

The Monastery of Samson up the Rock of Etham in the Byzantine Period

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1. The biblical rock of Etham

The name *ʿĒtām* (Etham) is only mentioned four times in the Old Testament¹, twice in the Samson narrative in a construct chain with the *nomen regens sela*^ʿ. Most probably this refers to a certain rock formation which distinguishes this toponym from the homonymous place. The toponym Etham can be located on three different sites²: a Judean Etham south of Jerusalem which has been fortified by Rehoboam according to 2 Chr 11,6 together with other cities³, a Simeonite Etham on the edge of the northern Negev according to 1 Chr 4,32 and the rock of Etham in the Samson narrative.

Outside the Bible another Etham is documented which can be differentiated from the Judean site. Eusebius mentions in his Onomasticon a toponym Etham “Where Samson lived in the cave of Etham beside the torrent”⁴.

According to Judg 15,8.11 Samson and the Judeans descended to the rock of Etham (*RDY*). This might indicate that one has to “step down” a countersunk cleft. In that respect Samson did not descend out of Timna to the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, he first went up the eastern mountains like the pursuing Philistines. Afterwards he descended to the cleft of Etham. The ascent was not mentioned in the narrative⁵. In the Samson narrative there is no need for a fortified city Etham on the spot where Samson hid⁶. A craggy environment would totally suit the story line. In Judg 15,8.11 there is a peculiar construct chain *səʿīp sela*^ʿ *ʿĒtām*. The *nomen regens* of this construct chain is difficult to explain because in the Old Testament only four instances with this word are to be found⁷. According to the twice prefixed preposition *bə* the word *səʿīp* might describe a room which is connected to a cliff. Due to the parallelism with *niqrōt haššūrīm* (“cliffy recess”) the construct chain *səʿīpə haššālāʿīm* might refer to rooms in the cliff. The word in question is sometimes connected etymologically with the Arabian *šaʿaba* (“split”)⁸. All things considered, the mysterious lexeme *səʿīp* might be either a “room in a cliff” or a “cleft in a cliff”. For the location of the rock of Etham the word *səʿīp* is not of great help.

¹ Judg 15,8.11; 1 Chr 4,32; 2 Chr 11,6. In another orthography (*ʿĒtām*) this toponym refers to a place during the Exodus of the Israelites, cf. Exod 13,20; Num 33,6–8.

² KOTTER 1992, 643–644; 2000, 429.

³ Most probably the Judean Etham is to be located on *Hirbet el-Hōh* (1670.1214) which lies near *ʿĒn ʿĀtān*. Cf. to this identification AHITUV 1995, 381; SCHMITT 1995, 152; NELSON 1997, 287; KOTTER 2000, 429; Vos 2003, 453; GASS 2005, 374–375.

⁴ Eusebius, Onomasticon 96,5: ἐνθα κατοικεῖ Σαμψών ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ Ἡτάμ παρὰ τῷ χειμάρρῳ. See new translation by FREEMAN-GRENVILLE/CHAPMAN/TAYLOR 2003, 55.

⁵ Cf. NIEMANN 1985, 180–181.

⁶ Cf. BIRCH 1881, 324.

⁷ Judg 15,8.11; Isa 2,21; 57,5.

⁸ Cf. especially SCHWARZENBACH 1954, 48–49.

Near the northern Shephela – the stage of the Samson narrative – there is only one distinctive place with cliffs over the Valley of Sorek, at the lower part of this valley, near its exit from the Judean Mountains to the Shephela: *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* (1527.1302)⁹ – a vertical rock face in *Wādī Ismaʿīn* which is the continuation of *Wādī eṣ-Ṣarār*. The rock of Etham might be found in the vicinity of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn*. There is a huge natural cave which could have been used for refuge purposes in early times¹⁰. According to a local tradition this cave was regarded as *Maqām* of the famous *Šēḥ Ismaʿīn* who lived here once¹¹. *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is situated not far from Zorah so that his own family could have supplied Samson with food during his stay in almost inaccessible refuge.

When looking for the rock of Etham in Samson's country *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* would be the best candidate for identification. Furthermore *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* suits the requirements of the Onomasticon on Etham as it lies in a cliff above the torrent of the Valley of Sorek. Presently *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* is called *Məʿārōt Šimšōn*¹². This official Hebrew name is apparently based on a modern popular tradition without scientific explanation¹³. Most probably this is due to the proximity of *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* to the main area of Samson's activities.

2. Veneration of Samson in the Byzantine Period (fig. 1)

In patristic exegesis Samson is usually regarded as prototype for Jesus Christ. The positive view on Samson was seldom contested¹⁴. He is considered to be the paradigm for the be-reavement of *virtus* and *gratia* by *voluptas*¹⁵. According to Heb 11,32–34 Samson is counted among the outstanding witnesses of faith even though not all his deeds could be endorsed¹⁶. Samson is compared with Hercules even by patristic writers. Sometimes Samson is even identified with Hercules¹⁷. Occasionally the heathens were accused of forging their Hercules according to the model of the Samson narrative¹⁸.

⁹ SCHICK 1887, 143–146; BUHL 1896, 90; CLERMONT-GANNEAU 1896, 220; MOORE 1958, 342–343; SIMONS 1959, 301; GOLD 1962; EHRlich 1992, 644. The Arabic name *ʿIrāq Ismaʿīn* cannot be linked etymologically with Samson. Perhaps the name of the Hasmonean Simon has been preserved in the name of *ʿIrāq* and *Wādī Ismaʿīn*. Moreover, *Ḥirbet Sammuniyye* could be identified with *Tūr Šimšōn*, cf. ZISSU 2004, 5–18. All in all, it seems likely that in the local Arabic toponymy the name of Simon, not of Samson, can be found.

