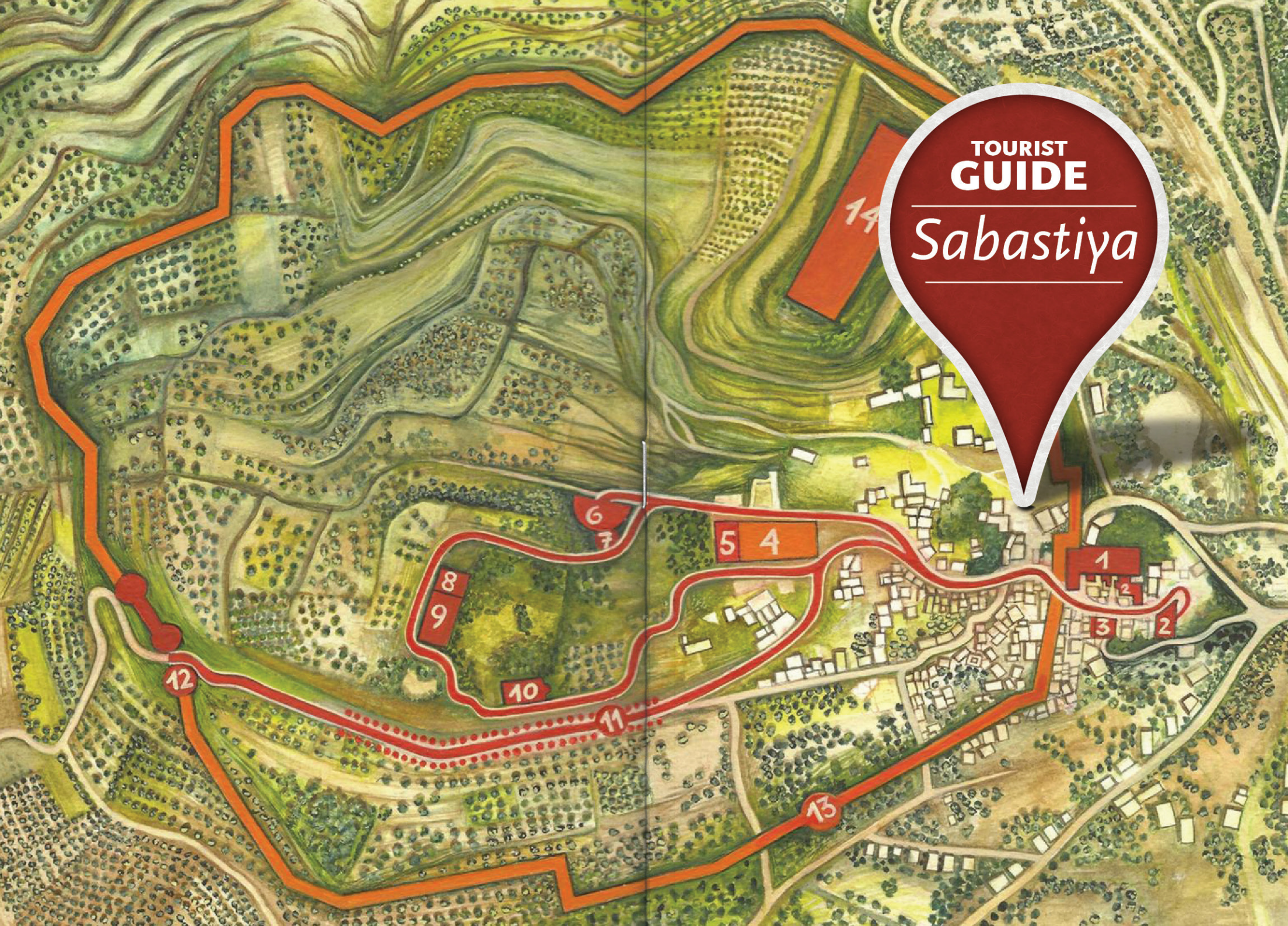


TOURIST
GUIDE

Sabastiya



Tourist guide - Sabastiya — 2nd Edition

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The drawings by Sandra Borgogno are after Sabastiya Children's book produced by the PMSP Program of the Italian General Consulate in Jerusalem in 2012





Location

The village of Sabastiya is located in the heart of the West Bank, some 80 km north of Jerusalem and 10 km northwest of Nablus, on a hill at 463 m above sea level.

Archaeological remains of the ancient city of Samaria have been uncovered on the summit of the hill

and the present village occupies the eastern and southern slopes.

The village is surrounded by fertile valleys, in which olives, almonds, figs and grapes are cultivated. Cereals, together with vegetables and other fruit trees, are grown in the area to the west of the village.

Sabastiya on the map of the West Bank





Roman columned street

How to reach Sabastiya

From Jerusalem/Ramallah:

by car: it is a 60/45 minute drive. Drive N on Rd 60 in the direction of Nablus. After the village of Huwara turn L in W direction following Rd 60. After 11 km you come to a junction where Rd 60 meets Rd 55; turn L here and immediately R (signs to Shave Shomron). Continue on Rd 60 for 6 further km and turn R as Rd 60 turns off the main road (signs to Shave Shomron). Almost immediately after the turn-off you reach a sign indicating Shave Shomron to the L: ignore this sign and continue straight towards the next turn to the left (signs to Jenin). After passing the wall of Shave Shomron on your left, take the second turn-off on your R (clearly sign posted to Sabastiya). Once you enter the village keep L, following the road upwards until you arrive at the central town square of the village.

If you prefer to pass through Nablus, after entering the check point follow the main road that crosses the city towards northwest. After few km turn to the right (signs to Jenin). After passing the wall of Shave Shomron on your left, take the second turn-off on your R (clearly sign posted to Sabastiya). Once you enter the village keep L, following the road upwards until you arrive at the central town square of the village

by bus: during daytime there are frequent and regular bus services leaving from East Jerusalem (Musrara square) to Ramallah. From Ramallah plenty of inter-city service taxis go to Nablus and from there to Sabastiya.

From Galilee: by car, it is a 30 minute drive, depending from the check points. We suggest you to drive through the Enav/Taybah check point to go out or Jenin to go in.



Climate

For most of the year the climate in Sabastiya remains enjoyable. Winter season lasts for three months. In the remaining part of the year, the climate is moderate. The hottest months in the climate are the months of July and August. The summer season is relieved by the gentle wind that blows from the Mediterranean Sea and although the days can be very hot, the evenings are cool. The temperature in the summer season reaches up to 35° C and in the winter season may sometimes fall to zero. Rainfall is very restricted and the months in which there is major rainfall are from November to February. In the months of April, May and in the middle part of June, the people of Palestine are affected by the hot, sandy, dry and dusty Khamseen

winds, which originate from the Arabian Desert.

Visitors and tourists to Sabastiya are advised to wear light clothes and hats in the summer and sweaters in the evening and night. During the winter season visitors should be well equipped with warm clothes and windproof jackets.

Female tourists are well advised to keep shoulders and legs covered. For both men and women wearing shorts is not recommended in all seasons.

Population and languages

The great majority of 3,000 people living in Sabastiya is Muslim and the language spoken is Arabic.

English is quite commonly understood.



The landscape from above the theatre

1908-10.

The basilica.
To l. of apse



From Samaria to Sabastiya

The origin of the name of the modern-day village of Sabastiya is the Herodian city of Sebaste, founded in 25 BC by Herod the Great on the site of ancient Samaria. The city on the summit of the hill was rebuilt several times through its history, where the foundations of later buildings had often sunk into the earlier strata down to the bedrock. The site was created by scarping, leveling, and terracing the

summit. Its major transformation began during the Iron Age and continued until Herod the Great built enormous retaining walls on the northern side of the summit to support the extension of the forecourt of a temple dedicated to Augustus. Only Roman period structures remain present in the area and little trace of earlier buildings are visible above the surface.

Sabastiya from the mosque (c. 1900 to 1920)



The history of excavations

The site was excavated by two major archaeological expeditions. The first was the Harvard Expedition, initially directed by Gottlieb Schumacher in 1908 and then by George A. Reisner in 1909-1910. The second expedition was the "Joint Expedition", a comprising consortium of five academic institutions directed by John W. Crowfoot from 1931-1935, with Kathleen Kenyon responsible for the excavations of the summit. The "Joint Expedition" institutions were Harvard University, the British Academy and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, the Palestine Exploration Fund, and the Hebrew University. In addition, small-scale excavations directed by Fawzi Zayadine were conducted in the 1960s on behalf of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.



The archaeological excavations in 1908-10

Since 2005 archaeological excavations and conservation activities have been carried out in the old core of the village by the Mosaic Centre in cooperation with the Italian NGO ATS Pro Terra Sancta, Al Quds University and Sabastiya Municipality.

The archaeological excavations in 2012



The early settlements

The entire upper city is marked by cisterns and rock-cutting activities by which the rock was hollowed out into cups and pits of various dimensions, and it appears to have served as an extensive wine and oil production centre since the Iron Age. The Harvard Expedition documented at least 30 bottle-shaped cisterns on the summit alone and the Joint Expedition recorded another six; many more cisterns, however, remained undocumented. It is clear that this group of rock-cut installations had an industrial purpose. The Harvard Expedition interpreted the variety of rock-cuttings as related primarily to olive oil production. For example, mortars and platforms served for crushing and pressing the fruit, vats held the collection and separation of the oil, basins stored the oil, and sockets held the oil jars. The period of these rock-cutting activities was dated by the Joint

Expedition, on the bases of the pottery, to the Early Bronze Age. However, a recent evaluation of the material led to the association of six bottle-shaped cisterns and several wine and oil installations with the early Iron Age pottery from the 11th and the 10th centuries BC. In fact, ca. 100 recorded bottle-shaped cisterns dotting the rocky summit of the city and many more that remain unexcavated can be associated with the Iron Age, as well as related rock-cut presses for producing oil and wine. The full extent of this oil and wine production centre is yet unknown, but it must have been a major commercial enterprise. The production capacity of only the documented cisterns is estimated at ca. 350,000 liters.

Examples of bottle-shaped cisterns and associated rock-cuts were also recorded in the area of the Temple of Kore, the lower Terrace, and the Stadium.

Rock-cut installation for olive oil production under the Temple of August



Samaria. The Capital of Omri's Kingdom

According to the Bible, Omri, King of Israel, (885-874 BC) bought the hill of Samaria from Shemer and moved his capital there, calling it Samaria after the name of its owner. The hill of Samaria was a prominent landmark, commanding two main routes; and, surrounded by valleys on all sides, it was easily defensible. To reinforce commercial and political links with neighboring countries, Omri's son and successor, Ahab (874-853), married the Phoenician

Princess Jezebel, daughter of the King Ethbaal of Tyre, and built a temple in Samaria dedicated to the god Baal. The city grew larger and richer.

The Harvard Expedition found the remains of a palace and a casemate enclosure wall (two parallel walls divided into rooms). Additional remains of a lower ring of fortifications and an earlier enclosure wall on the summit came to light in the Joint Expedition excavations.



Phoenician Princess Jezebel by Sandra Borgogno

The archaeologists of the Harvard and Joint Expeditions, taking biblical texts as historical references, proposed that the buildings dated back to the Israelite domination in Samaria that lasted from the foundation of the city by King Omri until it was conquered and destroyed by Assyrians in 721 BC.



Remains on the summit



Jezebel The story of Jezebel is recounted in several brief passages in the Bible. According to the 1st and 2nd Kings, which details an intense religious and political struggle for power during the ninth century B.C., the princess Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal, King of Tyre, married the newly crowned King Ahab, son of Omri. In Samaria, she brought her foreign gods and goddesses – and convinced Ahab to built temples of Baal. To stop her, prophet Elisha had one of his servants anoint Jehu as king to overthrow the house of Ahab. Realizing that Jehu was on his way to kill her, Jezebel calmly prepared for his arrival, painting her eyes with kohl, dressing her hair while waiting at the window. Jehu incited her eunuchs to murder the queen by throwing her out of the window and left her corpse to be eaten by dogs.



