

The Monastery of Bir el-Hamam, Mount Gerizim, Palestine

Site Management and Presentation

Hamdan Taha

Former Director General of Antiquities,
Palestinian Territory, Occupied

opposite page
Fig.1
Satellite photo
of Mount Gerizim

Abstract

The archaeological site of Bir el-Hamam, located on the northern top of Mt Gerizim, Nablus, in Palestine, was discovered in 2001 during preparatory work for the construction of the 'House of Palestine', a rotunda style residence for Mr. Munib al-Masri. In that same year, a salvage excavation was carried out by the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, and staff and students from An-Najah National University, directed by H. Taha (2015). The archaeological remains of a small monastery were preserved *in situ* in the lowest floor of the building as a complete self-contained public archaeological site.

The archaeological site included a complex of household installation and spaces, such as an open courtyard, a rain-fed cistern, a stable, and a kitchen. It also included a room with a mosaic floor with fragments of religious texts. This room gave access to an exceptional space of a chapel with colourful mosaics and a dedicatory text for three deceased 'brothers, lovers of Christ'. A nicely decorated chancel screen separated the holy eastern part, the bema, with its altar table, from the main room. This chapel, combined with the chandeliers found, indicates that the compound concerns a small monastery (Kooij, 2015, p.7).

The management plan of the site was based on an agreement between the private owner of the land and the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, the public owner of the archaeological remains, in order to keep this heritage site accessible for the public. As a result in 2004 a series of restorations and consolidation works were implemented, and measures were taken to ensure that the site is accessible and visitor friendly. A wooden visitor's trail was made, hanging in and over the architectural remains, and a museum room with an exhibition was added to present the site.

Introduction

The site of Bir el-Hamam is located on the north-western upper slope of Mount Gerizim (coordinates 175180-179620), approximately one kilometre west of Tell er-Ras on the north-eastern upper slope of the mountain, overlooking the city of Nablus (Fig. 1-2). Bir el-Hamam rises 750 metres above sea level and commands a broad view to the north and to the



MOUNT EBAL

Nablus

Tell Balata

Birel-Hamam

MOUNT GERIZIM

Tell er Ras

Maqam esh Sheikh Ghanim

east. The site bears the name of Bir el-Hamam, meaning literally the “Well of Pigeons,” and this is still indicated by two cisterns on the site.

Bir el-Hamam was recorded for the first time in the *Palestinian Survey* in 1999 (Ashhab, 2002) and by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in 2001 (Taha, 2015; Taha, 2014, p.26). The site is part of Mount Gerizim, known locally as *Jebel et-Tor*, *Jebel es-Sumara*, *Jebel Abu Ghanim* and *Jebel el-Qibli*. It has been traditionally identified with the Samaritan sacred mount *Har ha-Kedem* (the ancient mount), and *Tura Berikha*, upon which the blessing was delivered by divine decree (Wilson, 1873; Guérin, 1874; Conder and Kitchener, 1882; Anderson, 1980; Magen, 1993). The first major excavation on the Mount was carried out by Schneider in the Byzantine Church of the Theotokos in 1928 (Schneider, 1951). However, the systematic archaeological investigation at Tell er-Ras was conducted from 1964 to 1968 under the direction of Robert Bull within the framework of the Joint American Expedition at Tell Balata. Bull uncovered the Zeus temple and the staircase that links the city with the temple (Bull, 1968; Bull and Wright, 1965). The excavations by I. Magen at Gerizim and Neapolis began in 1982 (Magen, 2008; Magen, 2009). A substantial part of the main summit was excavated, revealing Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Arab remains.

Christianity began during the early Roman period, but it was not established easily in Nablus, since this was the stronghold of the Samaritan religion (Zangenberg, 1998). Therefore Nablus was a multi-religious city for centuries, with pagan Romans, Samaritans and Christians living together. The city of Neapolis flourished during the Byzantine period and became the seat of a bishop in the fourth century. One of the bishops of Nablus was Germanus, who attended the councils of Ankara and Nicea, and was praised by the Samaritan poet Marqah, who permitted the Samaritans to circumcise despite the prohibition by Roman law (MacDonald, 1963). Other bishops were mentioned too, including Terebinthus during the Samaritan revolt under Zeno around 484 AD, Procopius, who took part in the council of Jerusalem in 518 AD, John in 536 AD, and Ammonas, who was killed in the Samaritan revolt of 529 AD (Bagatti, 2002, pp.61-62).