¹⁰ SCHICK 1887, 144.

¹¹ CLERMONT-GANNEAU 1896, 220. The *fellahin* (peasants) of nearby *Dēr el-Hawā* (1535.1287) told CLERMONT-GANNEAU, who apparently never visited the cave, that the size of the cave is considerable and an ancient *kenise* (church) previously used by the *Kuffār* (Christians) is located inside. The appearance and position of the cave led CLERMONT-GANNEAU to locate here the hiding place of Samson.

¹² MARCUS 1993, 86–87 and 1:50.000 maps of the Survey of Israel.

¹³ VILNAY 1978, 4602.

¹⁴ Augustinus in Caesarius Arelatensis, Sermo CXVIII. See especially MORIN 1957, 491–496.

¹⁵ Ambrosius, De Spiritu II 5–16. See especially PL 16,774–777; FALLER 1964, 588–593.

¹⁶ Johannes Chrysostomus, Homilia in Epistolam ad Hebraeos XXVII 4. See especially PG 63,186–187; GARDINER 1978, 488.

¹⁷ Eusebius, Hieronymi Chronicon XI 13–15; LXII 16–19. See especially HELM 1956, 11.62a. Augustinus, De Civitate Dei XVIII 19,5–9. See especially SCHRÖDER 1916, 119; PERL 1953, 181; DOMBART/KALB 1957, 610.

¹⁸ Filastrius, Diversarum Hereseon Liber VIII. See especially PL 12,1122; HEYLEN 1957, 220.

In early Christian art Samson is depicted in elegant costume with tunic, pallium and sandals¹⁹. Especially the fight with the lion is a popular motif. Samson – as a type of Hercules – strangles the fronting lion in upright position or keeps apart his jaw-bones²⁰. The depiction of Samson's fight with the lion interprets Judg 14,6 typologically as the overcoming of devil and death by Christ and theologically as the moral combat of man²¹.

The fight of Samson with the lion was depicted on the walls of a famous catacomb which was discovered in 1955 in Rome in the area of the corner Via Dino Compagni/Via Latina. This catacomb is dated to the first half of the 4th century C.E. In this catacomb some episodes of the Samson narrative have

been depicted: Thus, a beehive was arranged already in the muzzle of the killed lion. This can be interpreted as forecasting Judg 14,8. A second fresco with the lion combat is only fragmentarily preserved. Furthermore the slaying of the Philistines with the jaw-bone of a donkey and the binding together of the foxes are also shown in this catacomb²². Most probable the Palestinian-Syrian way of illustrating the Bible which was concerned exhaustively with the Samson narrative had a strong impact on the early Christian painting in the 4th century C.E.²³. Various scenes of the Samson narrative have been found in a basilical building in Misis – the Cilician site of Mopsuestia. The only fragmentarily preserved cycle of Samson has altogether nine scenes. It shows the fight with the lion, the withdrawal of honey out of the lion carrion, the binding together of the foxes, the slaying of the Philistines, Samson in Gaza, Samson in the bosom of Delilah, the blinding of Samson, Samson in front of the Philistines and

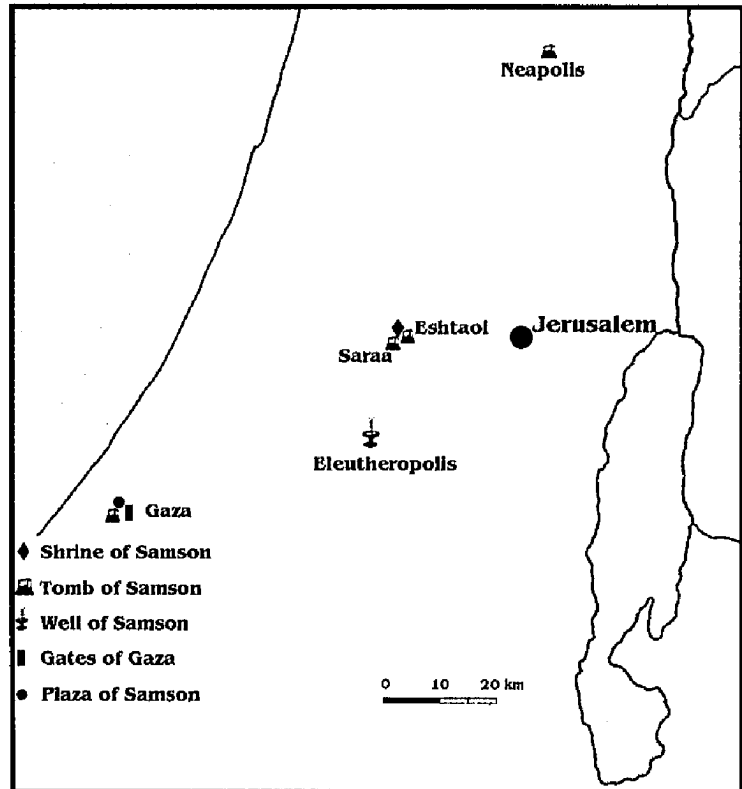


Fig. 1. Map showing veneration places of Samson in Byzantine Palestine.

¹⁹ BULST 1972, 31. For tradition und imagery types of the iconography of Samson in the Middle Ages and in modern times cf. RÉAU 1956, 236–348.

²⁰ BULST 1972, 31. For the iconography of the fight with the lion cf. STERN 1970, 88–97.

²¹ RÉAU 1956, 236–237. Cf already Procopius Gazaeus, *Commentarii in Iudices*. See especially PG 87/1, 1077–1078.