Samaria siege

The Assyrians drastically transform the society of Samaria

In the course of the eighth century, the Assyrian Empire took control over the entire region. Assyrian imperial policies involved mass deportations and the transference of large numbers of people both into and out of Palestine. According to the Assyrian Annals inscriptions, it was King Sargon II who conquered Samaria in the first year of his reign (721 BC), deported its population (27,290 people), rebuilt the city “more splendid than before”, repopulated it with peoples from his conquered lands (Arabs), and installed one of his officials as governor. The indigenous leadership was either subordinated to the

Assyrians or deported, young men were drafted into military service, and skilled laborers were transported to other Assyrian cities. Local government and its indigenous patronage were subordinated to the Empire’s provincial administration. The society was drastically transformed.

In the period following the fall Samaria continued to play a dominant role in the region of northern Palestine, but now as part of the Assyrian Empire. There are only meager remains at the site from the Assyrian and subsequent Babylonian and Persian periods.

Alexander the Great takes revenge

The historian Flavius Josephus records that Sanaballat, the satrap of Samaria in the Hellenistic period, joined Alexander the Great with eight thousand men at the siege of Tyre, but he died immediately after. Relations between the Macedonians and the Samaritans deteriorated considerably during Alexander's sojourn in Egypt, and the latter burned alive Andromachus, Alexander's commander in Syria. In 331 BC, Alexander took revenge and settled thousands of Macedonian

soldiers in Samaria transforming it into a Hellenistic town. Three round towers, 13 m in diameter, dating to this period have been excavated as well as a later massive fortification wall with square towers.

The excavations also uncovered large quantities of Hellenistic pottery forms with a black wash imitating the glaze of the originals, as well as cooking pots, casseroles and lamps based on Hellenistic forms, side-by-side with imports from Greece and the Aegean.



Greek pottery found in Samaria



Pompey in the temple of Jerusalem by Jean Fouquet c. 1470

The Maccabees and the arrival of the Romans

The Macedonian fortifications were breached and the city again destroyed by the Maccabee King John Hyrcanus in 108 BC. The city was apparently resettled under his son, Alexander Jannaeus, but it was returned to its previous inhabitants

and their descendants by Pompey after the conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BC. Samaria was annexed to the Roman province of Syria. The city was rebuilt in 57-55 BC by Gabinius, the Roman governor.

Herod the Great rebuilds and renames the city

In 30 BC, the Roman Emperor Octavian (who obtained his traditional name of Augustus in 27 BC), awarded the city to Herod the Great. Herod started to rebuild the city of Samaria and renamed it in the emperor's honor, Sebaste (Augusta in Greek).

He soon initiated further construction work, building a great temple dedicated to Rome and Augustus with a huge precinct round it, a stadium, a theater, and other public buildings. He settled six thousand new inhabitants in the city, veterans who had fought for him, and gave them fertile lands. He set up a special constitution and refortified the city with larger walls. Herod had a prior attachment to the city, which had provided a safe haven for his mother and children after he rescued them from Masada. It was also in Samaria in 37 BC where he married Mariamne, a descendant of the Hasmonean kings and the High Priests of Jerusalem.

After Herod's death, Sebaste was part of the territory that belonged to his son, Archelaus, until Augustus sent him into exile in AD 6.

Bronze coin of Herod the Great, minted at Samaria/Sebaste



Herod (73 - 4 BC) was a Roman-appointed king of Judea. Known to history for his cruelty, he is called the Great for his colossal building projects and administrative, diplomatic and military skills. In 37 BC the Romans captured Jerusalem and Herod took the role of sole ruler of Judea, a position he was to maintain for 32 years. To solidify his power, in the same year he married Mariamne, heir of the Hasmonean dynasty, in Samaria. To maintain his throne, Herod executed several members of his own family, including his wife Mariamne, numerous in-laws and several sons. In 27, he married Malthace, a Samaritan woman to whom two of his ultimate heirs were born, Herod Antipas and Archelaus. In the same year he rebuilt the site of ancient Samaria, and renamed it Sebaste.

The Roman Colony

The city was rebuilt at the end of the 2nd century AD by the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, when it was established as the colony of Lucia Septimia Sebaste. In the struggle between Septimius Severus and Pescennius Niger for control of the Roman Empire, Sebaste backed Severus and this was its reward; Nablus supported Niger, and consequently lost, for a time at least, its *jus civitatis*.

The extant remains at present-day Sabastiya come from this period: the Augusteum, the Theater, the Temple to Kore, and the Stadium were rebuilt as larger monumental structures. The area of the city was expanded with forum colonnades, a basilica and a columned street with all the columns made of hard gray limestone with an Attic base, a monolithic shaft, and a Corinthian capital. The city was encompassed by a city wall with imposing towers that linked the gateways in the west and north.

Since the city of Sebaste was relatively small and was not situated on one of the great trade routes of the ancient world, its wealth must have derived from the agricultural exploitation of the immediate vicinity. The quantity and quality of the buildings is therefore all the more astounding: some 600 monolithic shafts, each more than 4 m long, were required for the

columned street; another 160 of the same type were used for the stadium, far larger shafts for the basilica, and most of the seats in the theater which weigh ca. 250 kg.



Alabaster bust of Roman Emperor Septimius Severus, Rome, Musei Capitolini

Septimius Severus (145-211 AD) was Roman Emperor from 193 to 211. He was born in Leptis Magna in the province of Africa (now in Libya). He defeated many claimants to become emperor, including Pescennius Niger, who had been proclaimed emperor by the legions in Syria. He waged a successful war in the east against the Parthian Empire, expanding the eastern frontier to the Tigris. In his forties he married an Emesan Syrian woman, named Julia Domna, founding the Severan dynasty.

The arrival of the body of John the Baptist



Fate of the Earthly Remains of St. John the Baptist, Geertgen tot Sint Jans (c. 1484)
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum

Christianity came to Sabastiya at its very beginnings, when, after a severe persecution in Jerusalem, Christians “were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the apostles” (Acts 8:1). In Samaria, it is recorded that the early preaching of deacon Philip, soon joined by the apostles Peter and John, established the Church there.

From the early days of Christianity, the tradition developed that the body of John the Baptist, recovered by his disciples, was buried in Sabastiya alongside those of the prophets Elisha and Obadiah. The tomb of John the Baptist in Sabastiya is first mentioned by

Rufinus of Aquileia, a Christian scholar and priest who lived in the Holy Land from 378 to 397 AD, in his description of the pagan reaction against the Christians that took place in AD 361-362 under the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, when the body of John the Baptist was removed from the tomb, burnt, and his ashes scattered. Some monks from the monastery of Abbot Philip in Jerusalem, however, succeeded in rescuing some relics. Paula, a Roman noblewoman of Christian faith and disciple of Jerome, settled in Bethlehem in 385 AD and visited the tomb of John the Baptist in 404. The Palestinian monk, John Rufus, who wrote in 512, described the martyrium: “This place was in effect a particular



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

John Rufus

Palestinian historian and biographer, is famous for his writings about the Christian history of Palestine in the fifth and early sixth centuries AD. He was appointed bishop of the Palestinian city of Maiuma and had first-hand knowledge of the key figures of Christian asceticism in Gaza and their connections to the Egyptian monastic world.

Machaerus is a fortified hilltop palace located in Jordan, on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. It was originally built in about 90 BC by the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus, and later rebuilt by Herod the Great in 30 BC to serve as a military base.

chapel of the church, enclosed by grilles, because there are two caskets covered with gold and silver, in front of which lamps are always burning; one is that of St. John the Baptist and the other that of the prophet Elisha; a throne, covered by a cloth, on which nobody used to sit, is also placed in that spot”.

It is not clear, however, why the body of John the Baptist was believed to have been buried in Sabastiya. The historian Flavius Josephus relates that John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod Antipas in Machaerus, on the eastern side of the Jordan River. His head was given by Salome to her mother Herodias, so we have to suppose that John’s disciples, after taking away the rest of his body, left the territory of the tetrarch, where Herodias could still do them harm. In the first centuries of Christianity, the followers of John – called Baptists – were spread throughout Samaria.



The fortress of Machaerus in Jordan

Two Byzantine churches for John the Baptist



Detail of the Byzantine mosaic discovered during 2009 excavations

Two shrines were dedicated to the cult of the Baptist. The first, the tomb, is in the present village just outside the limits of the Roman city. The magnificent building in which is now the village mosque, is the shell of a Latin cathedral, built in the second half of the twelfth century on the foundations of the Byzantine church. Another small church, first founded in the 5th century, was excavated on the southern slope of the acropolis. According to the Christian Orthodox tradition, it marked the spot where John the Baptist was

beheaded. The document known as the *Commemoratorium de casis Dei*, an official inventory of churches and clergy prepared about AD 808, records two churches in Sabastiya. Those churches were served by a bishop called Basil and 25 priests and monks.

The first known bishop of Sabastiya, named Marinus, attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 and other bishops of Sabastiya, for a total of eight, figure in the attendance lists of six councils or synods between AD 325 and 536.

First Islamic Settlements

Sabastiya submitted peacefully to the Islamic Army headed by 'Amr ibn al'As in AD 634 at the time of the caliphate of Abu Bakr. During the first Islamic period, the daily life of the local community went on without major changes. The Roman monuments no more in use (pagan temples, the theater, the stadium) continued the degradation already started during the Byzantine period. Important monumental traces of the old Sebaste remains, however, and among them the columned street which was occupied by handcraft

and productive activities. Along this street developed a popular quarter and archaeologists found traces of late domestic buildings and industrial remains, among which is a glass factory. During the First Islamic period, the east corridor of the temple on the summit was also used for some local industry.

Amr ibn al-'As (592-682) was an Arab military commander. He belonged to the nobility of the Quraysh and like the other Quraysh chiefs opposed Islam in the early days. Once he converted to Islam he became a great commander fighting for the Islamic cause. He was sent by the Caliph Abu Bakr with the Islamic armies into Palestine and played an important role in the conquest of the region. He is most noted for leading the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 640, where he founded the Egyptian capital of Fustat and built the first African mosque.



Map of invasion of Syria



Saracen Army on the March with Musicians and Standard-bearers, by G. Schlumberger, 1890

Crusaders' period

At the arrival of Crusaders in 1099, the Byzantine church on the tomb of John the Baptist, which was already fallen to the ground in 808, should have been in ruins. They quickly settled and Daniel, the Russian abbot who visited the city in 1106, could see "a fine church dedicated to the Precursor, and there is a very rich Frankish monastery".

Crusaders revived the episcopate of Sabastiya under the archbishopric of Caesarea and official documents mention three bishops, who lived between 1128 and 1178, as well as some canons and priors.

Usama b. Munqidh, emir of the Syrian city of Shaizar, near Aphamea, describing his visit to the

place sometime between 1140 and 1143 reports a religious ceremony which edified him: "I paid a visit to the tomb of John the son of Zechariah - God's blessing on both of them! - in the village of Sabastiya in the province of Nablus. After saying my prayers, I came out into an enclosed space in front of the place where the tomb is. I found a half-closed gate, opened it and entered a church. Inside were about ten old men, their bare heads as white as combed cotton. They were facing the east, and had on their chests staffs ending with cross-bars turned up like the rear part of a saddle, on which they were leaning. And with them one receives



Capitals of the Crusader cathedral

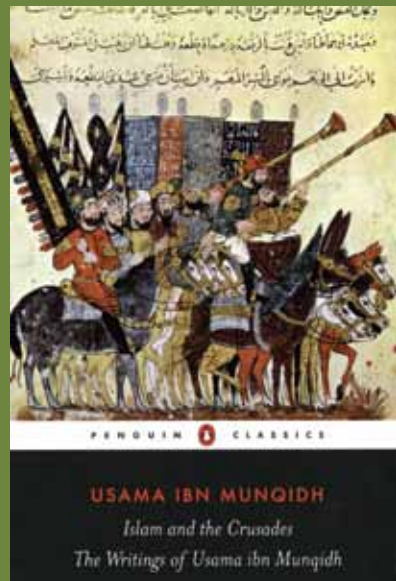
hospitality. The sight of their piety touched my heart, but at the same time it displeased and saddened me, for I had never seen such zeal and devotion among Muslims.”

In 1145 the relics of St. John were recovered in a silver reliquary and the Patriarch of Jerusalem, William I, related the discovery and granted an indulgence of 40 days to whoever would contribute to the rebuilding of the church. Work began on the new church soon afterwards, and around 1169-1170 a new appeal by Bishop Ralph was

issued to complete the building. In September 1184, Saladin appeared before Sabastiya with an army; but the bishop succeeded in negotiating the sparing of the town and church, including all those who had taken refuge in it, in return for the release of eighty Muslim prisoners. One year after Sabastiya was visited by the Greek monk John Phocas. He confirmed that the relics of John the Baptist and Elisha were no longer in the underground tomb but in two coffins carved in white marble inside the church.

