

A 4th CENTURY CHRISTIAN CHURCH BUILDING IN SAUDI ARABIA

Discovered in 1986



The 4th century Nestorian church at Jubail in 1986, shortly after excavation was complete, but before any restoration or repair. *(1986 image)*

Compiled by Brian Walling

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CONTENTS

	Page
Contents	2
Discovery	3
Original photos of site 1986	5
Around the site	9
The site and surroundings today	10
Historical background	13
Christian crosses	14
Hog Heaven	15
Postscript – further discoveries	18
Annexe – How to find the site	20

Maps and diagrams

Map of Persian Gulf and location of Jubail	3
2013 close-up aerial view of the structure within its compound	4
Aerial views of site and surroundings at different dates 2005-2021	11-12
Maps showing access route to site	20

DISCOVERY



The Persian Gulf. On the southern side, below Kuwait, the coastline is that of Saudi Arabia. The island of Bahrain and the peninsula of Qatar adjoin the Saudi territory. The coastline from the bottom, where it turns to head north-eastwards, belongs to United Arab Emirates. The coast it becomes Oman where the waters narrow at the strait of Hormuz (beyond the strait a small portion of UAE stretches across to the Arabian Sea and splits Oman's territory into two. *(Image courtesy Google Earth)*

In 1986 the remains of an early Christian church were discovered by accident buried in the sand dunes of eastern Saudi Arabia. The structure has been dated to the 4th century AD and identified as a church of the Nestorian Christian sect by some archaeologists and historians who were able to access the site immediately after its discovery. It is now widely recognised worldwide as one of the earliest surviving Christian church structures in this region. The remains have been preserved by the Saudi Arabian archaeological services and the site is protected and guarded. However, the site continues to be closed to all visitors of any type, including archaeologists and no official or academic examination of the site and its surroundings appears to have been undertaken. This is perhaps not surprising, given the extreme sensitivity in Saudi Arabia of any acknowledgments of non-Islamic religions existing in the region – either now or at any time in the past.

The discovery in 1986 occurred when a resident of the area was driving his 4-wheel drive or quad bike in the sand dunes some three miles south-west of the old town of Jubail on the Gulf coast. Jubail lies roughly half way along the Saudi Arabian portion of the Gulf coastline and some 50 miles north of the oil “capital” of Dhahran, the vast headquarters and residential community of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company (Aramco). The area is now rapidly becoming suburbanised and industrialised due to the massive development of Jubail as a major industrial and petrochemical city and the construction of new highways and airports in the vicinity. In 1986, however, inland from the old town of Jubail there was little or nothing except sand dunes apart from a few “corridors” where groups of massive oil pipelines up to 48 inches in diameter stretched for miles in each direction.

The driver is believed to have struck something solid and large below the sand with his vehicle and got stuck in the structure. Upon investigation this proved to be a building structure – where no building was ever known to have been built. Following the realisation that this might be an archaeological find, a full excavation was undertaken by the Saudi authorities. The result was an ancient structure, bearing crosses, indicating that it was most likely an early Christian church.

Word of the discovery spread quickly among those in the Aramco and other local expatriate communities and a number of them with historical, archaeological or religious interests were able to visit the site without problem before strict security measures were put in place and access became denied.

One or two original photographs of the site, taken by myself at that time, follow in the next section. The visit was made just after dawn one day in order to avoid any possible problems with security personnel who might come on duty during the day, to whom we might not be welcome. The photos therefore suffer from poor lighting.

The remaining structure (walls only) is about 10 metres wide and 16 Metres long, oriented roughly eastwards and with openings in the west and south sides. Across the east end of the building there are three interconnected rooms that are raised slightly higher than the main body of the building and have a couple of steps up to them from the main floor.



The site in 2013 showing general outline of the structure – in centre, quarter way down from top. (Image courtesy Google Earth)

Note – related material

A more comprehensive and professional paper on this discovery was published by John A Langfeldt, a dedicated historian and researcher into early Christian church history, in February 1994, in the *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* journal, pages 32-60, under the title: **Recently discovered early Christian monuments in Northeastern Arabia**. JAL was a colleague of mine in Arabia at the time of the discovery in 1986, but I have not seen his paper, which is not widely available. However, I believe that it will be by far the best account and interpretation of this discovery, coming from someone well qualified and experienced in the historical subject matter in question. JAL's paper is referenced in several other academic papers on related historic topics in this region.