²² For the Samson tradition in the catacomb along the Via Latina cf. FERRUA 1960, 48.53.63.73; KÖTZSCHE-BREITENBRUCH 1976, 89–93.

²³ BUDDE 1969, 75.

Samson's death²⁴. Several reliefs with scenes of the Samson narrative have been discovered in the Martyrion of Seleukia Pieria. One of these reliefs depicts the fight of Samson with the lion in front of the city gate of Timna. A further relief shows the episode of Samson carrying the city gates of Gaza²⁵.

In the Byzantine period there were many places with the veneration of Samson visited by pilgrims. According to the pilgrim Willibald there was a Holy Plaza in Gaza where Samson worked the wonder of the city gates²⁶. The pilgrim Bernard names Gaza also the "city of Samson"²⁷. The site *Ali el-Muntār* is the traditional Christian place on the hill to which Samson carried the city gates of Gaza²⁸. In Gaza there is also the tomb of Samson²⁹. The building named *Ali Merwān* seems to be modern. It could testify to the long held Samson tradition in Gaza because the name ("Ali the Imprisoned") might allude to the arrest of Samson in Gaza.

According to the tradition of the patristic writers the "well of Samson" is located near Eleutheropolis/*Bēt Ġibrīn* (1402.1128). Jerome mentions the well of Samson in a letter while describing the journey from Jerusalem to Egypt. Most probably this well is to be found on the main road between Soccoth and Morasthi³⁰. Even Antonine of Piacenza notes a well north of Eleutheropolis which is connected with Samson in a certain way³¹.

In Samson's home village Zorah the tomb of Samson was shown in the Middle Ages. According to Rabbi Ishak Chelo it was an extremely old monument decorated with the jawbone of an ass with which Samson has slain the Philistines³². Probably the *Wēli Šēḥ Ġarib* has replaced the ancient tradition in Zorah³³. This *wēli* is located on *Ḥirbet Islīn* (1503.1325)³⁴. There was even a shrine of Samson on the crest of the hills above *ʿArṭūf* with a special veneration of Samson³⁵. In the northern Shephela there are several sites whose place names can be connected with the Samson narrative³⁶. Local tradition has preserved many examples that the Samson tradition had a strong impact on local toponymy.

Also the site of *Nablūs* adheres to a tradition that Samson is buried there. North of the town a shrine was found situated amidst orchards³⁷. Due to the miraculous deeds Samson

²⁴ Cf. BUDDE 1969, 57–76. The identification of this building as a synagogue remains uncertain. In Christian mosaic art there are usually no scenes of the Old Testament. Moreover, no exclusive Christian symbols and ornaments have been applied. That is why it may be a synagogue, cf. AVI-YONAH 1982, 189–190; OVADIAH 2002, 94–103. According to AVI-YONAH 1982, 190 the Samson tradition in Mopsuestia might be explained by interlinkage of the Danite Samson with the legendary ruler Mopsus of the Danunim.

²⁵ WEITZMAN 1941, 137–138.

²⁶ WILKINSON 1977, 131.157.

²⁷ WILKINSON 1977, 142.

²⁸ CONDER/KITCHENER 1883, 255.

²⁹ CONDER/KITCHENER 1883, 250.255.

³⁰ Hieronymus, Epistula CVIII 14,1. See especially WILKINSON 1977, 52.

³¹ Antoninus Placentinus, Itinerarium 32. See especially WILKINSON 1977, 85; DONNER 1979, 294. The Byzantine tradition of the "well of Samson" is particularly described in SAGIV/ZISSU/AMIT 2002, 185–186, who suggested to identify it near *Tēl Goded*.

³² CARMOLY 1847, 245.

³³ GUÉRIN 1869a, 13–14; 1869b, 326.

³⁴ GUÉRIN 1869b, 324.

³⁵ STEPHAN 1939, 140 note 2.

³⁶ CLERMONT-GANNEAU 1896, 218–219.

³⁷ STEPHAN 1939, 140.

performed in Gaza according to Judg 16,25–30 the Samson tradition may be connected with the sanctuary *Riḡāl el-Āmūd* (“Men of the Pillar”)³⁸.

3. The Byzantine monastery Sampso

Johannes Moschos mentions in his book “Pratum Spirituale” a monastery Sampso³⁹. Unfortunately, the exact distance which could alleviate the location of the monastery is missing in the Greek original. Only in the Latin translations are there indications for locating the monastery: “*Distabat ab Jerosolymis fere viginti passuum millibus*”. The monastery of Sampso is to be situated at a distance “about” 20 Roman miles from Jerusalem. Unfortunately, no indication of direction is given.

The name Sampso is sometimes thought to be a scribal error for Sapsas⁴⁰. However, the name Sapsas is only a short form of Sapsaphas⁴¹. This monastery lies in Transjordan and is not in accordance with the distance mentioned in the Latin translation of Johannes Moschos⁴². The sought-after Sampso cannot be identified with the place Sappho/Sampho⁴³ mentioned by Josephus as the double transmission Sappho/Sampho can be traced back to phonetic reasons (shift of πφ to μφ) whereas the shift of φ to ψ cannot be explained⁴⁴.

The biblical name Samson is translated Σαμψων by the Septuagint. This complies with the spelling of Johannes Moschos. In this respect, the monastery mentioned by Johannes Moschos might be a Samson monastery which commemorates and venerates the deeds of Samson. The tradition of Samson clings to the northern part of the Shephela, especially to the environs of Zorah and the nearby valley of Sorek. Therefore, the monastery Sampso should be looked for in exactly this area. Thus, one has a vague indication of the direction for the distance given by Johannes Moschos.