Usama ibn Munqidh was a medieval Muslim poet, author, warrior and diplomat from the Banu Munqidh dynasty of Shaizar in northern Syria. He lived during the establishment in the region of the Crusader states.

He was the nephew of the emir of Shaizar and probably expected to rule, but was exiled in 1131 and spent the rest of his life travelling and serving other leaders, including Saladin. He was most famous as a poet and man of letters and his writings contains lengthy descriptions of the Crusaders, whom he visited on many occasions, and some of whom he considered friends, although he generally saw them as foreign barbarians.



Usama Ibn Munqidh “Book of Contemplation: Islam and the Crusades” book cover

The Islamic retaking

In July 1187, Sabastiya was retaken 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. The mosque, containing the tombs of John the Baptist, his father Zechariah and other prophets, is recorded by the Syrian biographer and geographer Yaqut ibn-'Abdullah al-Rumi al-Hamawi around 1225.

Since then and for the following centuries, we can rely on a long series of descriptions of the monument given by visitors, among which are some Christian pilgrims, who are still visiting the tomb of John the Baptist.

Saladin and Guy of Lusignan after the Battle of Hattin in 1187, by Said Tahsine, 1954

Husam ed-Din Muhammad was the only son of Al Khathun Sitt Al-Sham, Salah ad Din's sister. He was born from her first marriage with Lajin. Her mother dedicated to him all her efforts and he was indeed well educated. He was brave and generous, and therefore was among Salah ad Din favorites. Coming back from a pilgrimage to Mecca with her mother, in 1187, they were attacked by the Crusader army of Renaud de Chatillon. He then participated in the battle of Hattin. After the battle Salah ad Din sent him with a garrison in the region of Nablus, which pacifically surrendered to him. He became the lord of the city until his premature death, in Damascus, in 1191. He was buried in a cemetery since then called Husammya in his honour.





Detail of Samaria in the Map of the Holy Land of William Wey, 1407?-1476

Sabastiya in travelers' accounts from the 13th to the 17th century

The Dominican Burchard of Mount Sion, visiting the town in 1283, noted the *mahumeria*, i.e. the church transformed into a mosque, and the church on the acropolis, where he found Greek monks who received him kindly.

In 1347, Franciscan Niccolò da Poggibonsi found in the upper part of the town “a monastery, in the hands of the Greek monks”. Some years after, Sir John Mandeville recorded seeing the church in great part in ruins and fallen, maybe because of an earthquake.

Franciscan Francesco Suriano saw the tomb of John the Baptist in the church and reported that there were few inhabitants in the village and that: “This church is built like a fortress similar to that of Bethlehem,

and in it lives the Machademo, that is, the Governor”.

Pietro della Valle was born in Rome, in 1586. When he was 28 years old he left for a long journey in the Middle and Far East, which lasted 11 years and 9 months. He described his travel in 54 letters. In 1616 he was in Sabastiya and was taken by local Arab Orthodox Christians to see the church: “which is still largely intact, very large and beautiful; inside which they showed a chapel, which is underground, decorated above with a dome inside the church...” The dome was probably the Muslim shrine which still stands over the tomb in the central nave.

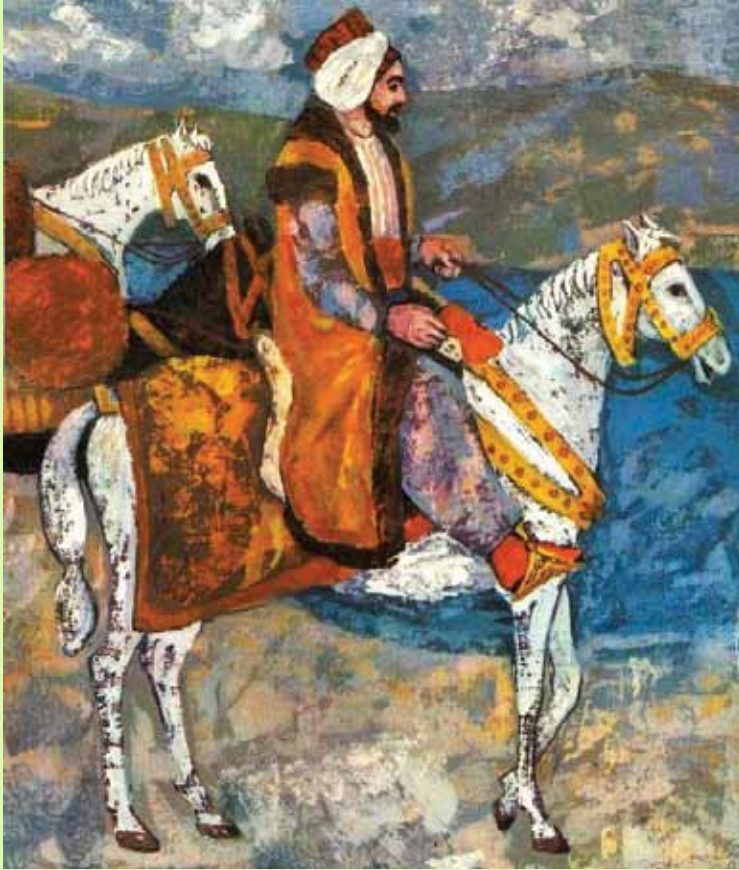
In 1649 and in 1670-1671, the Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi

visited Palestine on his way to Mecca. Speaking of Sabastiya, he says: "It is a prosperous townlet on a slope. It has at present Moslem and Christian inhabitants. Over this slope raises a high monastery, the buildings of which bewilder the onlooker. It is built artistically and is well worth seeing. The inhabitants of both monastery and town were massacred on the occasion of the Caliph el-Ma'mun halting at this city when he came up from Egypt on the way to Tarsus and Qara Görgis. Ever since that time no monks live in this monastery. It lies in ruins." Evliya talks about the church on the acropolis and continues, saying: "In the neighborhood of this monastery is the House of Yahya in Beit Sabastiya," showing how the village moved toward the tomb of St. John. Then he described the Baptist's death, and adds that "his noble body was kept by the Greek in a marble sarcophagus," and how Maltese pilgrims took the town by surprise and removed the body to Acre. The pilgrim Gabriel Bremond, who visited Sabastiya in 1666, made no mention of the monks and spoke of Christians who kept on visiting St. John's tomb, which was distinguished from the others because of the inscriptions and that also Muslims were holding the place in veneration, calling it Mar Zacharias, after St. John Baptist's father.



First page of "Viaggi di Pietro della Valle, 1650

Domenico Laffi, was born in Veduggeto di Savigno, in the Emilian Apennines in 1636. As a priest he made several pilgrimages, writing memories along the travels. In 1678 he made a pilgrimage by sea towards Jerusalem, where he arrived (passing through Corsica, Sardinia and African coast) in 1679. He wrote memories and descriptions about this experience, including his visit to Sabastiya, published in Bologna in 1683.



Evliya Çelebi

The priest from Bologna, Domenico Laffi, who was there in 1679, remarked about the “capitals of artful workmanship” of the church, and the “remains of a beautiful

the main altar, likewise adorned with marble columns and mosaic pictures; at present it is divided in half, the Greeks officiating in one part, the Mohammedans in the other.”

The Recent Period



Archbishop of Sebaste Atallah Hanna, Palestinian Minister of Local Government Mr. Khaled Qawsmi , Palestinian Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Mrs. Rula Maaya'h, and General Consul of Italy in Jerusalem Mr. Giampaolo Cantini, at the signature ceremony of a Memorandum of Understanding in Sabastiya in 2012

Based on the registers and other documents in the archives of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, Papadopoulos in 1904 drew up a list of the villages existing in 1667 and indicated Sabastiya as a bishopric with nine dependent villages, but no resident bishop. Among the bishops one named Nastri is known, who



Conservation works in the village



Entrance of the Ottoman palace Dar al Hawari

died in Rome in 1731. During the Ottoman Period the villagers were almost all Muslims. At present Theodosios, born Atallah Hanna, has been ordained Archbishop of Sebaste by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem on December 24th, 2005.

Before 1903, Ottomans built schools in each of the 46 villages of the governorate of Nablus, including Sabastiya. Since the end of 19 century also some foreign religious institutions built schools in Sabastiya and in other seven villages in the same province. The

school of Protestants from England in Sabastiya served 8 male and 2 female students.

In 1924, works started to bring potable water to the village. The water was brought by metal pipes from the 'Ain Harun spring toward the centre of the village, near the mosque.

In the last century the population of Sabastiya has grown constantly. In 1922, there were 572 inhabitants; in 1931, they were 751, among which were 20 Christians, living in 191 houses. In 1945, Sabastiya reached 1,020 citizens, among which were



Detail from the traditional lime work in the Ottoman palace Dar al Kaid

40 Christians. In 1961, population reached 1,345 units, among which were 20 Christians. Currently the village is inhabited by 3,400 citizens, 55% under the age of 24. Several houses date back to the Ottoman period, among them Dar al Hawari and Dar al Kayed. Dar al Hawari is a complex built in various phases around a central courtyard. It is entered by a huge entrance gate

and many ancient stones have been reused in the building. Dar al Kayed is near the mosque, in the southwest area of the village. The palace is composed by an internal courtyard and some houses all around. Several ancient stones were also reused to build it. Recently it has been subject of projects of conservation and houses social activities.





The Forum

The area of the Roman forum

The area of the Roman forum, known in the village as al-Baidar, was used until last century by farmers as threshing floor and was occupied from the middle of the spring until the beginning of autumn first by beans and chickpeas and then by cereals. In 1931, archaeologists of the Joint Expedition asked the help of the Mayor of Nablus, Mr. Suliman Bey Tukan, to act as arbitrator and to find satisfactory terms for the leases and compensation for crops and trees. Finally, the Department of Antiquities of the British Mandate decided to expropriate the area, since then it is part of the protected archaeological area. In the program of the Israeli National Park it was designed as parking lot for buses, as it is until now. When the area is free, it comes back to its public use:

the children play football and in the evening the villagers organize wedding parties.

Over the eastern part of the forum, the Palestinian Department of Antiquities has recently built a concrete structure to be used as Information Centre.

Even if it looks like a large natural terrace, the area is in fact an artificial platform made by levelling the rock at the west end, banking up the ground at the east, and running two parallel retaining walls along the north and south sides. At its west end, where columns are still standing, stood the Roman basilica that had been cleared by the Harvard Expedition in 1908. With results of the latter, the Joint Expedition proposed that the area assumed its present form during the first phase of the Roman period when there



Reconstruction of the Roman forum by Sandra Borgogno

was a large building orientated east and west at the west end. About the end of the 2nd century AD, this area was enclosed with Corinthian portico and a great basilica was built across the west end. South of the forum, a well paved street was constructed about the same time and ran through a popular quarter of the town.

The forum was a rectangular enclosure, a hundred and twenty-eight metres by seventy-two metres, surrounded by colonnades on all

four sides. Nothing can be seen now of the enclosing wall but the seven standing columns and a line of pedestals at the west side of the open area belong to the western colonnade of the forum.

Under the south colonnade of the forum, archaeologists discovered an aqueduct. The Joint Expedition viewed about 100 m of aqueduct, partly built and partly tunnelled through the rock, and sloping gently from west to east, along the grade of the hill.



