OF CLASSIC MONUMENTS DURING THE FIRST ISLAMIC PERIOD

Sebaste peacefully submitted to the Islamic army led by 'Amr ibn al'As in 634 A.D. During the first Islamic period, when the daily life of the local community went on without major changes, the degradation of the classic monuments (pagan temples, the theatre, the stadium) that had already started in the Byzantine period, continued because they were no longer in use. There were nonetheless clear monumental traces of the ancient Sebaste, i.e. the colonnaded street that, just like in other ancient cities, was occupied by commercial activities. Along the street, a folk district developed and several ruins of domestic and industrial buildings were found, including a glass factory.

The Crusaders' Sancti Johannes Sebaste hamlet

The Crusaders occupied Sebaste and the entire Samaria region in 1099, soon after conquering Jerusalem, and revitalized the episcopacy under the supervision of the archbishop of Caesarea on the Sea. Here they rebuilt the cathedral on the tomb of John the Baptist, upon the ruins of the Byzantine church and they built the Sancti Johannis Sebaste hamlet, a fortified rural settlement, part of the King of Jerusalem's domains.

In September 1184, Saladin led an army to Sebaste; but the bishop negotiated the safety of both the city and the church, together with the safety of all who took refuge there, in exchange for the release of 80 Muslim prisoners.

The second Islamic conquest

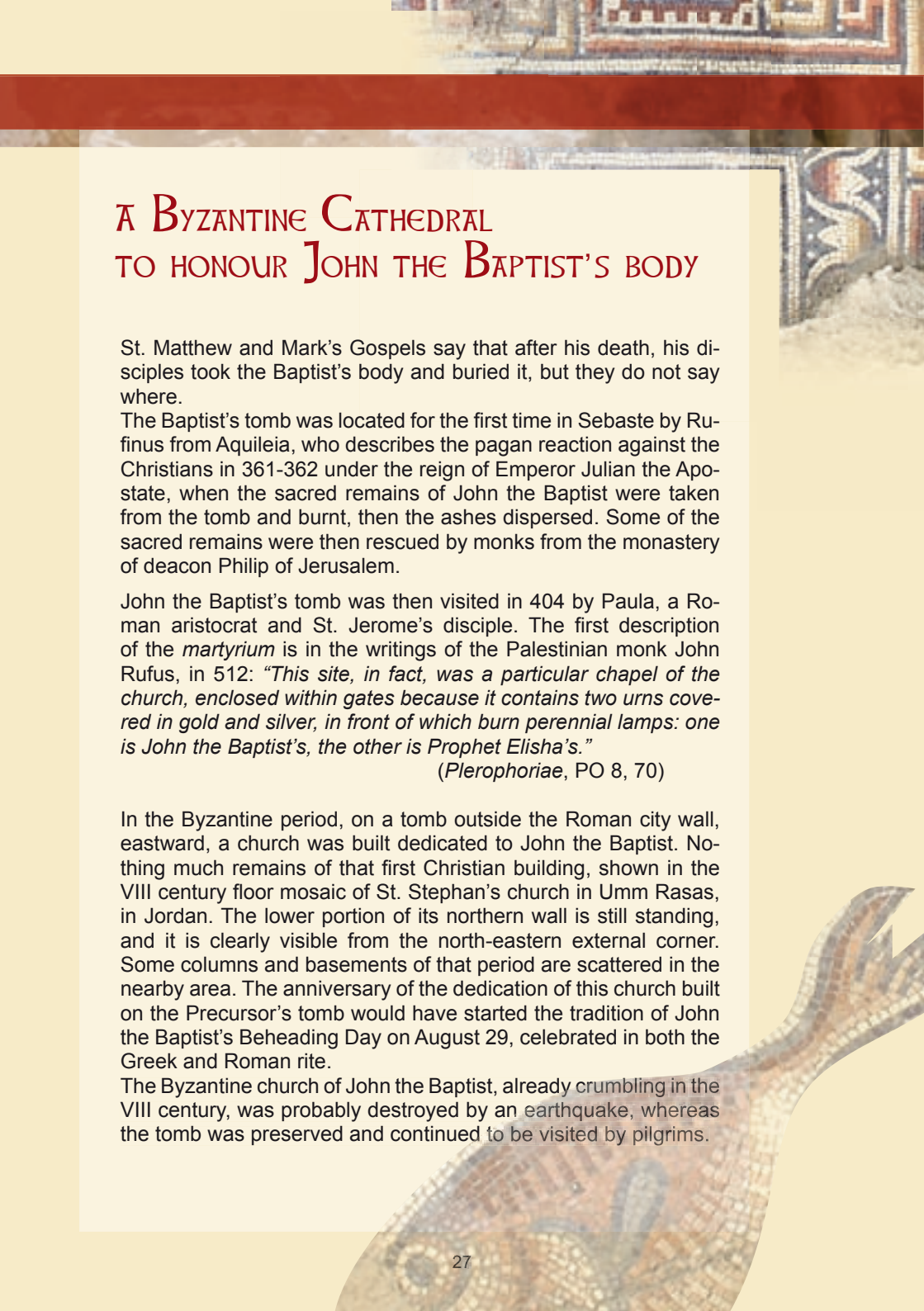
In July 1187 Sebaste was occupied by Saladin's nephew, Husam ed-Din Muhammad. The cathedral was turned into a mosque, dedicated to prophet Yahia, the Muslim name for John the Baptist. Several houses from the Ottoman period (1517-1917) are still in the village. The most important is Qasr Al Kaid. The building is made of an internal courtyard and several houses nearby. Stones from previous times were used to build it.