The distance “about 20 Roman miles” suits Beth Shemesh, *Tell er-Rumēle*⁴⁵. According to the Onomasticon Beth Shemesh lies 10 Roman miles from Eleutheropolis/*Bēt Ġibrīn* (1402.1128) apart⁴⁶ whereas the distance from Eleutheropolis to Jerusalem amounts 30 Roman miles⁴⁷. One approaches Beth Shemesh via a side road to the main road from Jerusalem to Eleutheropolis. This side road branches off at the 11th mile stone⁴⁸ to northwest and reaches Beth Shemesh after about 8 Roman miles via *Bēt ‘Itāb* and *Dēr Abān*.

³⁸ STEPHAN 1939, 140.

³⁹ Johannes Moschos, Pratum Spirituale CLXX 1–2. See especially PG 87/3 3035; ROUËT DE JOURNAL 1946, 223; WORTLEY 1992, 139. For life and works of Johannes Moschos Eucrates see HIRSCHFELD 1992, 246; WORTLEY 1992, XVI–XX.

⁴⁰ ROUËT DE JOURNAL 1946, 223 note 1; WORTLEY 1992, 253. The monastery Sapsas is mentioned also in Johannes Moschos, Pratum Spirituale IB.IIC. See especially PG 87/3 2853. Cf. already ABEL 1932, 251 note 1. For Sapsas cf. WORTLEY 1992, 5.233. A cave was changed to a church near Sapsas.

⁴¹ ABEL 1932, 251 note 1.

⁴² For location and findings in Sapsaphas cf. ABEL 1932, 248–252.

⁴³ Josephus, Bellum II 5,1 (70); Antiquitates XVII 10,9 (290). See especially AVI-YONAH 1976, 92; MÖLLER/SCHMITT 1976, 166–167.

⁴⁴ ABEL 1936, 539.

⁴⁵ ABEL 1936, 538–542; WILKINSON 1977, 153.172.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, Onomasticon 54,11–13.

⁴⁷ ABEL 1936, 540. According to Eusebius, Onomasticon 156,18 Sokchō/Sukkot lies 9 miles apart from Eleutheropolis whereas the distance from Sukkot to Jerusalem accounts for 20 miles according to Johannes Moschos 180. Cf. ROUËT DE JOURNAL 1946, 236; WORTLEY 1992, 149.

⁴⁸ THOMSEN 1917, 80.

Admittedly Beth Shemesh is not the only site in the northern Shephela located about 20 miles apart from Jerusalem. In the environs of Beth Shemesh there are several sites with a distance of 10 miles apart from Eleutheropolis according to Eusebius' Onomasticon: Esthaol and Saraa⁴⁹. Eusebius seems to have applied the distance of 10 Roman miles to several sites in the whole area of Beth Shemesh. In fact, nearly every site in this region is suited for identification with the monastery of Samson. Furthermore, the indication in the translated versions of the work of Johannes Moschos is not an exact value but only an estimated one.

In the area east of Ierimouth/*Hirbet Marmīta* (1514.1304) there are the only cliff formations in the whole region. The Byzantine tradition concerning the biblical rock of Etham could have clung to *'Irāq Isma'īn* (1527.1302) so that the Byzantine monastery of Sampso might be most probably located on *'Irāq Isma'īn* (1527.1302). Its purpose was to commemorate the biblical Samson narrative. By combination of several Byzantine distances one can make the point that the location of the monastery being sought should be actually looked for in the east of *Tell er-Rumēle*.

According to Eusebius' Onomasticon the distance of Kariathiareim to Jerusalem accounts for 9–10 Roman miles. Kariathiareim is located on the road to Diospolis/*Ludd* (1405.1515) via Nicopolis⁵⁰. Afterwards one has to leave the Roman road to arrive at Chasalon and Ierimouth. No Roman side road is documented for this rocky region so far. Due to the arduous ascents and descents the distance from Kariathiareim/*Dēr el-Āzhar* (1599.1353) to Ierimouth/*Hirbet Marmīta* (1514.1304) must be about 10 further miles even though both sites are 7 miles regarding air-line distance away. Moreover, the Latin translation of the work of Johannes Moschos only approximately locates the site of the monastery of Samson. Most probably this is due to the difficult location of this remote place situated far away from the major traffic routes⁵¹. Thus there can be only a vague description.

The pilgrim of Bordeaux locates Nikopolis/*Imwās* (1493.1387) at about 22 Roman miles apart from Jerusalem⁵². The place Aialon/*Yālo* (1523.1388) lies at the 2nd mile stone from Nicopolis to Jerusalem⁵³ so that even this site suits the distance given by Johannes Moschos. Drawing compasses around Jerusalem with the radius Jerusalem to Aialon one reaches directly Ierimouth/*Hirbet Marmīta* (1514.1304) (fig. 2). An identification of the nearby *'Irāq Isma'īn* (1527.1302) with the Byzantine monastery Sampso is fully in accordance with the various given distances in the sources.

⁴⁹ Eusebius, Onomasticon 54,11–13; 88,12–14; 156,15–17. See especially TSAFRIR/DI SEGNI/GREEN 1994, 86.123.263.

⁵⁰ Eusebius, Onomasticon 48,24; 114,23–25. See especially THOMSEN 1907, 78. According to Theodosius, *De Situ Terrae Sanctae* 8, who confused Kariathiareim with Silo, the distance counts only 8 miles, cf. WILKINSON 1977, 164; DONNER 1979, 203.

⁵¹ According to DORSEY 1991, 154–155.186–188 more roads have been built in this region during the Iron Age. See especially DORSEY 1991, 186–187: "While the Roman road continued westward from Kirjath-jearim to Emmaus, evidence suggests that the Iron Age road turned southwest toward Beth-shemesh, roughly along the course followed by the Turkish period road".