In 484 AD, during the reign of Emperor Zeno, a large octagonal church (36 metres long and 28 metres wide, with an internal diameter of 21.4 metres) was built on the summit of Mount Gerizim, dedicated to Mary Theotokos, the Mother of God (Bagatti, 2002, p.71). The church was built on the most sacred Samaritan place; consequently, the area witnessed episodes of struggle between the two faiths. In the sixth century the church was fortified by the building of a massive enclosure flanked by seven towers. The church was excavated by A. M. Schneider in 1928 (Schneider, 1951, pp.210–234). The excavations showed clearly that the church was not built on top of the Samaritan temple. The church is distinctive in having four side chapels on the four sides of the octagon, each with its own entrance to the church. On the north and south sides there were arcades from which one passed into the church; on the west side was the narthex with three

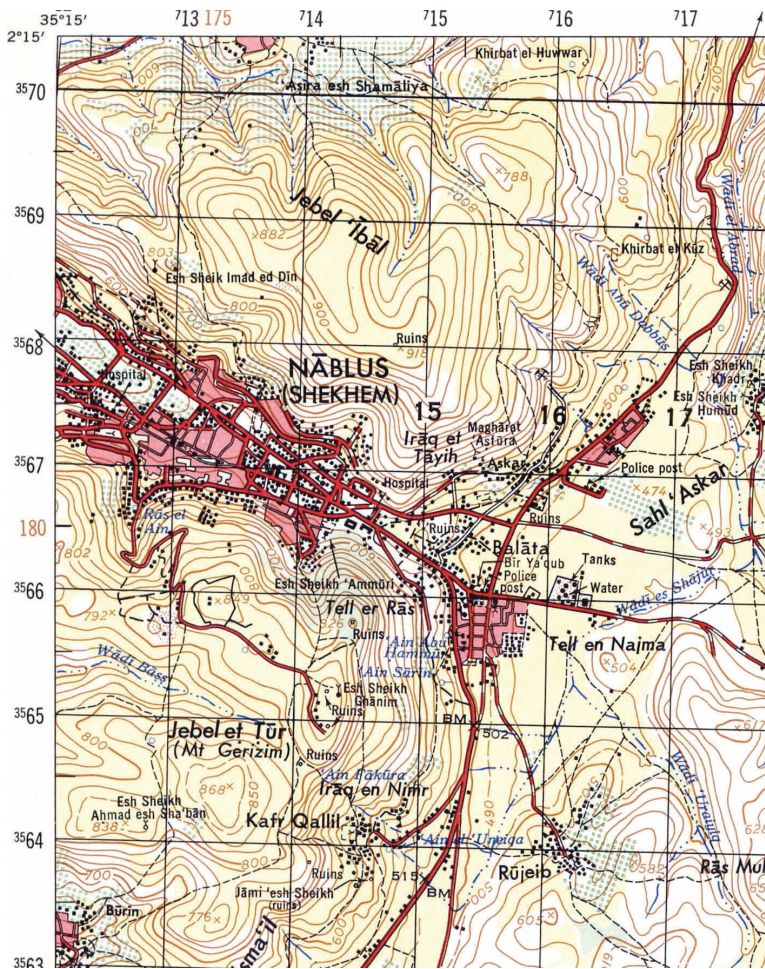


Fig.2
Map of Nablus
and Mount
Gerizim, 1964

monumental doors. The dome of the church rested on an octagon formed by 14 columns, alternating with 8 pilasters. Two pilasters supported the triumphal arch in front of the apse (Petrozzi, 1981, p.175; Magen, 1990). In the sixth century, Emperor Justinian (530 AD) fortified the church by building an enclosure around it, reinforced by towers.

Mount Gerizim continues to be the religious centre of the Samaritans. During the last decades, a small Samaritan settlement has flourished on the lower slope of the upper peak, west of the sacred area. The modern village now includes a museum that displays artefacts related to the Samaritan culture. The site of the sacrificial ceremony is now a permanent installation that is designed to accommodate thousands of visitors (Taha, 2009, pp.19–20). The Samaritan community displays remarkable continuity of a living cultural tradition within Palestinian society that is expressed in a religious way of life that the community believes has been pursued for more than three thousand years. This community represents the smallest and most ancient living religious community in the world (Taha, 2009, p.19).