ORIGINAL PHOTOS OF SITE IN 1986



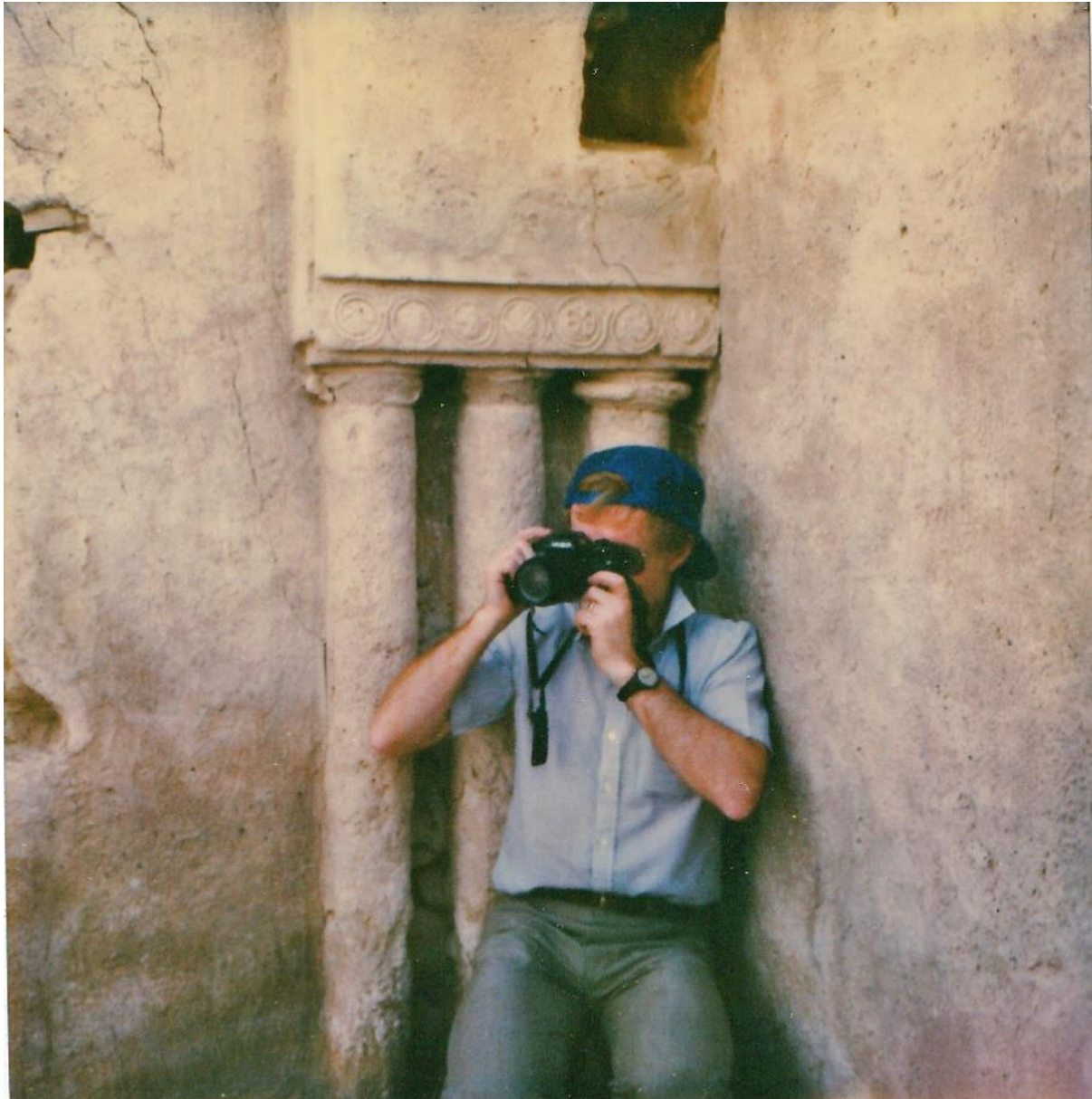
Interior of the building. There were several "imprints" of crosses – all of the same size and design – in the mortar or plaster at the side of doorway openings inside the building. It appears that the original crosses had been of some solid material (stone, metal or wood) and had been cemented into the walls. Over time wooden crosses might have rotted or disintegrated and more solid metal or stone ones might have been disturbed or taken during the excavations. However, it is possible that the crosses were just moulded imprints in a plaster background right from the beginning. At the time of this photo in 1986 at least the imprint of the cross remained in several places. The form of the cross imprint is fairly sophisticated – unlike early Nestorian crosses found in the region – and is possibly a later embellishment to the church's original structure; this idea is reinforced by the fact that crosses do not seem to have entered widespread Christian use until the 6th century and later. (*Image Brian Walling 1986*)