⁵² *Itinerarium Burdigalense* 20. See especially DONNER 1979, 63.

⁵³ Jerome, Onomasticon 19,14–15. See also TSAFRIR/DI SEGNI/GREEN 1994, 59.

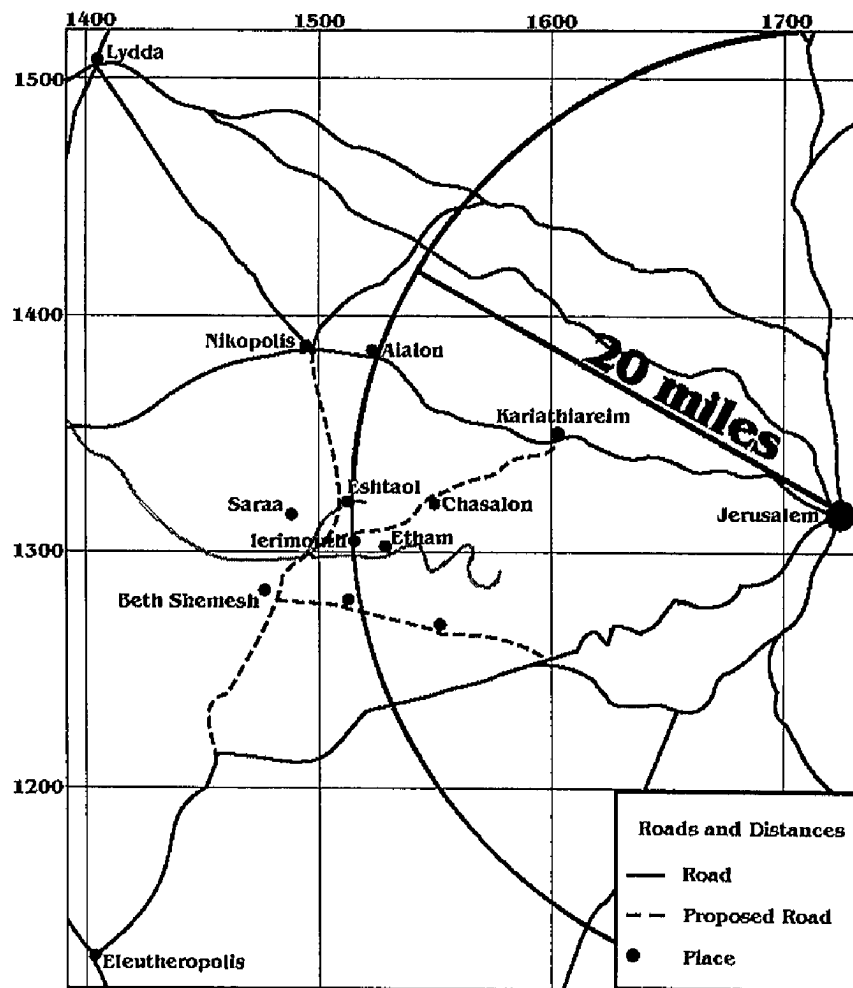


Fig. 2. Location map.

4. The so-called Byzantine monastery on *Tell er-Rumēle*

Already in 1911 MACKENZIE excavated a structure in the south-east quadrant of *Tell er-Rumēle* (1476.1286) – the biblical Beth Shemesh – on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund. Since then this structure is interpreted as a Byzantine monastery. The excavator suggested that this structure should be identified as the temporary abode of the arc of covenant in Beth Shemesh⁵⁴. Only ABEL⁵⁵ connected the Byzantine structure of *Tell er-Rumēle* with the above mentioned monastery of Sampsō.

It is a rectangular, 42 × 63 m large compound with a quadrangular courtyard which is surrounded by elongated rooms or galleries in the east, south and west. These galleries might have been vaulted. One enters these galleries out of the inner courtyard through two arched doorways which could be blocked from inside. The whole structure seems to be fortified due to the almost 3 m thick walls and the annex on the southwest corner. Apparently there was another similar annex on the southeast corner the more so as the whole structure is construct-

⁵⁴ MACKENZIE 1911b, 141.

⁵⁵ ABEL 1936, 538–542.

ed according to a symmetrical pattern. In the middle of the northern wall a nearly square edifice is situated which was interpreted primarily as the chapel of the convent due to a Byzantine capital⁵⁶. Admittedly there is a plastered 3.5 × 5 m cistern in the southwest corner of this edifice. MACKENZIE regarded the whole excavated structure as the residing complex of the convent while the church of the monastery lies north of the convent because of a door in the northern wall⁵⁷. Recently, the west-eastern oriented, rectangular southern gallery was interpreted as a chapel. The striking absence of an apse accounts allegedly for oriental rites⁵⁸.

About 80m east of the Byzantine structure there are the remains of a building, venerated as the tomb of an Islamic saint which is called sometimes *Wēli Šemšūm el-Ġebbār*. This tomb apparently preserves the local tradition of the veneration of Samson. For the most part this ruin bears the name *Abū Mēzar*⁵⁹. According to the local Arab tradition the blind *Abū Mēzar* overthrew a pillar in a church building while a lot of Christians assembled for prayer. By this action all Christians together with *Abū Mēzar* were killed⁶⁰. Most probably this church was located on the spot of the modern *wēli*. In this respect the tradition of Samson in Beth Shemesh could be explained by analogy but not by long-standing genuine transmission. Besides the tradition does not cling directly to *Tell er-Rumēle*.

