

The Tomb of Nabi Yahia/St. John the Baptist in Sabastiya: Documentation and Historical Analysis

Carla Benelli Associazione Pro Terra Sancta

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Bir Zeit University*

In the middle of the present village, in the area that was probably just outside the wall in the eastern side of the Roman city, a *maqam* (sanctuary) built inside the shell of a Crusader cathedral recalls the place where Muslims and Christians honoured the tomb of Saidna Yahia/St. John the Baptist. But why Sabastiya?

From Christian sources, we learn that during 4th century AD, the tradition began about the remains of John the Baptist being buried in Sebaste, next to prophets Elisha and Obadiah's tombs. We do not know how and when St. John's body arrived in Sebaste. According to the Gospels and the Koran, the Roman ruler Herod Antipas (the son of Herod the Great) had imprisoned the prophet Yahya/St. John because he was reproaching him for the adulterous relations with Herodias, the wife of his brother Herod Philip I. At a party for Herod's birthday, Herodias's daughter Salome danced before the king and his guests. Her dancing pleased Herod so much that he promised to give her anything she desired. Herodias suggested Salome to ask for the head of the prophet. The Gospels continue the narration, writing that after his death his disciples took the Baptist's body and buried it, but they did not explain where.

According to the historian Flavius Josephus, John had been beheaded in Machaerus fortress, in Transjordan (Antiquities, XVIII, 5, 2). His head was handed over by Salome to her mother Herodias and we have to suppose that John's disciples, having taken what remained of the body, left the tetrarchy, where Herodias could still persecute them. During the first centuries of Christianity, John's disciples, called the Baptists, were everywhere in Samaria.

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

"At the times of Emperor Julian [...] in Sebaste, city of Palestine, the pagans invaded



John the Baptist's sepulchre: they first dispersed his bones, but then they collected them again to burn them; they mixed the sacred ashes with dust and dispersed them all in the countryside and villages. But for God's will, some monks came along from Philip's monastery in Jerusalem ... they mixed up with those who were collecting the bones to burn, they collected some too with carefulness and pious devotion, at the best of their ability, and they went away stealthily bringing the venerable remains to the saint Father Philip" (Hist. Eccles. VII, 4)

In Bethlehem around the year 390, St. Jerome, while translating in Latin the *Onomasticon of the Holy Sites* written between the end of the III and the beginning of the IV century by the Greek Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, adds about Samaria/Sebaste: "*where the remains of John the Baptist are guarded*". The same author recalls the tomb of St. John in Sebaste in his account of St. Paula's pilgrimage to the Holy Sites.

The Palestinian monk John Rufus, bishop of Majuma in Gaza, is the first to recall a church, around 512, built on the Baptist's tomb in Sebaste: "*This site, in fact, was a particular chapel of the church, enclosed within gates because it contains two urns covered in gold and silver, in front of which burn perennial lamps: one is John the Baptist's, the other is Prophet Elisha's.*" (Plerophoriae, PO 8, 70). The Byzantine church is shown in the 8th century floor mosaic of St. Stephan's church in Umm Rasas, in Jordan.

Two sanctuaries were dedicated to the Baptist in Sebaste. A second small basilica, built in the V century, was excavated by John W. Crowfoot in 1932 on the southern side of the acropolis. According to the Orthodox-Christian tradition, it marks the prison and death of John the Baptist and the spot where his head was buried by Herodias (5th century *Life of John the Baptist* (cf. PO 4, 531), Joannes Phocas 1185).

We do not know what happened to the tomb during the first Islamic period, but the Byzantine church of John the Baptist was probably destroyed by an earthquake, whereas the tomb was preserved and continued to be visited by pilgrims. Around 808 the *Commemoratorium de Casis Dei* records that the church has fallen to the ground "All that is left is the place of the glorious Baptist's tomb, which has not been entirely destroyed".

Nothing much remains of that first Christian building. The lower portion of its northern wall is still standing, and it is clearly visible from the north-eastern external corner. Some columns and basements of that period are scattered in the nearby area.