The Roman basilica

The Stadium

From the middle of the forum looking at the hill, take the path on the right between a concrete slab and the restaurant to reach a terrace, from where you can see the site of the stadium on the north lower slope of the hill (*Karam al-Sheikh*). It looks a long way off, but it belongs to the city and was inside the walled area in the Roman period. It has never been wholly buried. Some ancient columns are still in position and others are visible on the ground. The lines of columns formed three sides of a vast rectangular enclosure. The stadium has never been completely excavated and excavation work in 1931-33 was limited to some soundings, leasing the area by the Mukhtar, Kamel 'Abd al-Hadi. The Joint Expedition cleared



North lower slope of the hill. Among the olive trees is possible to notice the columns of the Roman stadium



Columns of the Roman stadium



Columns of the Roman stadium



Reconstruction of the Roman stadium by Sandra Borgogno

the north portico and made just six soundings in other parts discovering that the stadium was composed by two buildings, identical in plan: long rectangular enclosures consisting of four colonnaded walks opening inwards on a central space. The early enclosure was built in Doric style, the columns built up of drums, held together with dowels. The walls were built of soft stones, the courses covered by a heavy coat of stucco, which was painted red and yellow alternately. The panels were scored with crude figures and inscriptions, in Greek, but many of the names are Latin in origin, probably the names of the Herodian soldiers. The exact date of the construction cannot be fixed but it should fit into the Herodian

phase. The second enclosure differs in everything except for the plan. It was built of hard stone on a higher level and in the Corinthian order. The columns were plain monoliths. The back wall of the portico was well preserved on the east side, built of the same stone as the columns. The length of the arena was about 195 m. and the width about 58 m. It was probably dedicated to foot-racing. Some of the drawings and inscriptions scratched on the walls may refer to boxing or wrestling matches, and the inscriptions of the professor of literature suggests that lectures were also given under the porticos. Archaeologists dated the Corinthian stadium to the last quarter of the 2th century AD.

The Basilica

Go back to the forum. A short flight of steps by a door in the west enclosure wall led into the basilica, a rectangular building with columns dividing it in a central area and two sidewalks. In the north part there is a semi-circular tribune at the lower level. The stone floor of the tribune was reached by a flight of steps leading down on each side. The basilica was paved with flagstones in the central area and mosaics in the side walks, which were still visible few years ago. This kind of building was commonly attached to the forum in Roman towns and was used for transacting business and disposing of legal matters.

Just south of the basilica a section of a more ancient wall has been exposed, dated by archaeologists to the Omride dynasty period (9th century BC). It consists in three masonry courses on a foundation



The Roman basilica, detail of the apse

course based in the rock.

Take the path on the right side of the basilica and climb the hill to reach the theatre.

The Roman basilica





The Roman theatre

The Theatre

The Joint Expedition cut trial trenches and found the remains of the theatre. At that time, they limited the work to some trenches. The theatre was later uncovered by the Jordanian Expedition. It has been dated to the first quarter of the 3rd century AD. The lower range of seats consisted of fourteen rows divided into seven blocks by six flights of steps. Only the top row of seats below the gangway was provided with backs. The seats above the gangway were destroyed so much that it is not possible to say how many rows of seats there were in the upper range. Very little can be seen now of the stage, which lies under the modern unpaved



Staircase of the Roman theatre



Reconstruction of the Roman theatre by Sandra Borgogno

path. Its front wall was decorated with a series of niches, alternately rectangular and rounded.

Several carved stones were found that came apparently from a towering façade decorated with recessed niches and free standing columns.

The theatre was a comparatively small one, with an external diameter of about 65 m.

From the theatre is possible to see the Hellenistic tower, but the best view is at the summit of the step at the left of the theatre, near the tower.



Decorated niche of the theatre



The Hellenistic Defensive tower

The Hellenistic tower

The tower was buried under the modern path to the summit, and was found by the Joint Expedition at the end of the 1933 season. It is an astonishingly impressive monument, standing as a great buttress below the NE corner of the summit. It was incorporated in an older scheme of defence. Apart from few exceptions, all the stones are laid as headers. Fragments of other two round towers were found in 1908 at the SW corner of the summit.

A few metres after the tower to the right side of the path there are two olive trees and a terrace. The area is very nice in summer time and is recommended to stop and enjoy the view of Sabastiya landscape and the pleasant breeze under the shadow. From here you can see the Theatre and the Stadium.



In the Hellenistic tower all the stones are laid as headers to strengthen the defense



Reconstruction of the Roman temple by Sandra Borgogno

The Augustum – Temple of Augustus

Going up to reach the highest point of the hill, it is possible to see the temple of Augustus.

In 30 BC, Romans gave the city to Herod the Great. To show his loyal gratitude to Augustus, Herod built a great temple with a large forecourt surrounded by colonnades over the ruins of the ancient citadel, on the top of the hill. To lay out the temple, it was necessary to enlarge the area by building a great platform out northwards. Two immense parallel retaining walls were built along the northern slope of the hill, and the court of the temple was carried

out on the flat esplanade created over the massive substructures. The temple was raised on a podium, but it was so heavily robbed, that nothing above the foundations remains. Even the ground plan cannot be reconstructed with certainty. The present flight of steps belongs to a later period, the end of the second century AD, when the temple was radically reconstructed; the front of Herod's temple stood several metres further back.

The later temple had columns all round it in the Corinthian order: a cella divided into a broad nave and



The Roman Temple of Augustus

two very narrow aisles. In front of the staircase, there was a large altar. We can still see few remains of it. To the south and west of the temple, foundations of previous buildings can be seen. The Hellenistic and Roman periods predominate among the fragments of the Israelite citadel buildings.

Recent studies suggest that Herod fortified the area around the Augusteum and erected here a royal castle and a keep.

Omri Citadel



Archaeological remains on the acropolis

Following the path along the right corner of the temple towards south is possible to see the ruins of more ancient structures, which archaeologists related to the first settlement of Omride dynasty (9th century BC). The citadel at the summit of the hill was a rectangle, about 90 m from north to south and 180 m from east to west. At present only the western part is visible. The walls have long disappeared, but they were probably made of sun-baked mud bricks. The stone foundations were laid in

trenches cut into the bedrock, with geometrical regularity, with the stones closely fitted and bonded in a standard technique. Their bosses and margination resulted from the method of construction: stones were brought on-site directly from the quarry and were fitted in the laying process into the wall. Such stone masonry is typical of the Iron Age Phoenician building technique.

Near the palaces there should have been storehouses and records offices, taxes were paid in wine, oil and other commodities and many

fragments of written broken pottery (*ostraca*) recording the delivery of goods were found by archaeologists. In 1932 many ivory fragments were found on the eastern side of the summit, now reburied. Some of the fragments looked as they had been attached to furniture but the greater number was more likely fixed in the wainscoting of a room. Nothing remains of the building but the discovery has been related to the “ivory house” described

in the Bible. Some of the carved ivory fragments were exhibited in the Palestinian Archaeological Museum (Rockefeller Museum) of Jerusalem. Now they can be seen in the Israeli Museum. They are of Phoenician workmanship in a mixed style borrowing many Egyptian motives. Visitors must be careful in the area, especially if there are children, because the excavated ditches are deep.

The casemate defensive wall



The Church of the Invention of the Head of St. John the Baptist

From the south part of the summit, the path descends towards east. After a few metres, taking care of the slope, it is possible to stop and to see from above the columned street that runs down the hill towards the western gate. In the distance you can see the Jewish settlement of Shave Shomron. After that, you will reach the church of the Invention of the Head of St. John the Baptist.

Since the Medieval period, pilgrims have been reporting the presence of two churches at Sabastiya: the cathedral with the tomb of John the Baptist (that you will visit later) and the Greek monastery associated with the discovery of the missing head of the Saint. This latter church had a roughly square plan with a semicircular apse on the east and a narthex on the west. The central dome was carried by four masonry piers, the remains of which still

stand to a certain height. Signs on the floor of the raised sanctuary at the east end mark the place of the altar. At the end of the north nave, the beginning of a vaulted roof shows that there had been a domed aedicule above a subterranean crypt. A staircase leads into the crypt where an altar slab divides the doorway opposite a niche containing remains of frescoes depicting the beheading of John the Baptist above, and the discovery of the head below. Few years ago the frescoes were still visible, but nowadays only traces remains.



The Byzantine church of the “Invention of the Head of John the Baptist”



The crypt of the church



Reconstruction of the Byzantine church by Saandra Borgogno

The church experienced various reconstructions. The earlier church was built in shape of a Basilica but without a dome. Masonry of the apse and some scraps of mosaic pavement in the aisles belong to this phase, dating from the 5th/6th century. Later a wooden dome was built, supported by four granite columns, three still standing, which were later incorporated into the pillars. The columns were probably quarried from the ruins of the Roman Theatre.

To the west lie the remains of the associated monastery. Its extension is uncertain because excavation was incomplete. The excavated remains include a room aligned north-south with a mosaic floor and an apse, now reburied. To the east was found a cemetery.

Archaeologists suggested that

the church and monastery were abandoned sometime in the 15th century. Their existence had been forgotten until the excavations of the Joint Expedition in 1932, although the villagers used to call the area the Fields of the Monastery. During the excavations, bodies were found in tombs inside the church and their remains were buried in front of it. Now the area is used as cemetery by the only Christian family remained in the village.

After visiting the church, take left and follow the path that goes back to the forum. Along the path you will meet a new construction built inside the acropolis area and a coffee shop where you can rest and have a fresh drink. At the end of the path you reach the forum, where there are other restaurants and coffee shops.

The Columned Street

From the forum, take the asphalt road that goes towards southwest. You are in the columned street that still runs until the west gate of the city. Just after the restaurant on the right side you can see a flight of stairs that in the past was used to reach the acropolis. At the corner few remains of ancient pipes show that there had to be a fountain in the past. Following the road you will reach the intersection with the

main columned street which was running east-west (*Decumanus*). From here you will start seeing scores of columns among the olive trees for a distance of about 800 m. Go to the right to reach the gate. Columns and capitals belong to the second Roman building phase at the end of the 2nd century AD. The original construction of the street was a colossal undertaking and should have required at least

The Roman colonnaded street



six hundred columns and work of terracing some areas and quarrying others. It was between twelve and fifteen metres wide. On each side there was a roofed walk for pedestrians and a row of shops behind. Their plans varied from side to side. On the north side, the rooms ended in apses and the walls were thicker maybe to resist pressure from the overhanging cliff. On the south side, the rooms were rectangular and the remains of an internal arch suggested an upper storey.



The Roman columned street

Reconstruction of the Roman columned street by Sandra Borgogno





The Roman city wall

The City Wall and Gates

At the end of the columned street you arrive at the west gate.

According to the 1st century AD historian Josephus, the new city wall, which Herod built, measured twenty *stadia* (a Roman *stadium* was about 185 m long) in circumference and enclosed a larger area than its predecessor. The line taken can be identified without much difficulty except in the south-east quarter where the village stands. The area enclosed is irregular in shape; its greatest length, from east to west, measures little more than a kilometre. In the centuries, thousands of cut stones have been

taken away for buildings and what remains now is not imposing. The best section still visible is the area of the west gate, the only gate whose position is certainly known, where there is a round tower on each side of the gateway and a third tower about 50 m to the north. The gate stands at the end of the columned street, which has been one of the principal streets of Sebaste. The remains of the gate belong mostly to the later Roman period, but there is a good deal of Herod's original construction in the two round flanking towers. The third tower seems to be wholly of Herodian

construction: the stones had heavy projecting bosses with comb-picked margins on all four sides, and they were laid in alternate courses of headers and stretchers.

Other fragments of the curtain wall and remains of the towers were uncovered on the north side. Deep foundations were seen only under the wall north of the stadium, where there was probably a second gate. Above the foundations there were the same variations in the masonry: the stones in the curtain wall were, as a rule, laid alternately as headers and stretchers, whereas those in the towers were laid in alternating courses.

A stretch of wall, which was uncovered north of the mosque, is quite different in character. It was well built but only 1.5 m thick. It has all the marks of a late wall from the early third century or thereabouts. A part of the same wall has been



Reconstruction of the Roman city wall and gate by Sandra Borgogno

found in recent excavations inside the Crusader hall (*al Baad*) south east of the mosque.

From the small square in front of the west gate is possible to admire the view of the valley that can help you to understand the potential of the agricultural landscape of the city of Sebaste in the past. We recommend you to walk along the columned street late in the afternoon. There you will often find young people of the village sitting on the gate towers enjoying the sunset.

You should now go back along the same street. At the intersection you will find two alternative paths to reach the village. You can go straight or go back to the forum and take the street on the right that goes down in the village from the northeast corner.



Fragments of the curtain wall are hidden in the fields



Reconstruction of the exterior of the Crusader cathedral by Sandra Borgogno

The Mosque of Prophet Yahia (The Crusader Cathedral of St. John)

Once arrived in the main square of the village you will find a coffee shop under the tall pine trees. You are in front of the Mosque of Prophet Yahia (once Crusader Cathedral of St. John the Baptist). From here, you have to descend the flight of stairs to reach the courtyard, well below the

level of the ground outside. Ask the *sheikh* or the Mosaic Guest House to open the door of the tomb.