Despite the local tradition there are several arguments against the identification of the compound on *Tell er-Rumēle* as a monastery. In the south gallery feeding troughs have been discovered adjoining the northern wall. According to the excavator's report the former monastery had been converted to a *Ḥān* in the Islamic Period. As a result of this modification the whole structure underwent changes. Since vital stratigraphic data were not published, we cannot deny the possibility that the feeding troughs belonged already to the Byzantine structure.

Nowhere in the excavated building was there evidence of utilisation as monastic convent. According to the excavator this is due to the second building phase. During the modification to a *Ḥān* all previous traces of monastic use have been removed⁶¹.

An Ionic capital with a cross between the volutes has been found about 80m east of the alleged monastic convent. As this capital is similar to the one discovered in the southern gallery, it is possible that both capitals belong to the church of the monastery. But the one found in the excavated structure lacks the cross between the volutes. Both capitals could derive from any Byzantine church or chapel in the nearby area so that this is poor evidence for a monastic complex.

In the cistern a stone with a cross in secondary use was found. Insofar the cistern might possibly belong not to the Byzantine building, but to the following building phase. Admittedly the secondary use of this stone in the so-called monastery cannot tell about its primary use.

⁵⁶ MACKENZIE 1911a, 79.

⁵⁷ Regarding the archaeology of the so-called Byzantine monastery cf. MACKENZIE 1911a, 72–84; KEEL/KÜCHLER 1982, 813–815; BAGATTI 2002, 118–121.

⁵⁸ BAGATTI 2002, 121.

⁵⁹ KEEL/KÜCHLER 1982, 815; BAGATTI 2002, 118.

⁶⁰ CLERMONT-GANNEAU 1875, 211; 1896, 209–210; BAGATTI 2002, 121.

⁶¹ The excavator claims two building phases but there is no stratigraphic support for this proposition. If there was just one building phase with the secondary use of Byzantine capitals, *Tell er-Rumēle* would have been exclusively an Arabic *Ḥān*. One can only speculate about a Byzantine predecessor.

In our opinion, the discussed structure seems to be more a Byzantine fortified site than a monastery due to the fortress-like character and the absence of a church⁶². The architectural plan resembles a type of building known from several sites in this country (fig. 3). These buildings, built and used from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine period, usually include rows of rooms arranged around an inner courtyard with an adjacent fortified tower. The exact use and function of these buildings remains unclear, and different explanations have been suggested – as road-stations, fortified estates or *villae rusticae*, guarding posts, etc.⁶³. Thus, the one-sided interpretation as a monastic complex is not unequivocal, since clear evidence for religious assignment is missing.

5. Samson's Byzantine monastery at 'Irāq Isma'īn – the biblical Sela Etham?

The ancient site is located on a prominent cliff, situated on the northern slope of Nahal Soreq (*Wādī Isma'īn*). This section of the slope is very steep. Its middle part forms an impressive cliff, 15–20 m high (ca. 390 m above sea level) named 'Arāq Isma'īn in the Survey of Western Palestine Map. The topographical character of this section of the valley is outstanding, since it is the steepest place in the western Jerusalem Mountains, and the only place where natural cliffs exist in the area.

In our opinion, the large natural (*karstic*) cave situated in the only cliff existing in the area above the Valley of Soreq and the traditions about Samson's activities in the Shephelah were the main factors which led to the choice of this place by the Byzantines. This identification led to the veneration of the cave as the hiding place of Samson and to the building of a monastic complex in and around the cave.

The complex (fig. 4) consists of a huge natural cave, which housed a church and water installations, surrounded by well-built rooms, rock-cut stairways, paths and water cisterns. All these elements are located along a long and narrow shelf, at the foot of the cliff.

Following Y. HIRSCHFELD's typology, it is tempting to regard this venerated cave as part of a monastery built next to a memorial church⁶⁴ or as integrated within a monastery of the "cliff coenobium" type, since no cells were detected in the surrounding area⁶⁵. Judging from the character of the site, its conspicuous topography and its location it seems very likely that this compound should be identified with the monastery mentioned by Johannes Moschos. The archaeological evidence supports this assumption.

The site was surveyed by the "Survey of Jerusalem Mountains Team"⁶⁶ in 1991–1993 and visited again by the present authors in 2004 and 2005. The following description of the

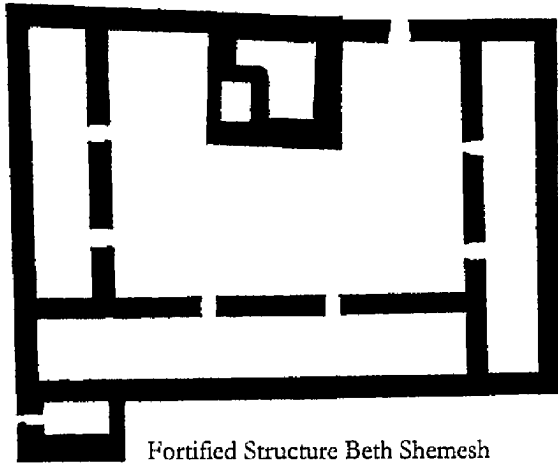
⁶² Perhaps the above discussed structure might be a fort. The galleries might have been used partly as bedrooms partly as stables on the basis of the feeding troughs. The quadrangular courtyard might be a parade-ground. The square installation with the cistern in the courtyard might be interpreted as the commandants' headquarters. For a similar structure cf. FRITZ 1973, 56–61 who describes the Roman fortress at *Tell es-Seba'*.

⁶³ Cf. HIRSCHFELD/BIRGER-CALDERON 1991, 87–111; HIRSCHFELD 1998, 162–171; 2000, 40–78.679–729. The most striking parallel to the structure in *Tell er-Rumēle* seems to be the edifice of *Ruġm el-Qaṣr*. See the plan in HIRSCHFELD 1997, fig. 37.