Excavation of Bir el-Hamam

The site was discovered during bulldozing work conducted by the owner of the land for the construction of a house. A salvage operation was carried out on the site that showed its great potential and the scale of damage inflicted on the site before the excavation. It was not possible to relocate the planned building, and the owner was in favour of preserving the archaeological site. Accordingly, the design and construction management team examined the site and it was decided to replace the foot foundations of the structure with piles, and to tie these piles with concrete beams that are constructed above the natural ground level. The archaeological site was located exactly at the centre of the proposed building, and accordingly it was all contained in the basement of the new building.

The first excavation was followed by a larger salvage excavation carried out jointly by the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage and the Department of Archaeology at An-Najah National University in Nablus. It was carried out under the scientific direction of Dr. H. Taha, assisted by B. Nassasera, D. el-Faris and M. Sayel from the Nablus Regional Office of Antiquities, and A. Khuweira and H. Ratrouf from the University (Taha, 2015, pp.33-40). The excavations took place in two main fields, Field A and Field B. Two major occupational strata were distinguished in the monastery complex. The earliest phase, Phase I, was dated to the late-fifth and early-sixth centuries and is represented by the monastery complex. The second phase is represented by remains from medieval times, and dating most probably from the Ayyubid period.



Description of the Monastery Complex

The complex is nearly square in plan (Fig. 3), measuring 28 metres east-west and 24 metres north-south (Taha, 2015, pp.44-62). It is surrounded by a perimeter wall, one metre in thickness. The monastery was entered from the main gate in the northeast corner of the building.

The whole area was enclosed by a perimeter wall built of large roughly dressed fieldstones. The internal walls were built of roughly cut stones and partly dressed ashlar. One to three stone courses of the walls have been preserved.

The general quality of the masonry of the first phase is relatively poor, the walls were constructed from rough field stones with few ashlar, with the core filled with small stones and mud, and the interstices between stones filled with plaster. Only the doors were built of well-dressed stones, such as thresholds, jambs, columns, capitals and the chancel screen fragments. The roof of rooms must have been supported by a vaulted substructure. Some of the column bases have been found, indicating that the wooden ceilings and tiled roofs were supported by the walls and the columns.

Some walls have been partly restored by the addition of one to two courses. The new addition is clearly discernible from the original wall found *in situ*.

The complex of buildings and open spaces consists of a chapel, a gate, external and internal courtyards, a cistern, a kitchen, a stable and a water reservoir in the southeast corner. It appears to be a self-sustaining habitation unit (Taha, 2015, pp.44-45). The chapel (Fig. 4) has only one nave, as is often

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Fig. 3
Plan of the
Monastery

Fig. 4
The main hall
of the chapel





the case in monasteries. The mosaics at Bir el-Hamam are relatively well preserved in the nave and the south side of the church (Taha, 2015, p.45). In general they are of simple design. The size of the tesserae ranges from 1 to 0.8 cm. The mosaic pavement of the church is a typical example of the Byzantine mosaic art of the fifth and sixth centuries AD.

The courtyard is rectangular in plan, 5.3 x 3.6 metres (Fig. 5). It was paved with large and medium stone slabs and small stones were fitted in between them. The size of the stone slabs ranges between 80 and 50 cm. This courtyard is connected by three entrances. The main entrance is to the east and gives access to the complex. It is 1.9 metres in width, elevated about 20 cm above the level of the courtyard, with evidence of a door socket from inside. The width of the footstep (threshold) is 0.5 metres. It consists of an ashlar stone, nicely cut, and at the two ends there is evidence of two circular holes for the door post. Two courses of the door jambs are preserved to a height of 75 cm. Opposite the main entrance, there is another gate that leads to the internal courtyard. It is 2.40 metres in width, with a footstep that is 55 cm wide. Only one course is preserved of this gate. A third entrance is located on the southern side and leads to the stable area, it is 1.22 metres in width. In the south-eastern corner a stone basin, probably a baptismal font, was found, apparently not *in situ*. It measures 70 x 58 cm and 37 cm in depth. The stone basin is 6 cm thick and has a circular hole in the lower part.