Close up of the cross imprint. (Image Brian Walling 1986)



Another interior view of the building. The three small chambers at the eastern end of the church all had a two steps-up from the main floor of the church. That can be seen clearly in the photo of the tidied-up church in the section later on about the church today. *(Image Brian Walling 1986)*



The author at the site in 1986. This three-column + decorated pediment feature was found inside each of the three small chambers at the eastern end of the building. These and the cross imprints were the only pieces of decoration seen inside the structure. A magnification of the pediment with additional contrast to highlight the design is shown in the next photo below. (Image Brian Walling 1986)



Magnification and adjustment of the decoration above.

AROUND THE SITE

Within about 50 metres to the north west of the building, outside the hollow that had been excavated to expose the remains, there were clear signs of a street or alley containing masonry walls that could have been small cells or shops. It is therefore possible that the church building was situated within some kind of settlement or small town or village.

Alternatively, this might indicate that the church building was a piece of a larger religious complex or monastery.

On my visit to the site in 1986 we sat on the sand and ate our refreshments close to the point described above. On running our hands through the sand we found a multitude of pottery shards of apparently very ancient origin and we collected a few of them. Again this indicates something of a settlement of some sort around the church building.

The shards are shown in the photo below. We have never had these properly identified, but no doubt this could be done by someone experienced in the archaeology of the region.



Pottery shards found in the sand near the church site in 1986.

THE CHURCH TODAY

The site and the building remain clearly visible in satellite images of the area on Google Earth.

The GPS coordinates are: 26° 56' 14.75" N
49° 39' 23.29" E

Enter the following string in the search box at top left of Google Earth window to go directly to the spot:

26 56 14.75 N, 49 39 23.29 E

(there are three spaces within each half of the string, and a comma and space after the N).

Alternatively, using *decimal* latitude and longitude readings, the following string can be entered:

26.93743N, 49.65646E

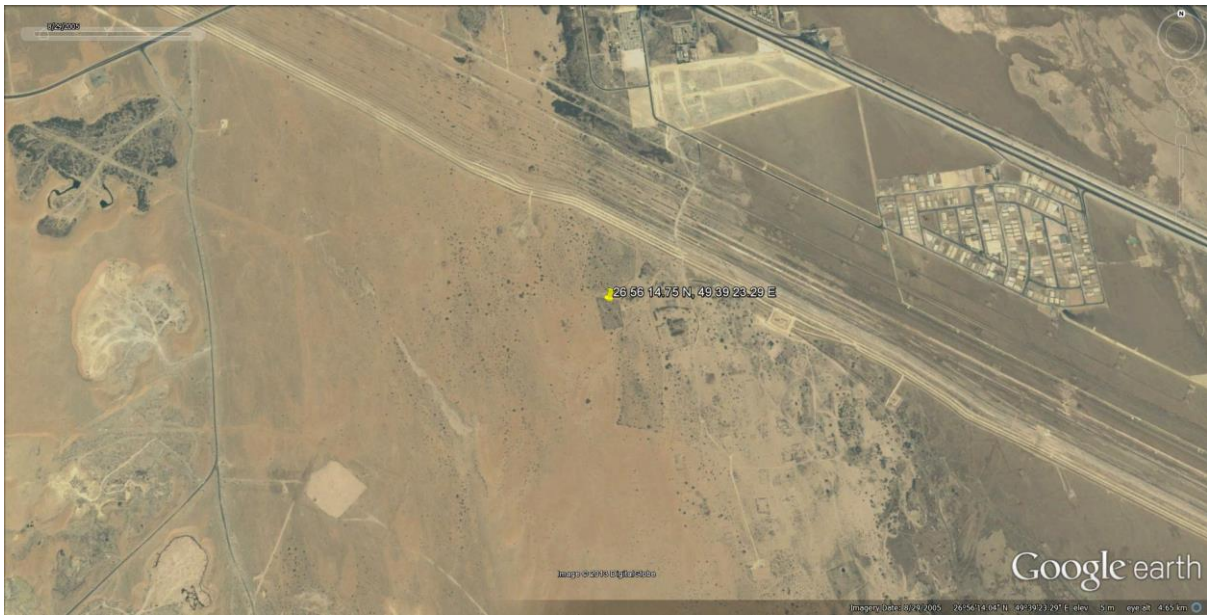
The site is now enclosed in a fenced compound of about 100 x 150 metres.