Sebaste Byzantine church reproduced in the mosaic of St. Stephan's church in Umm Rasas (Jordan)



Detail from the Byzantine mosaic discovered during excavations.



A BYZANTINE CATHEDRAL TO HONOUR JOHN THE BAPTIST'S BODY

St. Matthew and Mark's Gospels say that after his death, his disciples took the Baptist's body and buried it, but they do not say where.

The Baptist's tomb was located for the first time in Sebaste by Rufinus from Aquileia, who describes the pagan reaction against the Christians in 361-362 under the reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate, when the sacred remains of John the Baptist were taken from the tomb and burnt, then the ashes dispersed. Some of the sacred remains were then rescued by monks from the monastery of deacon Philip of Jerusalem.

John the Baptist's tomb was then visited in 404 by Paula, a Roman aristocrat and St. Jerome's disciple. The first description of the *martyrium* is in the writings of the Palestinian monk John Rufus, in 512: *"This site, in fact, was a particular chapel of the church, enclosed within gates because it contains two urns covered in gold and silver, in front of which burn perennial lamps: one is John the Baptist's, the other is Prophet Elisha's."*

(Plerophoriae, PO 8, 70)

In the Byzantine period, on a tomb outside the Roman city wall, eastward, a church was built dedicated to John the Baptist. Nothing much remains of that first Christian building, shown in the VIII century floor mosaic of St. Stephan's church in Umm Rasas, in Jordan. The lower portion of its northern wall is still standing, and it is clearly visible from the north-eastern external corner. Some columns and basements of that period are scattered in the nearby area. The anniversary of the dedication of this church built on the Precursor's tomb would have started the tradition of John the Baptist's Beheading Day on August 29, celebrated in both the Greek and Roman rite.

The Byzantine church of John the Baptist, already crumbling in the VIII century, was probably destroyed by an earthquake, whereas the tomb was preserved and continued to be visited by pilgrims.



