

Archaeologists find 'earliest church' in Holy Land: Excavation on the grounds of Megiddo Prison

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Israeli archaeologists excavating the grounds of Megiddo Prison have discovered what they believe are the remnants of the earliest church ever discovered in the Holy Land. Yotam Tepper, the dig's chief archaeologist, said at a news briefing November 6 that the find "is certainly the earliest church in Israel that we know of."

The discovery was sparked by prisoner Ramil Razilo, who was removing rubble when his shovel uncovered the edge of a large mosaic floor.

The Israel Antiquities Authority announced November 3 that excavations at the high-security prison had unearthed "a rare Christian religious structure" from the third to fourth centuries. An inscription on the floor stated that a table there had been dedicated to "the God Jesus Christ."

The excavations were launched seven months ago after construction workers preparing to expand the prison discovered artifacts that, according to the antiquities agency, warranted further investigation. The excavation is one of several at Megiddo, the site of numerous battles and the place some Christians believe Armageddon will occur.

Antiquities officials said that three Greek inscriptions were discovered on the structure's elaborate mosaic floor, which also contains motifs of fish—a symbol often used by early Christians—and geometric patterns.

Professor Leah Di-Segni of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who translated the inscriptions, said that one was dedicated by a military officer named Gaianus, who contributed to the construction of the mosaic floor from his own funds. Another inscription memorializes four women: Primilia, Kiraka, Dorothea and Crista. Another recalls "a certain god-loving Ekeptos [transliterated variously in news reports]," a

woman who donated a centrally located table to “the God Jesus Christ as a memorial.” (The table was not found.)

Authorities say that using a table for the communion ritual predated the use of altars in the Byzantine churches of the region. “This is a unique and important structure that expands our understanding of the early period of Christianity,” said Tepper.

Tepper said that pottery shards dating back to the third century had been found atop the mosaic. This, coupled with the inscriptions’ wording and the style of their letters, strongly suggests that the mosaic is from this time period as well, he said.

While there appears to be no doubt that the structure is indeed ancient, some scholars wondered whether it had been built for another purpose and only later transformed into a church.

“We do know that Judeo-Christian communities lived all over the region, and definitely in the Galilee,” Yisca Harani, a Tel Aviv-based historian of Christian pilgrimage, said in an interview with Religion News Service. “But how is it possible that a church with such a public, grand structure that was so ornate survived under the eyes of the Roman rulers?” Harani asked. “There is no doubt that it was a church, but whether it predates the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, which both date from the time of Constantine the Great, is another matter.”

Stephen Pfann, a biblical scholar based in Jerusalem quoted by Associated Press, said that inscriptions and iconography found in Nazareth and Capernaum show that people found places to worship in the second and third centuries but most did so in secret.

“This was a time of persecution and in this way it is quite surprising that there would be such a blatant expression of Christ in a mosaic, but it may be the very reason why the church was destroyed,” Pfann said.