A recent photo on the Web shows that the structure has been tidied up and weatherproofed, which is good. However, from the photo and from various other reports made on the web, it seems clear that the several imprints of the crosses on the interior walls have all been obliterated – most likely the result of local anti-Christian vandalism acquiesced in by the Saudi authorities, to whom the public display of a Christian symbol is a cause for concern.



A recent photo of the site, looking east, found on the web. The external openings on the west and south sides are clearly visible, as are the three rooms at the east end of the building, elevated by two steps from the main body of the building. (Image Harry Brockwell)

Local construction is increasingly encroaching on this formerly semi-wild area of low sand dunes. It is possible that the site will become lost to this encroachment. The photos following highlight the encroachment. The church is located at the yellow pin in the centre of each image. The latest satellite images of January 2022 show little or no change from the June 2021 photo included below.



The site in Aug 2005.



The site in Jun 2006.



The site in Mar 2010.



The site in May 2013.



The site in June 2021

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Nestorian sect originated in Mesopotamia (today's Iraq) and was an Eastern Christian denomination (also called the Church of the East or Persian Church) that is reputed to have been founded by St Thomas the Apostle. There were some important doctrinal differences between this sect and the more mainstream Christian churches at the time.

The Nestorian church expanded from its origins in Mesopotamia into a number of the settlements along the land trade routes which ran down the western edge of the Persian Gulf from Kuwait as far as Oman and provided a springboard at several points across to the Indian subcontinent. In the 4th to 7th centuries AD a substantial strip of territory all down the western shore of the Gulf as far as today's Oman was controlled by the Lakhmid kingdom or tribe, based at Al Hirah in Mesopotamia (in what is now central Iraq). The Nestorian Church (or Church of the East) was one of their religions and thus it is not surprising to find the Nestorian Church extending all down the Gulf coast. In other words, the Nestorian Church's spread down the Gulf coast, to places such as Jubail, was not primarily due to missionary activity but rather a general offshoot of the Lakhmid kingdom's cultural presence across the region.

In history, old Jubail was one of the more important trading towns of the region, having a harbour on the Gulf coast with deeper water than other nearby notable trading posts such as Qatif (just south of Jubail) and Al Uqayr much further down the coast, opposite Hofuf and the inland oasis area of Al Hasa, and reputedly (according to some sources) a possible site of the old Abrahamic city of Gerrha. Jubail was a convenient starting point for the cross-desert routes leading to the Riyadh area. It was also, until about the 1930s, an important pearling centre like the island of Bahrain not far away

While there are Christian churches active today in most countries along the Persian Gulf, these are essentially products of the current residential expatriate populations (European, N American, Asian and other Middle Easterners) that have grown up in the region in parallel with the development of the local economies since the 2nd World War. Perhaps curiously, the old town of Jubail, close to this old church, did in fact have a resident Christian community, possibly tracing its roots back to the era of this old church building, right up to 1947. This seems to have been the last publicly acknowledged Christian community in Saudi Arabia. Christian churches (as well as churches of other religions) are not currently allowed to operate publicly at all in Saudi Arabia, under the country's ban on all non-Islamic religious activity. Some Christian churches do nevertheless operate in Saudi Arabia, but very discreetly, with no outwardly visible presence, and are tolerated by the Saudi authorities on this basis.

CHRISTIAN CROSSES



Saudi Arabian Airlines 1980 logo, with the space between the initial S and A suggesting a cross, just to the left of the open cargo door. (File photo from Aramco history book, *Aramco and its World*)

The sensitivity of the Saudi Arabian authorities to symbols of crosses is well illustrated by the fiasco of the Saudi Arabian Airlines logos of 1980 and 1981. A new logo was in use in 1980, incorporating the airline's new brand name of "Saudia", in place of the previous "Saudi Arabian Airlines". The new logo was used widely internationally, including the promotion of sponsored events. It was realised, however, at one point, that the first two letters of the new logo, the S and the A, enclosed a space that could be interpreted to be a cross. The logo was therefore redesigned with a different font for the letters and reapplied across the whole of the airline and its commercial activities. All this because of the possibility that Saudia might be seen as promoting the symbol of a cross!

saudia
saudia

Old lettering above, new lettering below.