A church was built in the Byzantine period over a Roman burial place at the east end of the city just outside the Roman walls, under the present mosque. Little remains of the

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





Reconstruction of the interior of the Crusader cathedral

early Christian building, probably represented in the mosaic pavement laid in the church of St. Stephen at Umm al-Rasas in Jordan. The lower portion of its north wall is still in place and it is clearly identified from the outside northeast corner (now a private area), and some of the columns and moulded bases are lying in the courtyard of the mosque. The recent excavation and preservation activities outside the southern wall discovered in the



Crusader mason's mark on dressed stone

dump some Byzantine capitals, reused as foundation in later periods. The present building was rebuilt by Crusaders in the second half of the 12th century and is second in size only to the church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The present entrance is a later insertion in the original portal of the cathedral, which probably had a monumental arch and was decorated by beautiful historiated capitals, four of which since 1897 in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. In the interior, the Crusader cathedral was composed of a nave and two aisles, an inner transept, and three apses. The whole of the vaulting has now fallen, but most of the outer walls and some of the piers still stand. Until the end of the 19th century, the decorated remains of the central apse were still visible.

The vaulting was carried by



Roman and Crusader sculptures once preserved in the larger domed structure

composite piers and pilasters and stone vaults on the nave, and aisles were carried by a system of transverse and diagonal ribs. A row of buttresses against the south wall helped to abut the vaulting of the cathedral, unnecessary on the thick pre-existing Byzantine north wall.

The Crusader church is faced inside and outside with finely cut and dressed ashlars, that bear various masons marks. Its overall plan, derived from the Byzantine one, represents an elongated rectangle. A door in the southern wall, now walled up, probably gave access during the Crusader's period to the cloister and the residential quarters of the bishops and canons. Remains of those structures have been revealed by excavation and rehabilitation projects financed by Italian public and private funds in cooperation with Sabastiya Municipality.

In the middle of the nave there are two later domed structures. The larger one was built when the cathedral was turned into a mosque

by Saladin's nephew, Husam ed-Din Muhammad in 1187. It stands over the crypt containing the tomb of John the Baptist. Inside there are two little rooms. In the first, are large fragments of marble slabs inserted in the west wall that may have belonged to the chancel screen of the early cathedral and two Crusader carved sculptures which should have supported architectural elements: a man tearing his beard and a bull's head. Other three corbels, as well as a figure holding threatening snakes, were taken by the Israeli authorities escorted by soldiers from the mosque, after having put the village under curfew, and taken to the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem on the occasion of the Second Conference of the Society for the Study of the Crusades and the Latin (SSCLE) in July 1987. They weren't taken back until now. In the second room you can still see a mihrab inserted in the southern wall of the cathedral. It probably dates back to the same period of the construction of the

larger dome (Ayyubid period). The building of the room dates probably after 1892, when the mosque that hitherto had taken up the two western bays of the south aisle was removed, and a new one built across the eastern two bays of the church, including the minaret. The works involved the demolition of the unstable portions of vaulting and of what remained of the apse, the stabilization of the remaining structure and the building of two rooms in the northern aisle to serve as school. Now they hosts the local archaeological Museum, which worth a visit. A second smaller dome stands under two bitter orange trees and gives access to a narrow flight of steps leading down 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, Christian tradition locates the tomb of John the Baptist between the prophets Elisha and Obadiah, while local narrative recalls also the tomb of his mother Elizabeth and his father Zechariah. 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. Left to the entrance there is the basalt four-panelled door, which originally closed the chamber. Going outside to the courtyard take the left staircase to ascend and then go to the left. After 20 m you will find a courtyard. On the right there is a Roman dome tomb.



View of the Ayyubid sanctuary over John the Baptist's tomb



The Roman domed tomb after excavation

The Domed tomb

Under the Ottoman rule, in 1908, a small but well-preserved tomb was excavated by archaeologist of the Harvard University. Its floor-level was 7,15 m below the floor of the village house, which at the time was built over it. The excavations were resumed in 1937 by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities.

The tomb was a square chamber, with a portico that consisted of two rows of columns, extending the

Interior of the domed tomb before demolition



full width of the façade. The walls were of rough rubble, faced outside and inside with dressed limestone ashlar. The front was decorated with four pilasters. Inside the portico there were two huge sarcophagi, still visible now. They are decorated with human and animal motives. The door of the chamber was still in situ and in perfect working condition. In the middle of the north, east and south sides of the tomb, there were niches, each crowned by a semicircular arch. The tomb was roofed by a flat dome based over four pendentives. The structure was very interesting to study the evolution of the spherical pendentive, one of the earliest examples in the world.

The floor was paved with slabs of stone. A small manhole discovered in the southwest corner gave access to a lower tomb. In a later period the entrance to the lower barrel vault chamber was found in the southern side.



Sarcophagus outside the domed tomb

A total of thirteen stone sarcophagi, whole or fragmentary, were associated with the tomb. Seven of these were inside the upper chamber, all of them either smashed or disturbed. Four limestone busts, and fragments of a fifth, were found close to the sarcophagi. The tomb was dated to the end of the second/beginning of the third century AD. The villagers recall that in 1979, Israeli authorities built the wood structure that is still visible today and asked men and children to remove the stones of the tomb. Stone after stone they demolished the tomb. Many of the stones were moved in the forum, where the Israelis had built a cement platform, as base to rebuilt the monument. We have to presume that Israeli

authorities preferred to transfer the tomb from the original site to the archaeological park, because it was under their control and prevent tourists to come and see it inside the village. But for various reasons they were not able to complete



Present condition of the domed tomb



Ceiling of the domed tomb before demolition

the action to uplift the sarcophagi and left the situation of the tomb as in the present state. With time, the majority of the stones brought to the forum went lost and one of the most important monument of the Roman period, composed by a rare square structure covered by a circular dome, has disappeared forever. The present condition of the tomb is quite degraded and most of the time is full of garbage.

Just after the dome tomb, a narrow street on the left opens in a small courtyard in front of the southern external wall of the mosque.

Historical buildings in the village

The buildings of the area belong to the Crusader, Mamluk and Ottoman periods. They were recently excavated and renovated by conservation and enhancement projects financed by public and private Italian institutions. They are currently used as open-air museum, cultural centre, guesthouse and

study centre. Works in the area started in November 2005 and were implemented until August 2012 by the Italian NGO ATS pro Terra Sancta in cooperation with the Mosaic Centre, the Municipality of Sabastiya, and Al Quds University. From the courtyard enter the first building on the right.

The village of Sabastiya in early 20th century picture



The Chapel in the Tower

The building has a rectangular plan and is surrounded in all sides by a strong inclined fortification, built with large stones, columns, and capitals dated back to the Roman-Byzantine period.

The apse of the chapel is oriented towards the east, and has a window in the middle. The building dates back to the first Crusader period that is the beginning of the 12th century. It is probably older than the nearby Crusader cathedral, built over the tomb of John the Baptist. The foundations of the building are found 7 m under the present stone pavement of the chapel.



The renovated area



The Crusader chapel discovered in 2008



Crusader capital discovered during the excavations

The building has probably been built over Byzantine remains, dated to the 4th-5th century AD.

The main entrance is in the western side. The northern entrance is dated after the building of the cathedral of St. John the Baptist. In the northern wall there is a spiral staircase, showing that the building was composed in origin by several

floors. In the southwest area of the stone pavement, opens a cistern.

As shown by the different levels of the pavement, the building has been used for different purposes during the centuries, and was modified accordingly. The walls that separate the apse from the rest of the chapel were built when the building was used as dwelling.



Roman columns set in the Crusader fortification



The spiral staircase near the Crusader chapel



The room of the fortification

The room of the fortification



The room of the fortification

Exit the tower and take right to enter the room located between the tower and the huge cathedral wall. In the room you can see the floor dated back to the Crusader period and some water channels. The left corner of the eastern wall is original and it is still possible to notice traces of the stairs which in the past led to the upper floor. The south wall is built by pieces of columns, capitals and stones, some decorated, of various shapes. In the space where a door was opened in a second period to link the room to the tower, there is a half column carved and another hidden between two walls. The columns were meant to be a decoration, and give us the idea of the dimension of the tower's original main entrance.



The great hall excavated and enhanced in 2012

The Great hall

In the south-eastern part of the village, a huge hall was discovered under the modern houses. It should have been part of the storages or stables of the Crusader rural settlement of the *Casale Sancti Johannis Sebaste*.

The hall is the lowest of a series of three structures that descends along the eastern slope of the village. It is about 7 m large, 7 m high and 35 m long. Its length was originally around 60 m, but a part of it collapsed and a house was built over its ruins during the 19th century. The original entrance was in the east wall. It is a massive wall, around 2 m width, built reusing big stones dated from previous historical periods. In 2012 the hall has been excavated and enhanced thanks to Italian

funds to serve the local community as multifunctional hall. During the excavations stratifications from the Roman, Byzantine, Crusader, Mamluk and Ottoman periods have emerged. The hall is based over Roman buildings and remains of hydraulic installations have been left visible through glasses. The west wall is very interesting. It is more ancient than the rest of the structure and different in building technique and materials. It is possible to notice that it was built directly over the rock. It should have been at least 15 m high and probably was part of the Byzantine wall built when the Byzantine church over the tomb of John the Baptist, located outside the Roman wall, was encompassed within the new city walls.

Balian of Ibelin

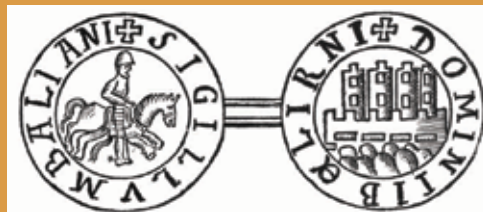
(early 1140s–1193) was a

French knight in the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. In 1177 he married Maria Comnena, widow of King Amalric I, and received the lordship of Nablus, including Sebaste, as dowry. In 1187 Balian with other knights were sent on an embassy to Tripoli. During the journey Balian stopped at Sebaste to celebrate a feast day and spent the night in the house

of the Bishop. The knights went ahead. On May 1st the Templars and Hospitallers were defeated by Saladin's son al-Afdal at the Battle of Cresson and many knights were killed. Balian was still a day behind; the stop in Sebaste saved his life.

*He became famous for negotiating with Saladin the surrender of Jerusalem on 2nd October 1187, and a highly fictionalized version of Balian is the main character of the 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven*, played by Orlando Bloom and directed by Ridley Scott.*

Balian of Ibelin raises Baldwin V at his coronation



Seal of Balian of Ibelin

The Eastern section of the Columned Street

In 2016, Al Quds University, in collaboration with Mosaic Centre and ATS Pro Terra Sancta, carried out archaeological excavations in the area of the village that has developed over the centuries along the eastern extension of the columned street.

The excavations revealed the long occupation of the village area, highlighting remains that range from the Hellenistic period to the late Ottoman.

A column still in situ, alongside a canal for the waters, attests the section of the columned street (*Decumanus*) that at a nearby point reached the eastern gate of the Roman city. Archaeological discoveries have been enhanced and made accessible to visitors within the Mosaic Guest House.

You reach the place going from the Forum to the village, turning left before the main square.



Archaeological remains
discovered in 2016



tour



Guided tour in the village

Walks around the village

Around the village there are four walks, described in “Walking Palestine”, a book published in 2012 by Stefan Szepesi and by brochures that are available in the Mosaic Guest House.

The walks enhanced environmental and historical elements of the village area. In the following paragraphs you will find three trails and historical information about some of the remains along the walks.