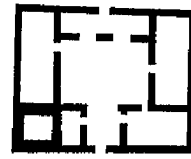
⁶⁴ HIRSCHFELD 1992, 18.55–58.

⁶⁵ HIRSCHFELD 1992, 34–42.

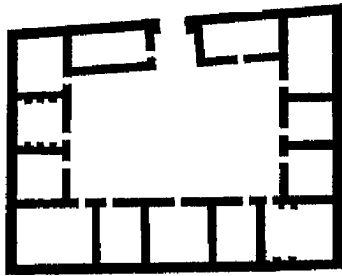
⁶⁶ We wish to thank our friends and colleagues Dani Weiss, Gideon Solimany, Yair Tzoran and Nikola Willner for their assistance. The research was supported by the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, University of Calgary (Alberta, Canada) and the Koschitzky Foundation at Bar Ilan University.



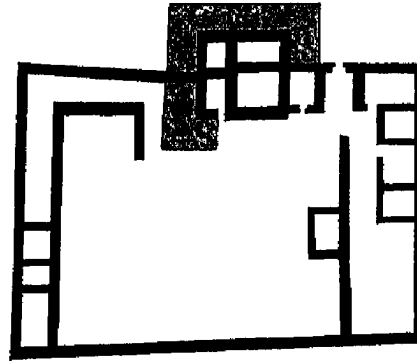
Fortified Structure Beth Shemesh



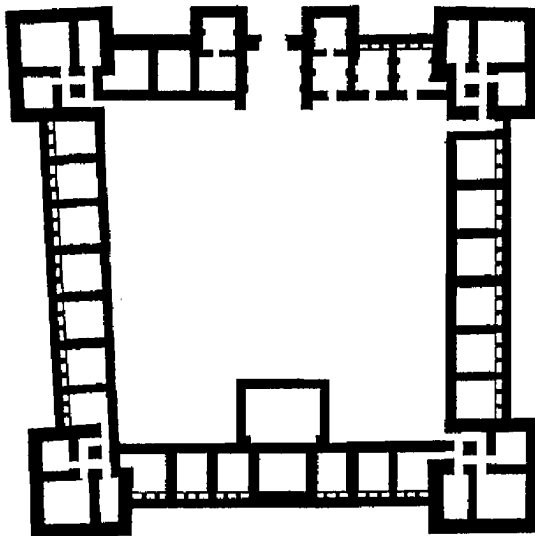
'En Boqeq



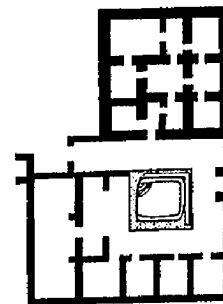
Limes Arabicus Project
Vicus Building 7



Ruġm el-Ħamirī



Limes Arabicus Project
Qaṣr Bašūr



Tāl Godēd

0m 10m

Fig. 3. The architectural complex at Beth Shemesh compared to similar contemporary sites.

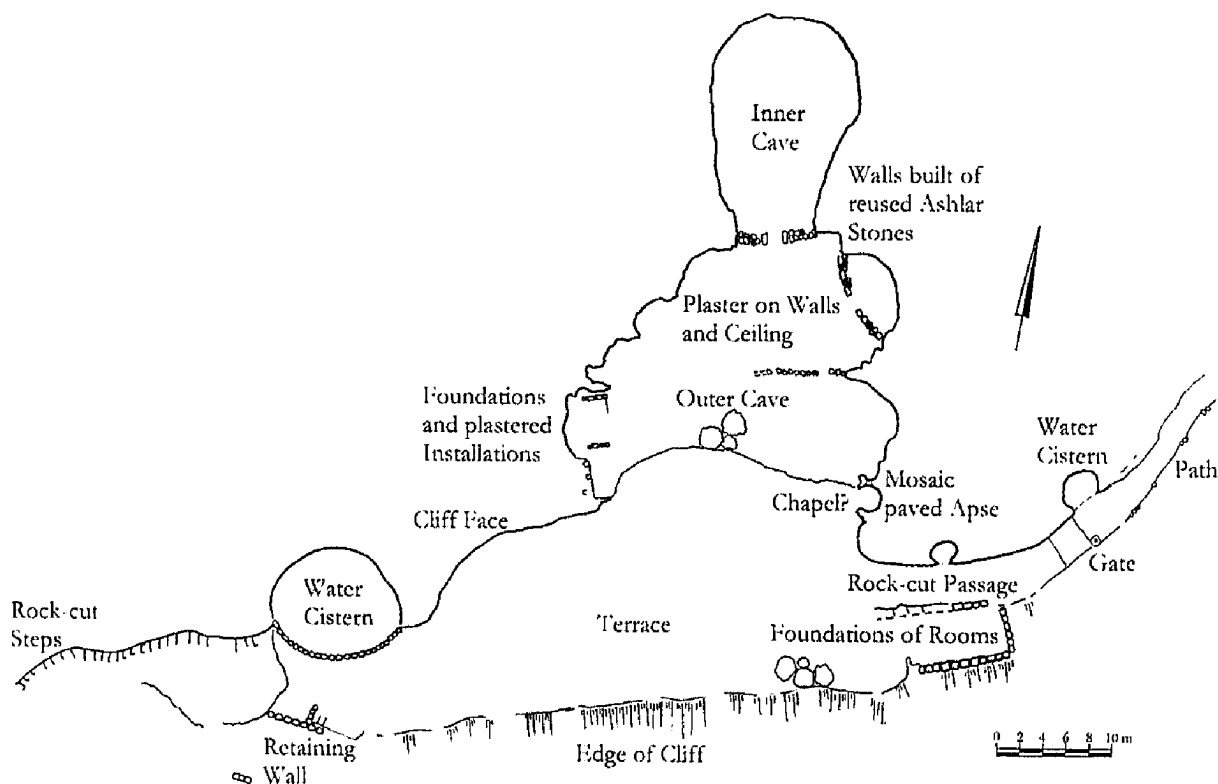


Fig. 4. Plan of Samson's Cave.

archaeological remains is based on the preliminary surveys and visits. This interesting site awaits proper excavation and detailed study.