HOG HEAVEN



Image from the International Herald Tribune on 7 Dec 1990

No account of this area of Saudi Arabia would be complete without the mention of “Hog Heaven”. This came into being during the Gulf War in 1990-1991, just four years after the Jubail church was discovered in the sand dunes.

Hog Heaven was the nickname given by the US forces (and adopted by the local resident expatriates) to the area close to Jubail where an assembled force of some 130 American A-10 tank-killer aircraft was stationed during the run up to the Gulf War of 1990-91 and the war itself. The A-10 was nicknamed “Warthog” for its somewhat grotesque and ugly appearance.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 4 August 1990 saw the Iraqi tanks paused in Kuwait just 200 miles north on a good highway from Dhahran, the headquarters of the Saudi Oil company, Aramco, and centre of the Saudi oilfields. Two immediate American actions were (i) the immediate deployment of the whole 82nd Airborne Infantry Division of some 20,000-30,000 troops (and not just the one “ready” brigade that is always on standby for quick deployment) to the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia for defensive purposes and (ii) the deployment to the Jubail area of some 130 A-10s, drawn from various locations around USA and Europe. Obviously the US command could see the need to counter the threat of an Iraqi tank-led advance into Saudi Arabia and its oilfields and the Warthogs – although never tested yet in this role in a real war – were the chosen prime defence against this.

Rarely had such a number of Warthogs been seen together in one place and this gave rise to the nickname of “Hog Heaven” for the unusual sight that this presented of so many of these ugly aircraft lined up on the ground at the same time. The force of Warthogs was based at the new King Fahd International Airport (which was then still under construction, opening only in 1999) some 30 miles south of Jubail, plus a couple of other airstrips near Jubail that served for overspill. I flew over one of these sites in late 1990 on a company flight and the long line-up of Warthogs along the taxiway was very striking.



The ugly Warthog. (US Airforce photo)

The A-10s had been built between 1972 and 1984 – thus 6-18 years before the Gulf War – and had never seen significant combat action and certainly not a war campaign before. In the event, during the Allies’ campaign to drive back and destroy the Iraqi forces that started in January 1991 (called Desert Storm) the Warthogs excelled and became one of the heroes of the war. The 132 Warthogs between them destroyed 987 Iraqi tanks, 926 artillery pieces, 1,355 armoured vehicles, 10 aircraft on the ground and 2 helicopters in the air.

The Warthog proved to be a formidable fighting machine. It was slow but highly manoeuvrable, able to land on dirt strips in forward locations for refuelling and re-arming, extremely robust and tolerant of damage, and quite devastating with its deadly firepower. It was essentially a massive flying gun with an aircraft built around it. The gun was a rapid-fire 7-barrel Gatling gun that fired 30 mm armour piercing shells of depleted uranium (an ultra-dense metal). A one-second burst of firing from the gun could put 50 shells into the target. In addition a variety of guided bombs and guided missiles, both air-to-ground and air-to air, could be carried under the aircraft’s wings.

The Warthogs always operated in pairs for tactical reasons. On the second day in the ground war one single pair of Warthogs destroyed 23 enemy tanks. An account of that can be seen on the Web at <https://theaviationist.com/2012/12/20/warthog-in-action/>

The size of the gun around which the aircraft was built can be seen from the photo below.



A 7-barrelled Gatling Gun with its firing mechanism and ammunition drum, removed from its A-10 aircraft, compared for size with a VW Beetle car. (US Airforce photo)

POSTSCRIPT – FURTHER DISCOVERIES

In 2022, 36 years after discovery of the Jubail church in Saudi Arabia, news emerged of another early Christian religious site recently discovered along the coastline of the Persian Gulf.

This was in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in the small Emirate of Umm Al Quwain, which lies on the west side of the Musandam peninsula, some 50 km north-east of the UAE's largest centre, Dubai. This is almost at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, close to the Strait of Hormuz, where the old trade routes crossed over the water to Persia and places beyond in the Indian subcontinent. Umm Al Quwain lies almost 1,000 km further down the line of the old trade route from the site at Jubail.



View of the site on Siniya Island, Umm Al Quwain, UAE, courtesy of the UAQ Dept of Archaeology, as provided with the media releases about the discovery on 3 Nov 2022.

The Siniya Island site is at GPS 25.619165N, 55.647637E and the image above looks south south east (on a bearing of about 150 degrees) towards the mainland part of UAQ just visible in the background about 3km away. The commercial centre of UAQ lies some 10 km to the right (to the west, that is).