Walking around the village

Trail from Nisf Jubeil to Sebastia

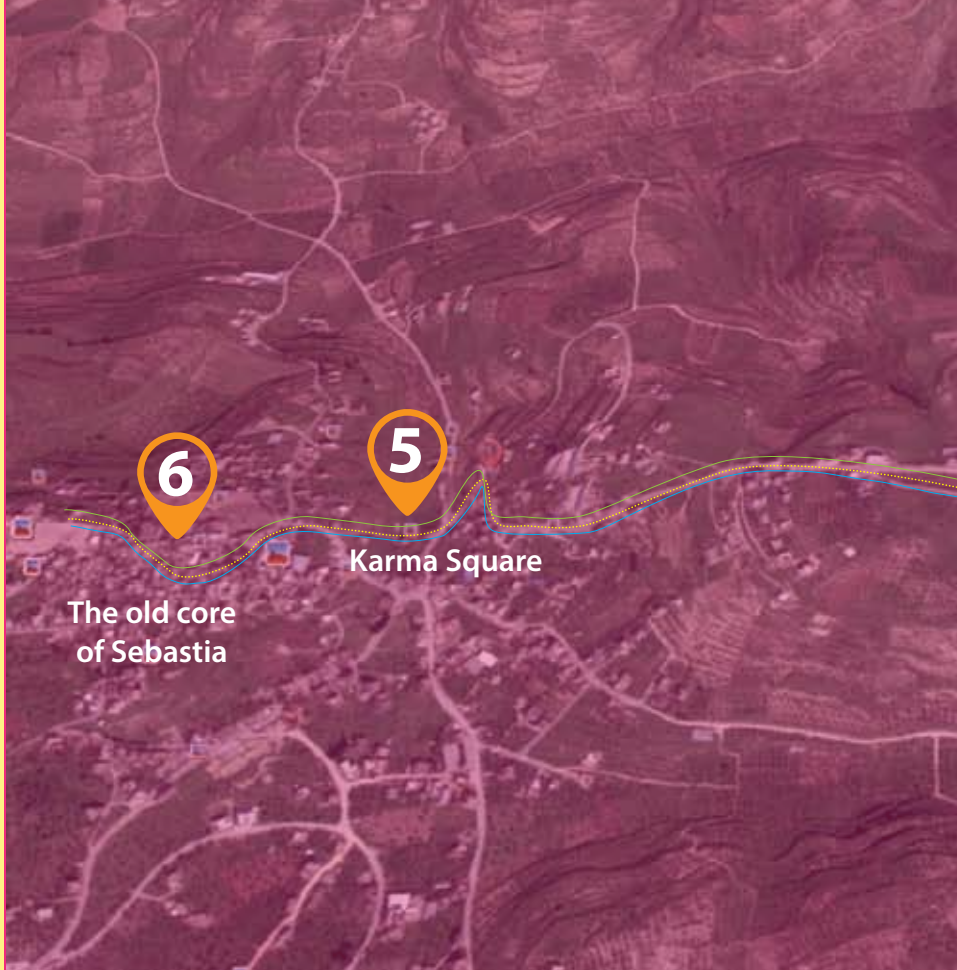
[0m-610m] The hike starts from the Guest House of Nisf Jubeil. Standing outside it, right in front of you at the end of a flight of stone steps, you can enjoy the view of the Orthodox Church, Mar Giries. To begin the walk, go L along the road going downhill and immediately after the Guest House you will walk past a community restaurant on your L hand side and then, after a few steps, past the Village Council on the R. Go straight and on your L you will see the ancient Mosque. At the end of the road keep to the L. The road now goes uphill. Notice the beautiful ancient house on your R. The road continues heading W and is flanked by olive trees on both sides. Now it becomes a dirt track.

[610 m - 1.3 Km] The track continues uphill among olive trees.

The first building you see on the right is a factory (1). After it, the track bends to the R. This area is called Khirbet Al-Mnore (2) and from here you can enjoy a beautiful view. If you observe the hill to the N, proceeding from the N to the W, after Nisf Jubeil you can see Bayt Umrin; then part of the village of Burqa and in the end Bazariya. Between the two big hills in front of you to the W, if the sky is clear, you can enjoy the view of the sea and the contour of the high buildings of Hadera and other cities in the NW. Continue the hike along the road until the top of the hill, which you will reach at 1.3 km (3). From here, looking to the W, Sebastia is already visible on the opposite hill, while to the SE you can see Naqura and on the top of the hill the monastery of

Donkey in Nisf Jubeil





Sheikh Sha'leh. The village you see to the S is Ijnisinia. On the top of the hill three roads come together: the first on the L leads to a private house, the second brings you to Ijnisinia, while the third to Sebastia. Before continuing the route, take a little time to enjoy the fascinating landscape: small villages lie on the gentle hills and, while in the winter all is green and brownish, in the spring the mantle turns to a bright green studded with yellow flowers. To continue on your way, choose

from the following routes according to your mode of transportation.

ON FOOT [1.3 Km - 2 Km]: Take the dirt road going downhill. At the end of the descent, on the left you can see a steel factory. This is the point where the unpaved road reaches the main street and where your trail meets the others. Turn right onto the paved street.

BY BIKE [1.3 Km - 2.8 Km]: Take the second road on your L which goes down the hill. After 600m you go past the cemetery on your L. A



little further the dirt road reaches the paved street. Take this main street to the R and keep pedaling. On your R you will see a steel factory. This is also the point where your trail meets the others. (4)

ON FOOT/BY DONKEY [2 km – 4.5Km]

by BIKE [2.8 Km - 5.3 Km] On a road running below you on your R, you can see the “Ibn Seena Medical Centre”. Proceeding along the paved street, you pass under an iron door with a farewell for those who

are leaving the area. When you get to the fork in the road, on the R you can see the street leading to Nisf Jubeil.

On this road, opposite the Medical Centre, there is the Police Station. Right in front of you, where the road splits, there is the white building of the Hall for Wedding Parties.

If you look to the S, proceeding from the W to the S, you can see Shavei Shomrom and then Naqura. On your R, instead, you can see an apricot tree field, enjoy the blossom



Landscape in Nisf Jubeil

if the season is right. Take the street on the L going downhill. Along the first narrow street on the R hand side, there is Sebastia's school, where Nisf Jubeil's children

go from class 8 on. Now the street bends slightly to the R. Following the road you will reach another fork: the street on the R proceeds to the NE towards Burqa, while the other leads to Sebastia. Take this road and keep walking until you reach Al-Karma square (5), where four roads come together. The first road on the R hand side heads to the Old City. Take this street and walk past a narrow street going uphill on your L, opposite a carwash. After 200m, before the road bends to the R, take the steep narrow street on your L (6) which climbs among the houses. When you arrive on the top, continue walking a little and then



Walking along the trail

take the wooden catwalk on your L to see the impressive Crusader Hall (Baad).

Turn back on the alleyway. Now you are walking on the street that runs alongside Sebastia Guest House. The first narrow street that opens on the R leads you to an area which has been renovated recently and where you can visit the beautiful Chapel in the Tower, dating back to the Crusader period.

When you go back onto the road, on the L hand side you can see the Domed tomb, dated to the end of the second/beginning of the third century AD.

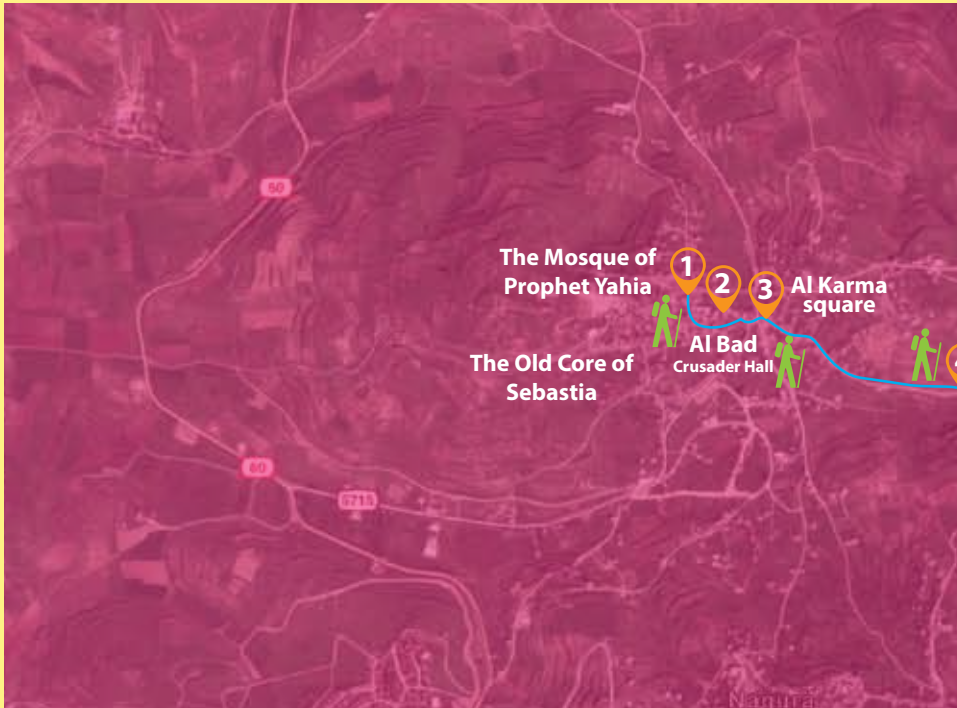
If you look to your R, instead, you will see the entrance to the Mosque of Prophet Yahya, its crypt contains the tomb of Prophet Yahya/St. John the Baptist. In front of the Mosque there is a coffee shop and rest area, where you can have a nice break in the shade of some tall pine trees.

To continue the walk, take the first street on the L. Here, on the R hand side, you will see the Ottoman Qasr el Kaed, an impressive building hosting a guesthouse. Walk along its wall and take the first small street on the R. Keep walking and turn L. Here on your R you can see the Mosaic Guest House, with its many colorful flowers, and recent excavations. Stop here to enjoy the beautiful atmosphere and to visit the shop that sells local specialties and handicrafts for the benefit of local youth and women and where you can also ask for information about local cultural resources.



Mosaic guesthouse in Sebastia

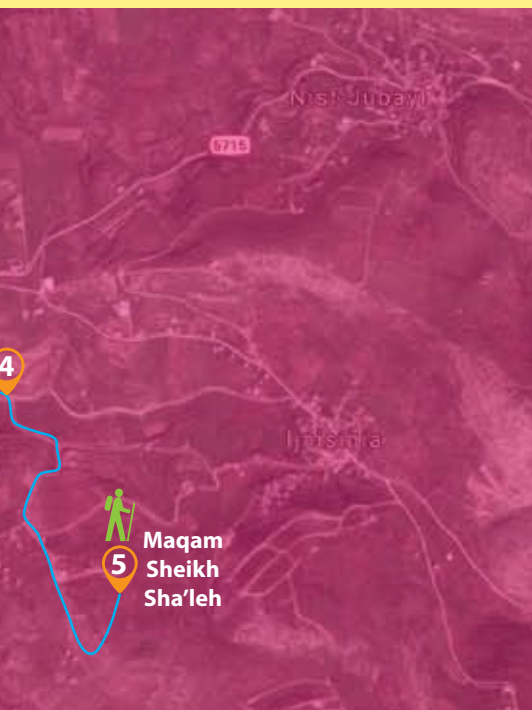
Trail from Sebastia to Maqam Sheikh Sha'leh



[0m-300m] The hike starts from the central square in Sebastia's old town, in front of the Municipality. Facing the impressive Yahya Mosque (1), start walking past it on its R side. You may entry in the preserved area on your L and walk in a beautiful Crusader's complex that houses some of the renovated rooms of one of the local Guesthouses. From the terrace you can see the Maqam Sheikh Sha'leh on the hill to the SE. Continue walking down the small alleyway and take on your R the wooden catwalk to have a



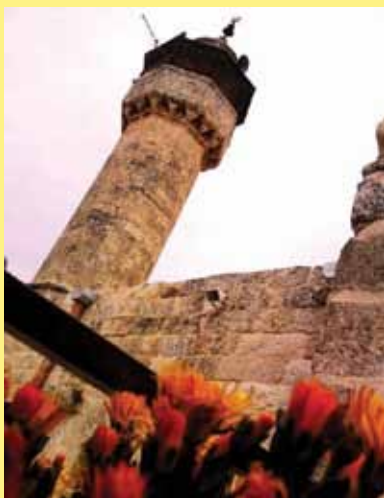
Courtyard in Mosaic guesthouse



[300m-1.7km] After passing some shops and houses the road becomes unpaved and leaves the Sebastia build-up area. Continue to follow it and, at 1.1km into the hike, take the second dirt road that veers off to the R (4). After a short dip the road starts climbing Jabal Sheikh Sha'leh. At the first split in the road (1.3km), keep R and continue to climb up. At the next split, keep L and at the last and final junction (1.7km) keep R again (the L leg leads to a few houses)

look to the impressive Crusader Hall (Baad) (2). Turn back on the alleyway, after 100 m you reach the Sebastia main road. Turn R here and walk down towards the Al-Karma square

(3). Five roads come together on this square. Take the second road on your L side which runs in E direction. It is the road located in between the main road which runs to Asira Ashimaliya and the road going down the hill (S) towards the village of Al-Naqura.