The right aisle of the crusader cathedral



Walls and pillars remains of the cathedral



Crusader trademarks on the stones

THE MARKS ON THE STONES OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CRUSADER CATHEDRAL

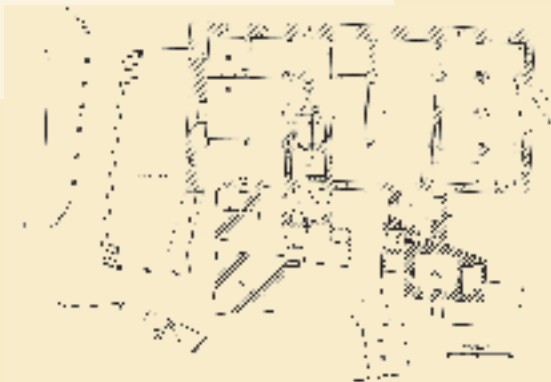
In 1145, William I, patriarch of Jerusalem, reported the casual finding of the saint's remains and granted a 40-day indulgence to all those who would contribute to rebuild the church. From that moment, the collection of money to rebuild the new John the Baptist's cathedral started.

The cathedral rebuilt by the Crusaders, second in dimensions only to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, had three aisles, an internal transept and a triple apse. The present access door is a further addition to the original portal of the cathedral, which probably had a monumental arch with historiated capitals, four of which are on display, since 1897, in the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul. The ceiling was weighted on composite pillars and the stone vaults were supported by a system of transverse and diagonal ribs. A row of buttresses pillared the southern wall and helped support the cathedral vaults, but none were on the northern wall, given its width.

The stones of the external and internal walls of the church are finely carved and carry trademarks of the artisans who carved them.

All the superior vaults have fallen, but a great part of the external walls and some pillars still stand. By the end of the XIX century, the decorated part of the apse was still visible.

On the north the map of the Crusader cathedral with John the Baptist's crypt at the centre, and the mosque inserted in 1892 on the east





Stairs leading to John the Baptist's tomb.

Orthophoto of the floor inserted in the map of John the Baptist's crypt. Remains of the floor in opus sectile are still visible.



THE PROPHETS' TOMB

Starting from today's floor level, in the third bay of the central nave, under two bitter orange trees, a small dome, built after the cathedral was turned into a mosque, gives access to a narrow staircase leading to the Roman tomb. The tomb is composed of a barrel-vaulted chamber and six sepulchral niches arranged in two rows on the southern wall. In the lower row, tradition tells us the tomb of John the Baptist rests, between the prophets Elisha and Obadiah. The floor in opus sectile dates back probably to the Byzantine period, but the current arrangement of the tomb dates back to the crusader period.

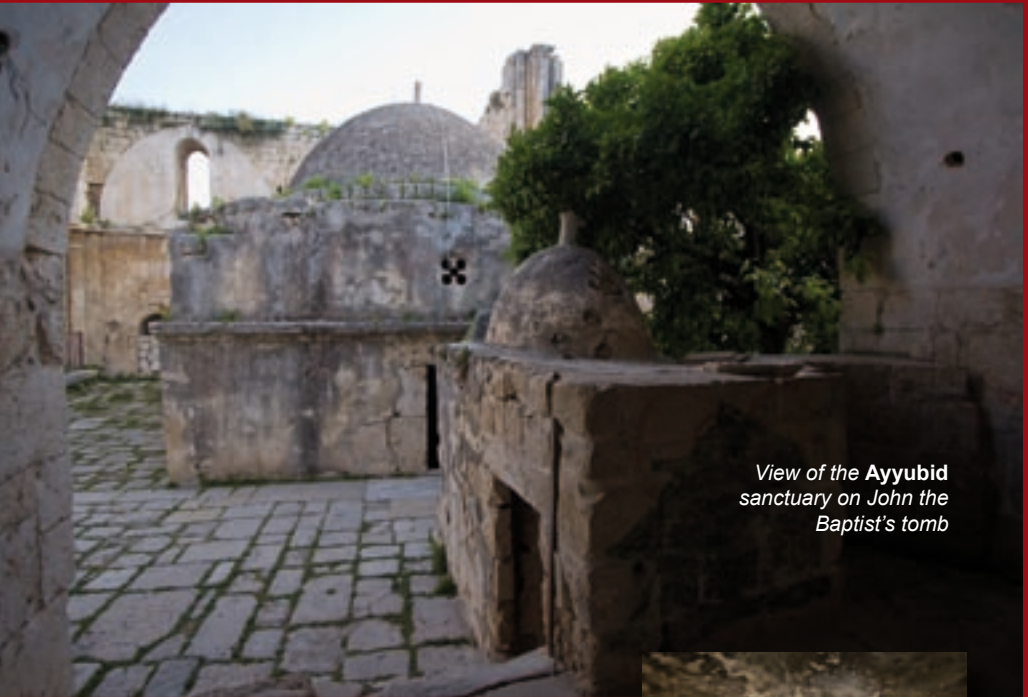
In 1185 the city was visited by the Greek monk John Phocas, who relates that the crypt by the altar where John the Baptist was allegedly beheaded preserves the sarcophagi of the saint's parents, Zaccharia and Elisabeth, while the ashes of John the Baptist and Elisha are in the superior church, in two sarcophagi carved in white marble.