The Chapel is located in the southern corner of the monastery (Taha, 2015, pp.48-52). It is composed of two halls, the southern hall, containing the altar, the northern room (reunion room), and the eastern square room. It consists of a rectangular hall and follows a basilical plan. The south eastern area of the monastery complex has a partly exposed water pool (Fig. 6). A significant part of the pool was demolished during the construction work. The lower part of the pool was hewn in rock, whereas the upper part was built of fieldstones. The internal wall of the pool is coated by a layer of grey plaster.

Three dedicatory inscriptions were found at the monastery of Bir el-Hamam (Taha, 2015, pp.63-65). They were set into a framed *tabula ansata*, and they all consist of three lines. The one found in the southern hall (bema) is complete (Fig.7). The two in the northern hall are partly preserved with the first (left-hand) parts of the lines demolished. The inscriptions were dated to the middle of the sixth Century. The letters, with which the three inscriptions are written, are typical for the middle of the 6th century according to late Dr. M. Piccirillo.

The preserved parts of the inscription read by M. Piccirillo as follows:

- for the salvation...of...and of the armigeri (of the soldiers)
- the second inscription (O Lord Jesus Christ) give rest to... lovers of Christ
- the third inscription reads By vow and for the salvation of Esuchios and Megalos and Prokopias the brothers, lovers of Christ, mentioning the names of three brothers benefactors of the church

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Fig. 5

Bir el-Hamam,
the external
courtyard, from
the east

Fig. 6

Bir el-Hamam,
Water Reservoir,
from the
southwest

Material Culture

The archaeological finds in the excavation were relatively meagre and include stone objects, pottery vessels and shards, glass vessels, a number of coins, and a considerable number of metal objects. Among the architectural remains were numerous fragments of marble carved columns, capitals, chancel-screen panels and posts, an offering table and roof tiles.

The Byzantine pottery (Taha, 2015, pp.69-73) is represented by common ware. It consists of body shards, rims, bases, jars, juglets, bowls, cooking pots, unguentaria and handles. No ceramic lamps were found. However, two mendable vessels of the bag-shaped jars were retrieved from the excavation, with typical grey surface and light-brown, dark-red in colour. The grey ribbed jars have a cream-line geometric pattern.

The Crusader/Ayyubid pottery is represented by kitchen ware, decorated geometric ware and some glazed tableware of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The hand-made geometric painted ware is common at Bir el-Hamam. A strainer-Jug, spherical in body, decorated with geometric black painting applied on whit slip was found.

Numerous glass fragments (Taha, 2015, pp.74-75) were retrieved, including many diagnostic fragments and one mendable plate. The fragments include rims, handles, bases and decorated body parts that represent different types of bowls, lamps, and tubes.

The metal objects collection (Taha, 2015, pp.70-86) includes bronze plates, chandeliers, bronze ceiling maps or different objects that might be related



to this form, as well as iron nails and rings attached with nails, and bronze coins. One coin dates to the Byzantine period, to the reign of Constantine, but most date to the Crusader-Ayyubid period, and four are not clear.

Site Development

The site of Bir el-Hamam was excavated and rehabilitated as a small archaeological park by the Department of Antiquities of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and An-Najah National University in cooperation with the UNESCO office in Ramallah, and with financial support from the Munib R. Masri Development Foundation.

Restoration works

Following the excavation at the site in 2001, an agreement was reached between the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage and the owner to develop the archaeological site in the basement of the premises of Beit Felasteen (Taha, 2015, pp.100-102). In 2004, the Jericho Workshop for Mosaic Restorations conducted an assessment of the state of conservation of the site in order to plan for a series of restorations (Fig. 8). The study identified the main problems caused by the destruction of some parts of the archaeological remains, and the loss of parts of the mosaic pavements. Other problems identified are lacunas, fractures, fissures, pits, settlements and swelling of some parts of the mosaic floor.

The restoration work focused on consolidating mosaic borders, fixing loose tesserae, and filling the lacunas in the mosaic pavement. It also included treatment of the swellings and injection with lime mortar and consolidation of the degraded parts of the plaster, as well as general clearance work of the archaeological complex. The missing parts of the mosaic floor were filled with rubble. In the open courtyard of the monastery, most of the mosaic pavement was removed, but it was possible to collect the scattered mosaic tesserae and to repave a small part of the mosaic floor to show an example of the original situation of the courtyard pavement. Consolidation work was carried out in the cistern to fix the lime plaster and to consolidate its borders.