Mosque of Prophet Yahya



Sheikh Sha'leh

[1.7-2.8km] From this point onwards, the road climbs very gradually and swirls around the S side of Jabal Sheikh Sha'leh and overlooks the wadi coming from the village of Al-Naqura below. You can also see the residential towers of Nablus to the SE. Continue to follow the road until, after 2.5km into the hike, the ruins of Maqam Sheikh Sha'leh can be clearly seen

above over your L shoulder. A path to the L side of the road winds up through the fields and over large rock formations to the Maqam (5). As you approach the ruins be careful not to step into one of the caves that surround the Maqam.

On the way back simply retrace your steps to reach the old town of Sebastia.

Sheikh Sha'leh

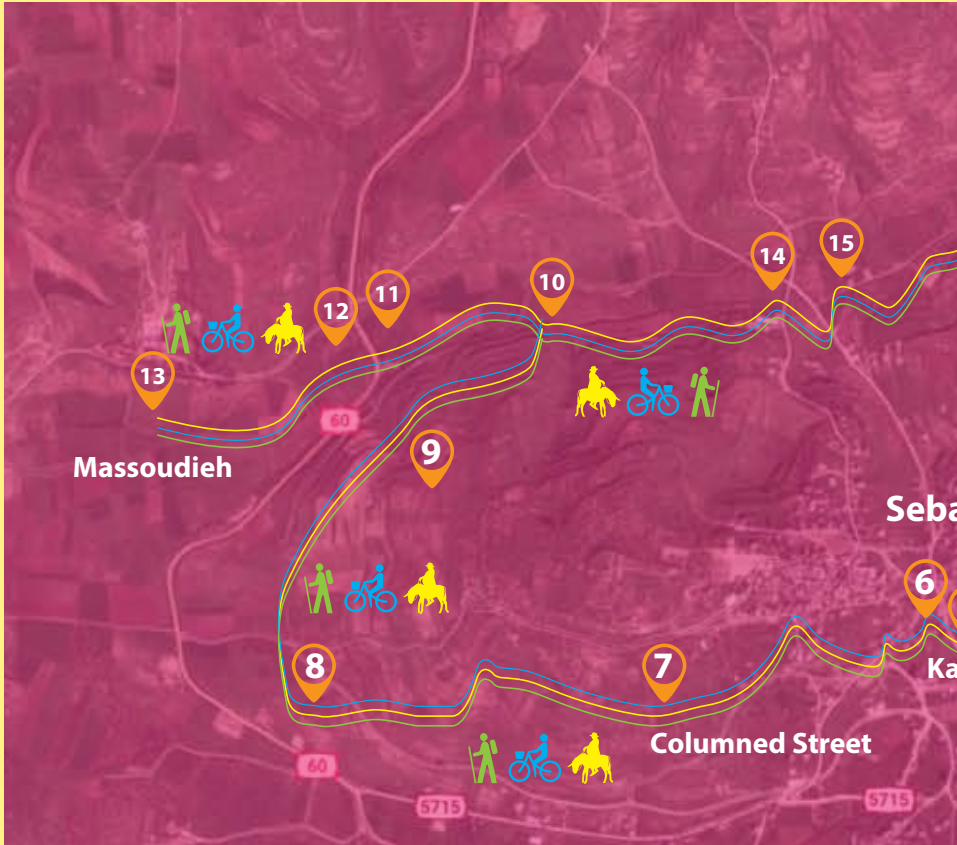
In the 17th century the Ottoman traveller Evliya Celebi described the place on the hill south-east from Sebastia: “. Again, opposite it raises the Tekye of Sheikh Sha'le on an ascending slope, like a fortress. The sheikh used to worship in this convent during the day-time, and in the dark night he would gather his dervishes around him, when he would begin to lecture to them without using any torches or lights. His holy talk would illuminate his holy assembly until the morning. They therefore call him Sheikh Sha'le. He is a high(ly honoured) Lord and his a flourishing shrine. I visited it and was honoured by kissing the hand of his descendant, the present Sheikh Sun'ullah, and of being blessed by him”.

The large construction includes a hall supported by huge columns and a courtyard in front of the main entrance. The present building is a reconstruction of an ancient fabric. You can notice an interesting Greek inscription on the lintel of the entrance that mentions the bishop of Sebastia, Stephan, who has built here a sanctuary in honour of Prophet Elijah in the Byzantine period. Going around the area you can find caves and cisterns.



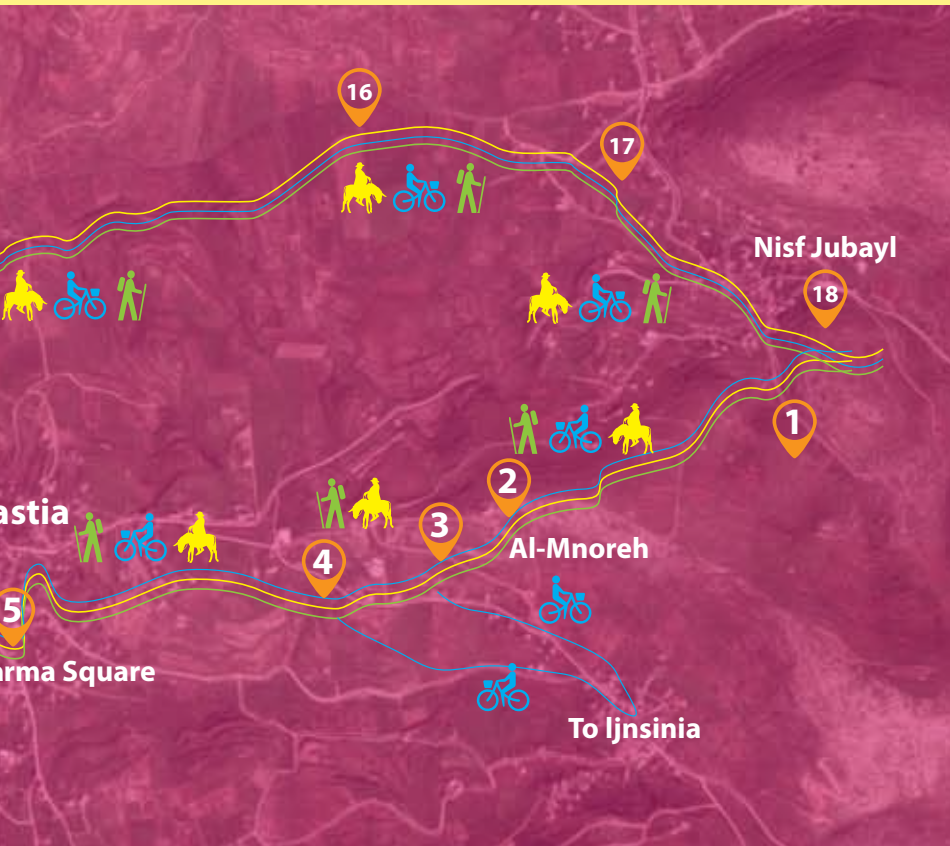
Sheikh Sha'leh

Trail from Nisf Jubeil to Massoudieh through Sabastia and back



[0m-610m] The hike starts from the Guest House of Nisf Jubeil. Standing outside it, right in front of you at the end of a flight of stone steps, you can enjoy the view of the Orthodox Church, Mar Giries. To begin the walk, go L along the road going downhill and immediately after the Guest House you will walk past a community restaurant on

your L hand side and then, after a few steps, past the Village Council on the R. Go straight and on your L you will see the ancient Mosque. At the end of the road keep to the L. The road now goes uphill. Notice the beautiful ancient house on your R. The road continues heading W and is flanked by olive trees on both sides. Now it becomes a dirt track.



Mosaic guest house in Nisf Jubail





Mosaic guest house in Nisf Jubeil

[610 m - 1.3 Km]

The track continues uphill among olive trees. The first building you see on the right is a factory (1). After it, the track bends to the R. This area is called Khirbet Al-Mnore (2) and from here you can enjoy a beautiful view. If you observe the hill to the N, proceeding from the N to the W, after Nisf Jubeil you can see Bayt Umrin; then part of the village of Burqa and in the end Bazariya. Between the two big hills in front of you to the W, if the sky is clear, you can enjoy the view of the sea and the contour of the high buildings of Hadera and other cities in the NW.



Continue the hike along the road until the top of the hill, which you will reach at 1.3 km (3). From here, looking to the W, Sebastia is already visible on the opposite hill, while to the SE you can see Naqura and on the top of the hill the monastery of Sheikh Sha'leh. The village you see to the S is Ijnisinia. On the top of the hill three roads come together: the first on the L leads to a private house, the second brings you to Ijnisinia, while the third to Sebastia. Before continuing the route, take a little time to enjoy the fascinating landscape: small villages lie on the gentle hills and, while in the winter all is green and brownish, in the spring the mantle turns to a bright green studded with yellow flowers. To continue on your way, choose from the following routes according to your mode of transportation.



BY BIKE

[1.3 Km - 2.8 Km]: Take the second road on your L which goes down the hill. After 600m you go past the cemetery on your L. A little further the dirt road reaches the paved street. Take this main street to the R and keep pedaling. On your R you will see a steel factory. This is also the point where your trail meets the others. (4)



Landscape in Nisf Jubeil

ON FOOT

[1.3 Km - 2 Km]: Take the dirt road going downhill. At the end of the descent, on the left you can see a steel factory. This is the point where the unpaved road reaches the main street and where your trail meets the others. Turn right onto the paved street.

ON FOOT/BY DONKEY

[2 km - 4.5Km], by BIKE [2.8 Km - 5.3 Km]

On a road running below you on

your R, you can see the “Ibn Seena Medical Centre”. Proceeding along the paved street, you pass under an iron door with a farewell for those who are leaving the area. When you get to the fork in the road, on the R you can see the street leading to Nisf Jubeil. On this road, opposite the Medical Centre, there is the Police Station. Right in front of you, where the road splits, there is the white building of the Hall for Wedding Parties. If you look to the S, proceeding from the W to the S, you can see Shavei Shomrom and then Naqura. On your R, instead, you can see an apricot tree field, enjoy the blossom if the season is right. Take the street on the L going downhill. Along the first narrow street on the R hand side, there is Sebastia’s school, where Nisf Jubeil’s children go from class 8 on. Now the street bends slightly to the R. Following the road you will reach another fork: the street on the R proceeds to the NE towards Burqa, while the other leads to Sebastia. Take this road and keep walking until you reach Al-Karma square (5), where four roads come together. The first road on the R hand side heads to the Old City. Take this street and walk past a narrow street going uphill on your L, opposite a carwash. After 200m, before the road bends to the R, take the steep narrow street on your L (6) which climbs among the houses. When you arrive on the top, continue walking a little and then take the wooden catwalk on your L



Mosque of Prophet Yahya

to see the impressive Crusader Hall (Baad). Turn back on the alleyway. Now you are walking on the street that runs alongside Sebastia Guest House. The first narrow street that opens on the R leads you to an area which has been renovated recently and where you can visit the beautiful Chapel in the Tower, dating back to the Crusader period. When you go back onto the road, on the L hand side you can see the Domed tomb, dated to the end of the second/beginning of the third century AD. If you look to your R, instead, you will see the entrance to the Mosque of Prophet Yahya, its crypt contains the tomb of Prophet Yahya/St. John

the Baptist. In front of the Mosque there is a coffee shop and rest area, where you can have a nice break in the shade of some tall pine trees. To continue the walk, take the first street on the L. Here, on the R hand side, you will see the Ottoman Qasr el Kaed, an impressive building hosting a guesthouse. Walk along its wall and take the first small street on the R. Keep walking and turn L. Here on your R you can see the Mosaic Guest House, with its many colorful flowers, and recent excavations. Stop here to enjoy the beautiful atmosphere and to visit the shop that sells local specialties and handicrafts for the benefit of local youth and women and where you can also ask for information about local cultural resources.