Access to the crypt of John the Baptist's tomb with Roman door



Interior of the crypt of the tomb of John the Baptist and other prophets. The tomb is located in the central niche, inferior row.





View of the **Ayyubid** sanctuary on John the Baptist's tomb



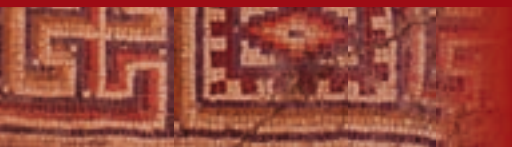
The mosque mihrab in the south aisle



Crusader sculptures



Marble plaques from the Byzantine cathedral in the sanctuary



THE MOSQUE OF SAYDNA YAHIA (PROPHET JOHN THE BAPTIST)

The nephew of Saladin, Husam ed-Din Muhammad, in 1187 partially transformed the cathedral, building a dome on the crypt of John the Baptist's tomb, and turning the right aisle into a mosque by adding a *mihrab* (a niche pointing to the Mecca direction for praying). The dome construction has two small rooms. In the first room there are three wide fragments of marble plaques, inserted in the western wall, which could belong to the Byzantine church presbytery, and two crusader sculptures that supported probably some architectural structures.

Four more sculptures supporting arches, three stylized male faces and a figure holding a snake, were preserved there until, after imposing a curfew on the village, the Israeli authorities, escorted by soldiers, moved them to the Rockefeller Museum of Jerusalem on the occasion of the Second Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin East (SSCLE) in July 1987. The sculptures were never returned.

In the following centuries, John the Baptist's tomb continued to be visited by Christian and Muslim pilgrims. Among the most interesting descriptions by visiting pilgrims, the one by deacon Domenico Laffi from Bologna, in 1679, relates that in the building Christians would pray on one side and Muslims on the other.

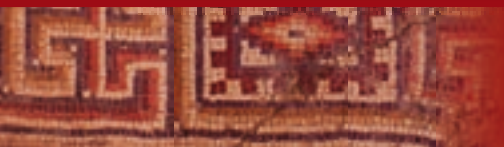
Around 1892, under the Ottoman Sultan Abd el Hamid II, the mosque that had so far occupied the two bays west of the southern nave was destroyed and a new mosque was built along the presbytery on the east side. The new building, still in use today, brought to the demolition of what remained of the apse, the dangerous portions of the vaults and the consolidation of the remaining structure.



In the Roman forum square

*Tourists visiting the Crusader
Hall preserved within
the project*

*Archaeological excavations
of January 2011*





A PROJECT OF CONSERVATION, MEMORY AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

For several years now, the ATS, the Holy Land Association of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land, has been active in Sebastia working to preserve and enhance its extraordinary archaeological and cultural heritage. Their activities, funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fondazione Cariplo, Lombardy Region and the City of Rome, support the conservation of the historical centre through a continuous vocational training offered to the local community and continue to develop the historical and cultural heritage to benefit the local population. The conservation action has already avoided the fall and abandonment of several Crusader buildings inside the historical centre.