This new finding is consistent with historians' belief that Christian religious sites, in the early days of Christianity, emerged in various locations on the old trade route from Mesopotamia down to the Strait of Hormuz along the southern side of the Gulf.

This was not the first subsequent early Christian site discovered in this region after the one near Jubail in 1986. Two others were discovered further down the south coast of the Gulf in the United Arab Emirates in 1992 (Sir Bani Yas Island) and 2000 (Marawah Island). Both lie just off the present-day shoreline west of Abu Dhabi and close to the border with Saudi Arabia.

The Jubail site in Saudi Arabia remains protected and secured, but it is not widely acknowledged and not open to visitors. By contrast, the 1992, 2000 and 2022 discoveries further down the Gulf coast in UAE have been widely acknowledged and publicly documented and public access allowed (although it will probably be some time before this becomes possible at the new site in Umm Al Quwain).

Particularly interesting in the case of the UAE discoveries is that some of the plaster-work decorations here appear to be near-identical to those in the Jubail church. Compare the decoration motifs seen in the image on page 8 of this note (above the pillars behind the author's head) with the plaster fragments discovered below on the Sir Bani Yas site.



ANNEXE

HOW TO FIND THE SITE ON THE GROUND

The following directions (at least from point 3.) are best read in conjunction with an up-to-date Google Earth aerial view of the area.

1. Take the Dhahran-Jubail coastal expressway (the expressway closest to the coast, not the parallel one further inland) northwards from the AlKhobar/Dhahran/Dammam area.
2. The route passes Dammam, Qatif, Safwa/Ras Tanura, Juaymah, on the way to the Jubail area. Aim for the second main Jubail exit. This lies about 7 km beyond the first Jubail exit (and about 74 km beyond the King Fahd Airport junction on the road at Dammam).
3. Turn off at this second Jubail exit and take the slip road down from the expressway embankment, left back under the expressway and then left again to go up and rejoin the expressway going back in the direction of Dammam - but for a short way only. Go about 650 metres only then turn right into the petrol station/services area.
4. In the services area keep to the right edge and go straight for about 750 metres, exiting the service area and keeping straight along a road that runs besides a built-up area to the right. (At this point you are driving almost due south, 173 degrees to be exact.)
5. After these 750 metres the paved road turns half left on approaching the massive pipeline “corridor” that lies ahead; it then runs straight along the near side of the pipelines. At this corner you have to diverge right from the paved road and find a sand track that leads obliquely towards the pipelines.
6. The track leads for about 300 metres or so to the start of the pipeline corridor. On reaching the pipelines the track becomes banked up by sand, veers right and crosses the pipelines on the track’s sand embankment.
7. The pipeline crossing extends for about 400 metres. At the end the road descends to ground level.
8. At this point the church building lies about 400 metres away on a bearing of 242 degrees, more or less south-west. The fenced compound starts before that and is about 330 metres away. The ground undulates and rises in the direction of the church after you have crossed the pipelines and so the fenced enclosure and the church may not be visible after you come down from the pipeline crossing. Printing out a one page aerial view of this area from the most up-to-date Google Earth image may help to determine where to drive your vehicle (examples on next page).
9. At the time of writing (2022) the sand track beyond the oil pipeline crossing appears still to follow its route of many years: continue 70 m beyond the pipeline crossing; then take a right turning which winds around to the right and then unwinds back to the left; from where this track straightens after unwinding it is about 310 m at 214 degrees to the SE corner of the fenced church enclosure, where the official entrance is; a right fork about half-way down this 310 m stretch diverges directly towards the fenced enclosure stretch and connects with a track that encircles it just outside the fence.



Aerial view of the area between the Dhahran-Jubail Expressway and the Jubail church. Visible are the expressway cutting north-west across at top right; the Jubal no 2 exit on it at top centre, where you have to come off heading north-west and then go back south east in the reverse direction; the triangular-shaped service area on the south side of the road (opposite the large roundabout above the north side of the road); the road leading southwards from the apex of the service area; the track across the pipeline corridor; the church south-west of where the track completes its pipelines crossing. The church lies approximately 1.65 km south of the expressway exit into the service area.



Close-up of part of the above, showing the sand track across the pipelines after you leave the paved road and the various paths and tracks criss-crossing the last 400 metres after you leave the pipeline crossing.