Sebastia - Massoudieh



Roman Bottega in Mosaic Guest house Sebastia



Handmade ceramic products of Nisf Jubeil

[0 m - 210 m] We recommend taking this trail in the late afternoon, because the path faces west and offers a breathtaking view of the landscape around Sebastia, plunged in green and yellow fields and the red of the sky at sunset. When you leave the Mosaic Guest House-Sebastia, go straight and then take the street on the L and climb up the steps on your right. At the fork, go L. You pass under an arch, the Bab Al-Madafa. Keep walking straight and follow the street uphill. On your R hand side there is the cemetery of Sebastiya. After this, take the narrow alleyway which climbs up between two houses to lead you to the Archaeological Site.



Detail of Mosaic Guest house Sebastia

When you reach the large square, take a break; you are now on the Roman Forum, known by local people as al-Baidar. On the Eastern part of the Forum you can see the Interpretation Centre, which provides visitor information, while at the West end, where columns are still visible, are the remains of the Roman Basilica. From here climb up the hill to visit the impressive archaeological remains that date back to the Israelite, Assyrian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine period. Before continuing your trail, you can enjoy either a good coffee or lunch in one of the restaurants and coffees around the square.



Basilica in Sebastia



Columned street in Sabastiya

[210 m - 1.7 Km] To continue the walk, take the asphalt road on your L that goes downhill to the SW (7). You are now on the columned street, which still runs to the West Gate of the city. On the right side you can see The Holy Land Sun Restaurant, where you can enjoy typical and good Arabic food. If you look to your L hand side, lying on the hill, you will see the Israeli settlement of Shavei Shomrom. Just after the restaurant on the R side there is a flight of stairs that was used in the past to reach the Acropolis. Keep walking along the road, flanked by olive trees, and you will reach the intersection with the main columned road that used to run east - west (*Decumanus*). At the end of the street you will notice huge stone structures on both sides:

this used to be the main Roman Gate. From here on your R you can also see remains of the mighty wall that encompassed the city during the Roman period. Sebastia's young people love to sit here enjoying the sunset with its fascinating colours.

[1.7 Km - 4.5 Km] After 1.5 km you will see a dirt road which crosses the paved street (8). You will reach an old railway station, called Massoudieh. This used to be a stop of the Ottoman Railway, whose main branch connected Damascus to Medina, reached in 1908. A branch line was built from Haifa to Samakh, at the Southern end of the Sea of Galilee, and from there it ran Eastwards to link with the line from Damascus to Deraa. This line from Haifa shed a branch southwards from Afule through Massoudieh to Nablus.



Massoudieh railway station

Take the dirt road to the right side and keep walking on this path which will offer you a breathtaking view of the landscape. The atmosphere of peace and silence will take you back to the times when the railway was built, while the bright colours in the warm light of the sun will capture your heart. The main road runs below you on your L hand side and if you look across it, you can already see the Ottoman Station. On the

hills around you, to due N lies the village of Burqa. On the field to your right below you, you can notice part of the railway bending southwards. Now the dirt road veers to the R and leaves the main road for a while (9). Keep walking and, after following the path bending to the L, you will pass over a bridge and reach a junction with another dirt road: take it on the L (10). Now you can see the main street again, a little below and ahead of you. The path climbs up to the R (11). From here you can already see the entrance to the Ottoman Railway Station. Cross the main road (12) and follow the road sign, leading you to the station along a track among the olive trees (13). The area of the Station is well equipped with wooden tables and benches. Therefore, you can have a rest, have a picnic or a barbecue while enjoying the wonderful landscape.

Landscape along the trail



Massoudieh - Nisf Jubeil
 [0 m – 1.30 Km] When you leave the station, walk along the track until it reaches the main street (12). Cross it and take the dirt road in front of you. This is the same path you followed after crossing the bridge on the way to Massoudieh. After a few metres you will get to a fork in the road; turn R onto the little descent (11). From this moment on you will walk through a valley called Wadi Shami, with Sebastia on the R hand side and Burqa on the L. While walking along the valley, you can enjoy the lovely scenery around and above you. In addition, in spring and summer you can stop from time to time to pick delicious fruits from the trees and taste other treats, like wild fennel. Olive trees will accompany you all along the way.

After a while the road becomes a narrow path. After 45m, looking to your R, you can see the railway and Sebastia. Now the road continues among prickly pear plants on the R and olive trees on the L. Take the narrow street you see on the R hand side. On the L you can see several apricot trees.

[1.30 Km - 1.48 Km]

Here you reach a T junction (14). Take the road to your R and keep walking until you reach the point where three roads come together: the first on the L takes to Burqa, while the one on the R and the middle leads to Sebastia.

[1.48 Km - 1.69 Km] The road bends to the L and then makes a turn to the R. (15)

Landscape along the trail





Meeting along the trail

[1.69 Km - 2.32 Km] At this point it becomes a track again and you may meet donkeys and sheep with their shepherds returning home at sunset. In front of you towers a hill behind which Nisf Jubeil lies. If you look to the R hand side, you will see the ruins of an ancient wall.

[2.32 Km - 3.12 Km] Sebastia is now behind you, while to your R you can see Nisf Jubeil and in front

Bayt Umrin. Keep walking along this path.

[3.12 Km - 3.54 Km] When you see a dirt track which crosses the street you are on, turn R (16). Instead, if you take it to the L, it goes uphill toward Burqa.

[3.54 Km - 4.12 Km] If it's the right season, you can recognize plum trees on the R and figs on the L all around you.

[4.12 Km - 4.34 Km] Now the path continues up the hill, but you turn R (there is a red house which helps you to identify where to turn). If you look to the R up above, you can already see Nisf Jubeil School.

[4.34 Km - 4.85 Km] Turn R again towards Nisf Jubeil (17). Go past a small path on the R and keep on the same road, which becomes narrower and continues uphill. Here on your R hand side you are close to the school you have seen earlier, and in the same direction you can see the cemetery of Nisf Jubeil.

Walking along the trail





Handmade ceramic products of Nisf Jubeil



Local food in Sabastiya

[4.85 Km - 5.08 Km] When you reach this point, turn L. The street goes uphill and the first houses of Nisf Jubeil will appear in front of you. When you reach the main street, turn L and follow it downhill.

[5.08 Km - 5.3 Km] Here, at the entrance of the village, you can see the mosaic sign made by the people of Nisf Jubeil with the help of Mosaic Centre Jericho and to its L the Maqam al-Khader,(18) an old building respected by both Muslims and Christians. People used to light a candle there when their vows came true. Under the buiding there is an old water well,

called Ain al-Khader. Following the street uphill you will arrive at the supermarket on Nisf Jubeil's main square. Here take the road to the L and continue until you reach the Orthodox Church. Go past it and climb up the steps just next to it. At the top of the flight you will see the charming Mosaic Guest House- Nisf Jubeil right in front of you, where you can experience the colours, perfumes and sounds of the Palestinian rural life. If you look to the L, up the hill, the gate of the Ceramic Centre is visible. Stop here to enjoy the beautiful production made by the women of the village.

The spring

The walk that leads to Sheikh Sha'leh, will take you to the springs near Nakurah, called 'Ain Harun (Harun Spring). The visit of the spring requires a local guide. The ancient ruins consist of an underground passage which is partly built and partly tunnelled through the rock. The passage is about 80 m long. About 30 m from the end, there is a chapel where the canal water flows between the apse and the nave. According to the archaeologists of the Joint Expedition, there was originally an external entrance from the west or the south. A little beyond the chapel the passage forks; one spring is close to the fork and a second is at the end of a longer tunnel that is less than a metre high. In the past, the line of the conduit rounded the hill on which stands the weli (shrine) of Sheikh Sha'leh and made a sharp curve west of Jinsiniah. Then the water crossed the chasm between the two valleys by a bridge. The total length of the ancient conduit is about 4,400 m, more than two and a half times the length of the modern aqueduct (1,700 m.). The remains of a second conduit on the hillside west of Jinsiniah have been found.



'Ain Harun in Nakurah

Ancient Tombs

Around the village numerous ancient tombs have been discovered and are still the object of numerous cases of illegal excavations. Among the most important tombs, there is a Roman mausoleum excavated in 1931 south-east of the village. From the main square in front of the mosque, take the left side and go down the valley. In the crossroad go straight and after the wood shop take the left. A small path paved only for the first twenty metres reaches the mausoleum. It consists of an atrium with two sepulchral chambers, and contained a number of limestone unornamented sarcophagi. Thanks to the arrangements made by the Department of Antiquities of the Palestine Government during the British Mandate, the tomb was left open for visitors. The present condition of the tomb are miserable, but still worth a visit.



Roman mausoleum after excavations



Present condition of Roman mausoleum

غرفة نوم
غرفة نوم



Where to eat

Restaurants' owners and workers are very kind and helpful. All restaurants serve the same kind of tasty local food; we suggest *musakhan* (*taboon* bread topped with roasted chicken baked with onions, sumac, spices and oil) especially during the olive harvest season or *maklubah* (rice, vegetable and chicken) that cost around 15 Euros. If you prefer something light ask for *manakish* (Arab pizza), that will cost around 10 Euros.

Restaurants in the Forum area are:

- Samaria Restaurant of Abu Salem, northern part of the Forum near the Basilica (0599071552), email: samaria.restaurant@yahoo.com
- Holy Land Sun restaurant of Abu Mohammad Rajab, at the beginning of the Columned street (0599212252), email: holylandsun@yahoo.com
- Sabastiya rest of Abu Rasmi Shaer, southeast corner of the Forum (0598890934).
- Bab al Saha restaurant of Riad Shaer, in the middle of the south side of the Forum (0597446677).
- Al Qala restaurant of Naad Akel, on the western terrace over the Basilica (0568989976).
- Basilica restaurant of Fakher Shareef, on the western slope (0597404155)

In the village you can enjoy falafel and sip coffee and tea in the main coffee shop under the big pine trees in front of the mosque.



Traditional food in Sabastiya

Where to stay overnight

In the village there are some nice guesthouses.

The Mosaic Guest House is our favourite. It is a clean and lovely restored complex with courtyards and terraces, where you can find warm hospitality, traditional food for breakfast and local handcraft. The guest house is managed by the Mosaic Centre, a non profit Ngo that organised guided visits and walks in the surroundings. It has eight rooms all with bathrooms. It also preserved and equipped three rooms in the nearby small rural village of Nisf Jubeil. In total it can host 25 people. All profits are reinvested in the activities to preserve the cultural heritage of the village. Website: www/mosaicghsebastia.com
To book contact by email mosaicguesthouse@yahoo.com or call Shadi at 0595952187.

Al-Kayed Palace guest house is equipped inside a beautiful Ottoman building. To book contact by email alkyed_2011@yahoo.com or call Abu Yaser at 0599473646



Mosaic Guest House

Where and what to buy

In the archaeological area inside the Mosaic Guest House, the Mosaic Centre provides maps and books on Sabastiya's history and sells local products such as jam, soaps and handmade handicraft souvenirs (pottery and mosaic) locally produced in the Roman Bottega. It also offers mosaic-making lessons to visitors. Opening hours: from 8 am to 4 pm. Closed on Fridays.

Other souvenirs can be bought inside the Samaria and Holy Land Sun restaurants. Other kiosks can be found along the trail in the archaeological site. Abu Firas gift shop is located before the theatre and the Holy Land Sun souvenir in the Forum.

You should not miss the opportunity to visit the Nisf Jubeil Ceramic Lab in the village of Nisf Jubeil, 3 km from Sabastiya. The ceramic laboratory allows visitors to appreciate local hand made products. The unique production is connected to the agricultural and pastoral nature of the village and is inspired by the archaeological discoveries in the area.



Roman Bottega in Mosaic Guest House



MAP LEGEND

- 1 MOSQUE OF PROPHET YAHIA (CRUSADER CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN)
- 2 HISTORICAL BUILDINGS IN THE VILLAGE
- 3 DOMED TOMB
- 4 FORUM
- 5 BASILICA
- 6 THEATRE
- 7 HELLENISTIC TOWER
- 8 TEMPLE OF AUGUSTUS
- 9 OMRI CITADEL
- 10 CHURCH OF THE HEAD OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
- 11 COLUMNED STREET
- 12 WEST GATE
- 13 ROMAN CITY WALL
- 14 STADIUM