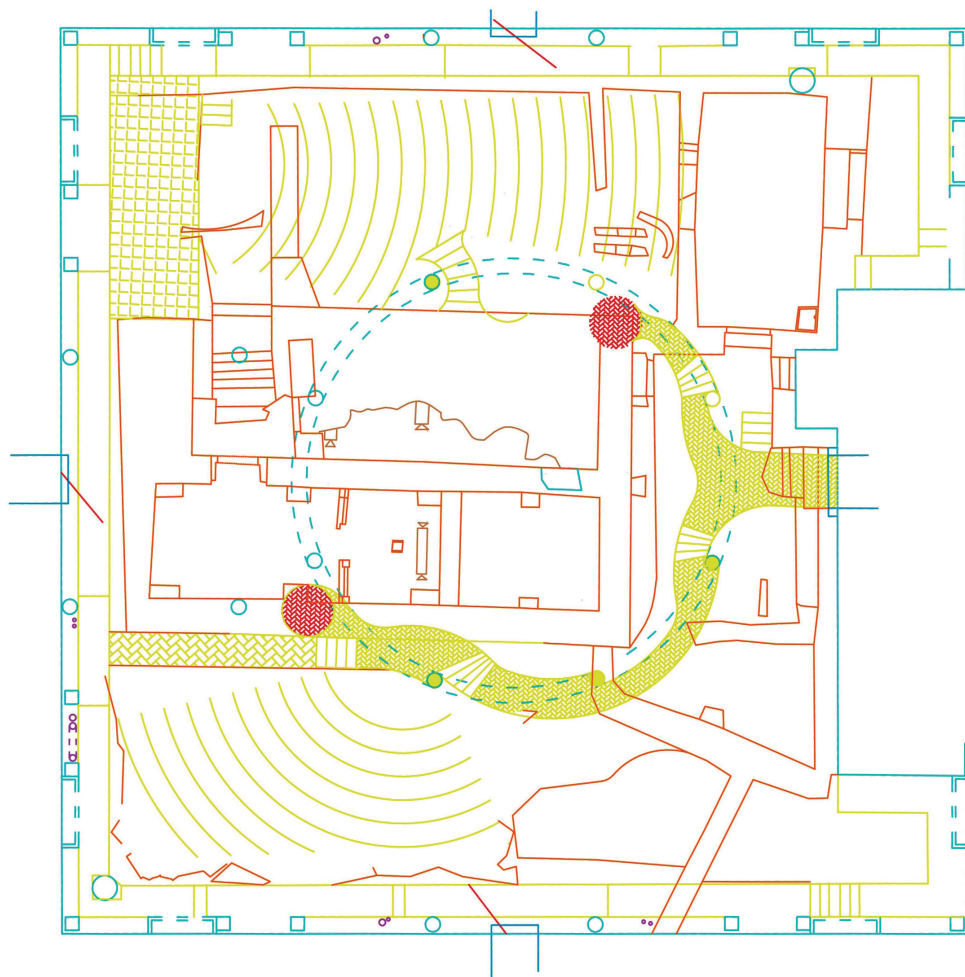
The UNESCO office in Ramallah was approached to provide technical assistance in the development of the site as an archaeological park. During the period February 5 to 26, 2006, architect Tiziano Aglieri Rinella was invited by UNESCO to carry out a mission in Nablus as a consultant for the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities to design and supervise the implementation of the archaeological museum at the Bir el-Hamam site. The international consultant worked cooperatively with the local team from the Department of Antiquities, which was composed of architects and archaeologists, namely J. Yasin, A. Humran, architects B. Hubeishe and I. Daoud, for the development plan and the architectural design for the site and the museum (Fig. 9). A series of activities were carried out in the main room (space) that is hosting the archaeological site; a project to create a visitor trail with handrails was designed and implemented (Fig. 10); a false ceil-



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Fig. 7
Bir el-Hamam,
the inscription of
the chapel

Fig. 8
Restoration
of mosaic
pavement



ing and lighting system was installed in the room, and the whole area was whitewashed as a way to minimise the visual damage caused by the cemented columns and bridges of the new building that was constructed over it.