The Crusaders entered Sebaste and the entire Samaria region in 1099, soon after



conquering Jerusalem. Here they soon built a monastery and a fortified rural settlement, the Casale Sancti Iohannes Sebaste, as part of the King of Jerusalem's domains. A Russian abbot, Daniel, found already in his visit during 1106-8 a Latin religious community established in the ruined church at Sebaste. *"The tomb of John the Precursor is here and there is a fine church dedicated to him and there is a very rich Frankish monastery* (de Khitrowo 58).

In 1142 Usamah ibn Munqidh, emir of Shaizar in central Syria, wrote *"I visited the tomb of Yahia, Zaccharia's son – God bless both! – in the village of Sabastiya in Nablus. After my prayers, I entered an enclosed space in front of the tomb site. I found a half-closed door, I opened it and entered the church. Inside there were ten old men....and they give hospitality..."* (Kitab al Asa). The account indicates that the Baptist's tomb and the church occupied separate parts of the area.

Soon after Usamah's visit the condition of the church at Sebaste was radically altered, in 1145, William I, patriarch of Jerusalem, reported the casual finding of the saint's remains and granted a 40-day indulgence to all those who would contribute to rebuild the church. From that moment, the collection of money to rebuild the new John the Baptist's cathedral started.

The pilgrim Theodoric (1169-72) wrote that part of the relics were displayed in the church itself, but he is the first to describe the flight of steps going down the crypt. *"Moreover, a piece of his arms is held there in great veneration. He was buried, however, in the crypt between the prophets Elisha and Obadiah, One enters it down thirty-five steps"* .

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

In July 1187 Sebaste was conquered by Saladin's nephew, Husam ed-Din Muhammad. He partially transformed the cathedral, building a dome on the crypt of the tomb, and turning the right aisle into a mosque by adding a mihrab. *"he made a halt at Sabastiya, where lies the tomb of Zechariah. ... then he gave access to the Muslims and established the site of the mihrab for the direction of prayers"* (Imad al Din RHC Or, IV, 302)



In the following centuries, John the Baptist's tomb continued to be visited by Muslim and Christian pilgrims (Yaqut, Burchard of Mount Sion, Nicolas of Poggibonsi, Evliya Celebi and many others). In the 16th century Fr. Pantaleone d'Aveiro records that Christians kept lamps burning beside three tombs and Boniface of Ragusa locates the chapel in the south-eastern part of the church. Deacon Domenico Laffi from Bologna, in 1679 was in Sabastiya and relates that the building “ at present is divided down the middle, the Greeks officiating on one side and the Muslims on the other.

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

Very little documentation was done before our projects about the tomb (see Survey of Western Palestine 1882)

Thanks to a series of initiatives of private fund raising, in 2010 we succeeded to carry out a small project of documentation and emergency conservation (electrical system and hand rail), which was carried out by the local community for free.

Starting from today's floor level, in the third bay of the central nave, under two bitter orange trees, a small dome gives access to a narrow staircase leading to the Roman tomb. The tomb is composed of a barrel-vaulted chamber and six sepulchral niches arranged in two rows on the southern wall. In the lower row, Christian tradition tells us the tomb of John the Baptist rests, between the prophets Elisha and Obadiah, while local narrative recalls also the tomb of his mother and his father Zaccharia. The floor in *opus sectile* dates back probably to the Byzantine period (Bagatti), but the current arrangement of the tomb dates back to the Crusader period.

From the plans prepared by Arch. Osama Hamdan, it is evident that the crypt and the Roman tomb were transformed after the building of the Crusader pilaster to built the cathedral. The entrance through the steps is one, but a closed door at the end of the corridor make possible the presence of another flight of steps to exit.

From the sections and elevation prepared by Arch Osama Hamdan we can see that the second room was added to the maqam, probably after the removal of the mosque to the east in 1892.



Conclusion:

We cannot say why the tomb of the Baptist was located in Sabastiya, but we can mention two different hypothesis:

1. the disciples of John wanted to preserve the body of the Saint, and brought it far from Herodias, in a place where Herod Antipas has no power (Samaria was under the direct control of Romans). They chose as burial a holy place, a tomb where other Prophets were already buried. In Samaria there were many disciples of the Baptist.
2. The local narrative (both Christians and Muslims) recalls that the tomb of the Baptist was near the ones of Elisabeth and Zacharia, suggesting that it was the tomb of the family.