The dangerous buildings have been renovated, respecting their historical value, to welcome social activities promoted by the Municipality of Sabastiya and the Palestinian association Mosaic Centre, i.e. a youth centre, a guesthouse, a tourist information point, a local-product shop and a centre for studies and documentation.

The extraordinary cultural heritage of the village has always drawn visitors, starting with the first Christian pilgrims in the IV century, but since 1987, with the aggravation of the political situation, the tourist flow has diminished drastically. The project helped to change this trend, by building new facilities and infrastructures for the visitors and by promoting the village, both locally and internationally.

It is clear that the unstable political situation does not encourage interventions in this field. This concrete difficulty shall not prevent us from hoping there will be better conditions in the future. The conservation of memory and identity is particularly important in conflict situations and it is our duty to preserve this heritage to the benefit also of future generations.



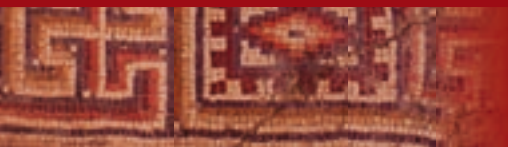
Worker from the village working in the guesthouse



Workers in the new chapel



Workers in the first Crusader hall





CONSTRUCTION SITE AND CONSERVATION

ATS started dealing with the village's poor conditions back in 2005, after some on-site surveys –with the scientific support of Prof. Michele Piccirillo from the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum – that had confirmed the value of the buildings and the urgent need of preservation. Some projects launched by the Italian Cooperation allowed the first works of conservation to begin recovering a good part of the historical centre.

Since January 2010 the village activity is supported by Fondazione Cariplo, The intervention restarted the historical centre conservation in order to widen the preserved area, enlarge the guesthouse, and open a shop to sell local products and a tourist information point.

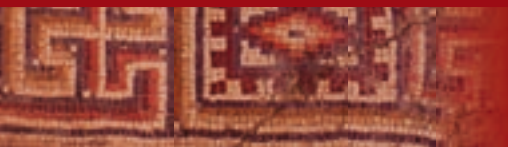
The unsafe buildings have been strengthened, the surfaces have been cleaned and some streets and open spaces have been repaved with stones. The adaptive efforts to improve the safety of the historical buildings is based on the reversibility principle, employing materials compatible with the original ones and with the environment, trying not to modify their original aspect and the historical phases of the buildings.

Throughout the project, the spaces around the tomb of John the Baptist and the above dome structure have also been documented and preserved.

The conservation works have been carried on by a team of workers from the village, properly trained to work on historical buildings, led by experts from the Mosaic Centre Jericho.



The Crusader chapel discovered in 2008



THE FIRST CRUSADER CHAPEL

Usama b. Munqidh, emir of Shaizar, by Apamea, describing his visit to the site between 1140 and 1143, relates about a ceremony officiated by the monks, which drew his attention: *“I visited the tomb of Yahia, Zaccharia’s son – God bless both! – in the village of Sabastiya in Nablus. After my prayers, I entered an enclosed space in front of the tomb site. I found a half-closed door, I opened it and entered the church. Inside there were ten old men, their bare heads as white as combed cotton. ... Their devotion moved me greatly, but at the same time I felt sorry and bitter, since I had never seen such zeal and devotion in the Muslims.”*