Site Presentation

Several presentations and promotion activities were carried out on the site (Taha, 2015, p.104), including the production of a bilingual leaflet, in Arabic and English, about the archaeological site and Beit Felasteen, a site-map sign, and a book. The suspended visitor trail was designed to enable visitors to see all parts of the archaeological site before ending their tour in the small museum. The site-map sign was installed at the entrance, with information about the history of the site, architectural remains, mosaic floors, inscriptions and other finds. Arrows and short labelling signs of the main features of the archaeological site were placed along the visitors trail. Further promotion materials are no doubt needed, including posters, cards and a website to provide information to local and international visitors.

Archaeological Exhibition

In a room attached to the archaeological site, a small exhibition was organised as a complementary part of the visit (Taha, 2015, p.105). The exhibition and showcases (Fig. 11) were designed by architect Tiziano A. Rinella, in cooperation with the Department team and UNESCO cultural heritage expert, Arch. Giovanni Fontana. The small museum consists of a number of showcases. The archaeological finds were displayed in showcases and include complete pottery jars from the Byzantine period and a jug from the Ayyubid period, as well as a collection of coins from the Byzantine and Ayyubid periods. A small glass collection was found and displayed in the museum. The metal objects include the chandeliers, a bronze bowl in a good state of preservation, nails, rings and other small objects. Some architectural pieces, including pillar crowns and chancel-screen fragments that originate from the Byzantine church, were exhibited in the museum.



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Fig. 9
Development
plan (Tiziano
A. Rinella)

Fig. 10
The site after
development,
showing the
walking trail

Fig. 11
Archaeological
exhibition



Summary

The site of Bir el-Hamam (Well of Pigeons) is located on the north-western upper slope of Mount Gerizim, approximately one kilometre west of Tell er-Ras on the northern edge of the mountain, overlooking the western part of the city of Nablus. Bir el-Hamam is part of Mount Gerizim (*Jebel et-Tor*) and commands a broad view to the north and to the east and is rising 750 m above sea level. The excavation was carried out by the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and the University of An-Najah National University in 2001 under the scientific direction of the author.

The site features a small monastery complex, built on a quadrangular plan. It consists of the east gate, stable, the main courtyard, the cistern, the main prayer room (chapel, church) and the reunion room, associated with the kitchen, and an oven area to the west of the room. It may have served as a refectory in the monastery. The whole area was enclosed by a wall built of large roughly dressed field stones. The internal walls were built of field stones and partly dressed ashlar. The cistern apparently was fed by water drained from the roof surface of the church complex. This rain water was conveyed into the cistern by a subterranean channel running below the slab pavement of the atrium.

Two main occupational strata were distinguished, the earliest phase (phase I) was dated to the late 5th century and mid-6th century and is represented by the monastery complex. The second phase (II) is represented by the secondary remains of the medieval period most probably from the Ayyubid period. The coloured mosaics are relatively well preserved in the nave and the south side of the church. In general they are of simple design. The mosaic pavement of the church is a typical example of the Byzantine mosaic art.

The mosaic is enclosed by a wide border of geometric patterns. The chancel screen in the northern room encloses the *bema*. The ornamented chancel screen was found almost complete. It consists of two sections. Each has a chancel screen post and a panel. The finds include pottery vessels, glass objects, coins, and metal objects.

Three dedicatory mosaic inscriptions were found at the monastery. These inscriptions were set in a frame *tabula ansata*. The letters, with which the three inscriptions are written, are typical for the middle of the 6th century according to late father M. Piccirillo.

The existence of this monastery attests to the presence of Christian monastic life on Mount Gerizim, contemporaneous with the revival of a Christian presence on Mount Gerizim after the construction of the Church of the Theotokos at the top of the sacred Mountain. The site was rehabilitated as a small archaeological park by the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in cooperation with the UNESCO office in Ramallah and with financial support from Munib el-Masri Foundation.

Bir El-Hammam is considered as a pilot example of preserving an important archaeological site within a private property, in cooperation with its

owner. The works conducted at the site reflect an important example of developing and opening to the public the archaeological part without halting the construction of the building. It also reflects the private-public co-operation towards preserving cultural heritage.

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