Three paths lead to the site: the first two from the ridge located to the north of Nahal Soreq (the ridge is marked on modern maps as "Samson's Mountain"). One of them approaches the site from the east, following the bottom of the cliff. The other branch turns north-west and descends the cliff entering the architectural complex through the rock-cut staircase which will be described below. The third path reaches the site from south, after a steep climbing from the bottom of Nahal Soreq.

It appears that the main entrance to the compound was from the east. The last 15 m of the ancient path are well preserved, and the terrace built in order to support the path is still visible.

The point where the path enters the ancient site (152609.130166) was marked by a rock-cut flat area (4×3 m), flanked by a bell-shaped rock-cut water cistern (3×2.5 m, 4 m deep). Some graffiti covered by patina were discerned on the cliff face, above the cistern. Since this area was accessible only by somebody standing high above, on the conjectured ceiling of the cistern, we assume that the cistern was covered.

The open area and the cistern were apparently located outside the gate. From the point at which the gate is assumed to have stood, a 20 m long and 3.6 m broad passage was created by rock-cutting. This passage led toward the center of the compound; it is bounded by sections of walls to the south and the cliff to the north.

The walls belong to the foundations of two parallel rows of rooms (4.4×8 m each), apparently the remains of a rectangular building, which initially stood to a height of two storeys. They are built of well-drafted ashlar, and in some places are intact to a height of three courses. On one of these ashlars some letters were inscribed in Arab characters, most probably after the monastery went out of use. Additional foundations cut to the west of this building and in the same orientation suggest that additional rooms stood there.

As explained above, the passage is flanked by the cliff, which was hewn in order to create a rock-cut vertical wall (2–7 m high). This wall was initially covered with masonry, as evidenced by foundations cut on its face and traces of masonry, still *in situ*. In our opinion some carved foundations and traces of masonry located ca. 6 m above the floor level of the entranceway provided the framework for a structure at least two stories high. We assume that a prominent feature stood here – presumably a bell-tower.

Broad steps were carved in the floor of the passage, which descends gently to a flat terrace – most probably a central courtyard flanked on its northern side by the cave complex and on its southern side by the slope which descends steeply to the bottom of the valley. The poor state of preservation of the remains does not allow for a reconstruction of the units, which probably stood to the south of this courtyard.

A spacious cave in the cliff (25 m wide at its opening, a maximal depth of 37 m, with a 5–10 m high ceiling) housed the church. In order to create a broad, flat area on which the church could be erected, a retaining wall was built on the slope. This conjectured wall (of which nothing remains) supported a fill of stones and mortar, parts of which still survive *in situ*.

The church was partly built and partly rock-cut, as attested by well-drafted stones found on the spot. One of these stones has a rounded profile, thus indicating its former use in a barrel vault or as part of an apse. Some colored mosaic cubes (*tesserae*) and few fragments of tiles indicate as to the possible shape of the roof and floors. The upper parts and ceiling of the cave contained large traces of plaster made of mud and straw, laid in two layers. Many ribbed sherds of Byzantine storage jars were imbedded in the plaster.

The eastern wall of the cave was adorned by a rounded apse (1.2×2 m), plastered and paved with mosaics, with a 1.8 m entrance in its northern wall. The mosaics were systematically destroyed, but a single row of *tesserae*, imbedded in the plaster which covered the walls survives. Two rounded depressions can be seen in the upper part of the eastern wall. These depressions are apparently all that remains of the two other apses of the church, but without excavating the floor of the cave it is not clear whether the depressions were actually incorporated in a three-apsidal church or whether the church was monoapsidal and the depressions (together with other cavities) were only plastered and were shown to visitors who wished to see Samson's hiding cave.

At the western edge of the cave, opposite the apse some foundation walls made of small stones and mortar were detected on the cliff face. The remains of a plastered vault are visible, but it is difficult to determine whether they formed part of water installations or other kind of building. Some additional niches, including a larger one (1.8×1 m, 1.8 m high) were located as well in this section of the cave. The cave church was heavily damaged after the Byzantine period.

The survey of the site along the main cliff found the remains of a large oval cistern (152536.130120) (ca. 11 m long, ca. 10 m wide, ca. 5 m deep). Its northern side was carved out of the cliff and its southern side (ca. 2.5 m wide) was built of stone. The lower part of this

wall was made of large fieldstones and mortar, while its upper part was built of large and well-drafted ashlar, with prominent bosses. The curving line of the upper part suggests that the roof had been a half dome, leaning against the cliff. The inner face of the reservoir and its ceiling were covered with hydraulic plaster. Its capacity has been estimated at about 450 m³.

Another element found to the south of the cistern is a strong retaining wall. Additional walls were found outside the compound, attesting to the existence of buildings on the slope.

A flight of steps entirely cut in the rock mark the westernmost point of the complex (152531.130119). This 0.7 m wide and almost vertical flight of steps was the only available measure used for climbing the cliff, and connecting the compound to the path arriving from north-west.

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