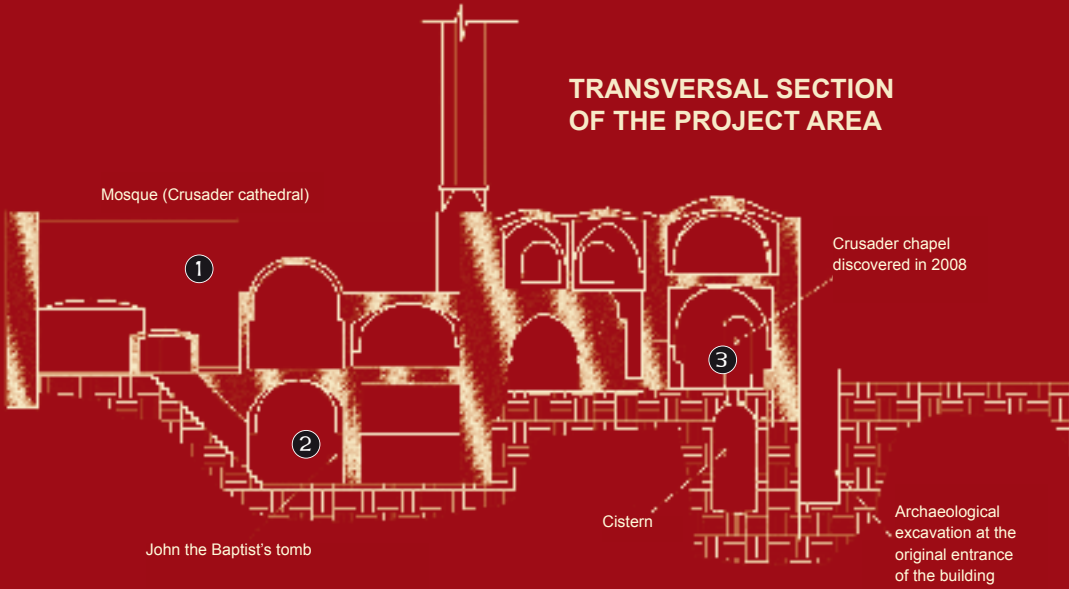
(Kitab al Asa, 1140-43: 528-9)

This description testifies that at that time a church already existed nearby the tomb well before the construction of the great Crusader church. As a matter of fact, during the 2008 excavations, the remains of a massive fortification came to light, together with a spiral staircase and a chapel, probably dating back to the first Crusader period. In summer 2009 two fragments of floor mosaic of exquisite making came also to light, probably from the Byzantine monastery next to the church.

The chapel has a rectangular base with an apse on the east side and is surrounded by an inclined fortification, built with big stones and columns and capitals from the Roman period. Its basement is 7m under the actual level and stands on ruins that might be Byzantine. On the northern side, the spiral staircase demonstrates that the building was originally on different levels.

The different floor stratifications of the building show a continuous change of use during the centuries.

TRANSVERSAL SECTION OF THE PROJECT AREA



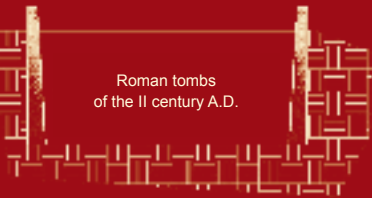
*The crusader hall
preserved by the project*



MAP OF THE MOSQUE (CRUSADER CATHEDRAL) AND THE CHAPEL DISCOVERED IN 2008

LEGEND

- ① Mosque (Crusader cathedral)
- ② John the Baptist's tomb
- ③ Crusader chapel
- ④ Spiral staircase
- ⑤ Fortification





Carved stone in the southern wall of the cathedral

*Roman capital with cross sculpted
in the Byzantine period*

*Roman capital discovered during
the excavations*



CAPITALS AND COLUMNS ARE RECYCLED DURING THE CENTURIES

At the entrance and inside the beautiful vaulted hall next to the south wall of the Crusader church, some capitals are on display that were found during the excavations and that surely belong to the Byzantine basilica. The cross within a circle with the apocalyptic letters *Alpha* and *Omega*, very rare in Palestinian churches, is carved on the leaves of the Corinthian capitals. Other capitals and several columns have been left in place, built in the fortification, where the crusader builder masters and their modern successors had reused them as construction materials.

The capitals and the columns came from the monuments of the Roman city and had been re-used and adapted to a religious employ in the Byzantine church.

Among the ruins excavated in the chapel, a fragment of an isolated historiated capital came to light, dating back to the crusader period, representing a figure playing an instrument. It is probably part of the figurative plan of the Crusader cathedral portal, representing Herod's banquet and Salome's dance. Four other capitals are on display at the Istanbul Museum.

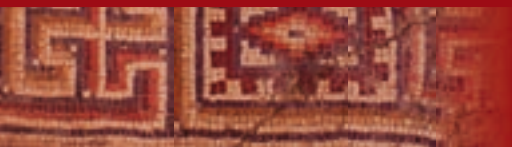


Roman capital with the Alpha and Omega symbols sculpted in the Byzantine period





A woman from the village processes olives



THE FRUITS OF HISTORY

The project supports some vocational training activities for the local population, particularly women and the young, through an integrated program enhancing local resources in relation to the cultural heritage and the economy.

After research on the local specialties produced by women villagers, a series of meetings were organised with the local women association, to improve the organoleptic qualities and the packaging of the local products.

Fruit for jams and olive oil for soap come exclusively from the fruit gardens of the village, supporting both the family and the rural economy. The packaging states the reason for production, the origin of the product and its social aim.

Recently we have started to support the reproduction of ancient clay oil lamps, copies of the ones found in the local archaeological site, to be sold also in the local shop. The activity is a way to highlight all the city historical periods, but at the same time helps defeating the illegal sale of archaeological finds.



*"John the Baptist's jam"
produced in the village*



*Olive oil soap
produced in the village*



*Tourists buying
local products*

WELCOME TO SEBASTE



Girls from the village during a folk play

Tour to the Byzantine sanctuary



“Ahlan Wa Sahlan” welcome to Sebaste

The historical structures along the southern side of the cathedral have been recovered, and host a tourist information centre. It offers tourist information and services and manages the guesthouse located inside the preserved historical buildings and in some rooms offered by the families.

The guesthouse was built in response to the need to create infrastructures to host the tourists and offer services, but at the same time it creates jobs and guarantees the necessary maintenance of the newly discovered sites and the preserved buildings.

To enhance other historical and natural elements of the area and make them known, three on-foot itineraries around the cities have been planned. The itineraries last some hours each and include the Islamic-Byzantine sanctuary, the entire ancient northern wall and the train station of the Ottoman period.



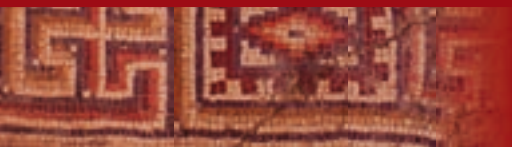
*Breakfast terrace in the guesthouse.
Room and bathroom in the guesthouse.*





A villager

*Music concert
in the village
narrow streets*





WORKING WITH THE PEOPLE

Without adequate laws and regulations, the problems related to the responsibility and the control over the conservation and maintenance of unprotected historical buildings are complex and go beyond the possible interventions of a single project. The long and frequent discussions with the different parties of the intervention (the Municipality, local associations, the regional office of the Department for Antiquities, owners and tenants of the buildings) gave us the opportunity to create a plan responding to everybody's needs, safeguarding the cultural heritage and benefiting the community. This decision sharing process has had a very positive impact on the local population and is one of the best outcomes of the project.

Given the difficult economic situation in Palestine, the project aimed at revitalizing the city economy by creating job opportunities for the locals, hiring artisans and specialized and non-specialized workers in the construction sites, but also buying products and tools locally, thus helping the small local commercial enterprises and shop-owners.

The cultural heritage as identity and memory, with their sense of belonging and remembrance, plays indeed an educational, cultural and social role, but is at the same time an important part of the Palestinian resources.

Since the very beginning, the main objective of the project was not the simple restoration of one building. The several interventions carried on bit by bit have acquired their own value primarily in the possibility to launch a sustainable activity within the village and, given the quality of the intervention, the main aim was to bring the local population closer to their cultural heritage so that it could become part of the cultural, social and economic life of the entire community.



Girls from the mosaic class



Girls and boys attending the local tour guide training



Kids draw historical monuments

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE : THE YOUNG

To involve the young, a number of training and awareness-raising activities have been organized.

A course to train local tourist guides has given the youth of the village the basic historical and artistic information to guide with expertise and knowledge the pilgrims and the tourists who, slowly but in rising numbers, are coming back to visit Sabastiya. Many local boys and girls have attended classes on the different historical periods and participated in field tours.

To raise the awareness and draw the attention of the children to the cultural heritage, during the project a workshop on drawing was given the title “Let’s read a monument – looking for the marks of the past on the stones”. It took place through classes about the main notions of drawing and visits in the open air, when the children could sketch their favourite monument.

Another workshop was organized involving the male and female elementary schools of Sabastiya. The children, with the assistance of mosaic experts from the Mosaic Centre, have participated in all the phases of making a mosaic in the traditional way, with the coloured stones available in the area.



Mosaic art in the local product shop

OPEN CONSTRUCTION SITE



*A villager visits
the conservation yard*

School visit to the project



To create awareness in the local population toward safeguarding the cultural heritage, the preservation and maintenance work must keep a constant relation with the local community and the conservation yard must be open to the public, to show everybody what actions must be taken to preserve a collective property.

Following this philosophy of dialogue between the cultural heritage and the conservation activities with the people, our site is always open to the local community and we have hence received many visits during the implementation of the project. The main reason behind these visits by the locals was above all curiosity to know and see what was happening and how the site was slowly being transformed. The work team was always ready to welcome visitors, explaining the different kind of activities taking place in the yard and the reasons behind methods and choices.

There were also many visits by schools and tourists coming from other cities and villages in the region, as well as foreign tourists.



Father Michele Piccirillo leads an Italian group



Local authorities' visit to the project



Presentation of the 2 videos introducing and closing the photo exhibition.

THE FRUITS OF HISTORY. TRAVEL TO SEBASTE

A travel to Sebastia, through the eyes and the stories of the youth who have found hope again, thanks to the projects promoted by ATS pro Terra Sancta, NGO of the Custody of the Holy Land: from the restoration of the historical centre, to the new guesthouse for tourists and pilgrims, and the first attempt at creating solidarity agritourism in the Palestinian Territories. Suhaib, 30 years old, university degree in archaeology, today a tourist guide, tells us about his lucky destiny, in a context where the majority of young Palestinians do not have a job or a future. Mona, a Muslim, like the other 3000 inhabitants of the village, wanted to attend university after meeting those who taught her about the rich history of Sebaste and made her love it. Rasmi, 30 years old, once an unskilled worker, became a mosaicist and is now the heart and soul of the mosaic laboratory next to the tomb of John the Baptist. Suhaib, Mona and Rasmi are just some of the people who relate the slow and difficult rebirth of Sebaste, an exciting sign of a hope that can become true also in the heart of Palestine.





THE LAST PROPHET - FOLLOWING THE STEPS OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

Following the steps of St. John the Baptist, in a fascinating intertwining of places, stones and the Bible, with an exceptional guide: father Frédéric Manns – Bible expert of the Custody of the Holy Land – brings the public through a fascinating discovery of the Baptist, the prophet par excellence. The journey starts in 'Ain Karem, the birthplace of the Baptist to follow the steps of Mary, Elisabeth and Zaccharia, understand the mysterious childhood of the Baptist – very young hermit – through the Jude's desert up to the Jordan River, where the Precursor ends his mission, christening Jesus and pointing the Messiah to the world. The last prophet withdraws with humility: allows his disciples to follow Jesus and testifies his faith till the very end with his martyrdom. But his disciples do not forget their first master, bring his remains to Sebaste and give him the proper burial for a prophet.

Alessandra Buzzetti



SABASTIYA

THE FRUITS OF HISTORY
AND THE MEMORY OF
JOHN THE BAPTIST

A PROJECT OF ARCHAEOLOGY, CONSERVATION AND LOCAL COMMUNITY IN PALESTINE

