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Mosaics in Alumah, Southern Israel**

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A Late Fifth Century Byzantine Church and Mosaics in Alumah, Southern Israel

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Abstract

In the early months of 2014, an impressive basilica with wellpreserved mosaics was unearthed in the site of Aluma in the Ashqelon region of southern Israel. The basilica measures 30 m in length and 15 m in width. It consists of a central hall with two side aisles divided by marble pillars. At the front of the building was uncovered a wide, open courtyard (atrium) paved with a white mosaic floor. Leading off the courtyard is a rectangular transverse hall (narthex) with a well-preserved mosaic floor decorated with colored geometric designs. In the center of the mosaic of the narthex, opposite the entrance to the main hall, is a twelve-row dedicatory inscription in Greek containing the names of the church fathers and regional ecclesiastic leaders as well as the foundation date of the basilica. The main hall (the nave) has a colored mosaic floor adorned with vine tendrils to form thirty-six medallions. The medallions contain depictions of different animals such as a zebra, leopard, turtle, wild boar, and various winged birds as well as botanical and geometric designs. Two medallions contain dedicatory inscriptions in Greek commemorating senior church dignitaries and donors. On both sides of the central nave are two narrow halls (side aisles), which also have colorful mosaic floors depicting botanical and geometric designs and Christian symbols. The basilica was part of a small Byzantine settlement that existed in the region in the Late Antique period that probably also served as a center of Christian worship for neighboring communities.

Keywords:

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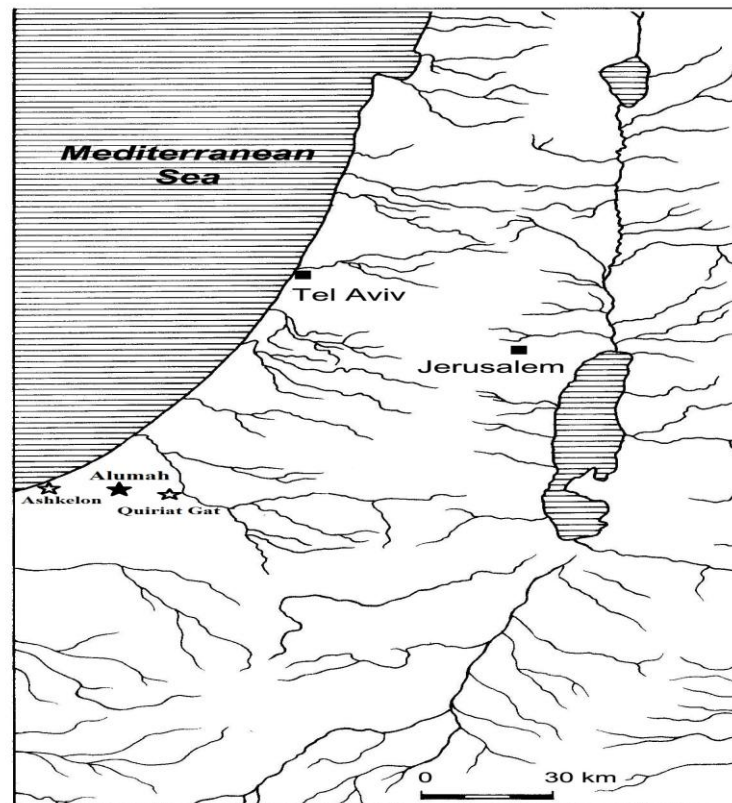
Introduction

In the early months of 2014, an impressive basilica with well-preserved mosaics was unearthed during a salvage excavation in the site of Alumah in the Ashqelon region of southern Israel, ca. 3 km northwest of the modern town of Quiryat Gat and midway along the road between Bet Govrin (ancient *Eleutheropolis*) and Ashqelon (Figure 1). The site is located below the remains of the Late Ottoman village of Hatta.

Excavations in the site have revealed that it was occupied in the Byzantine period (5th to early 7th century CE) and reoccupied in the Abbasid and Mameluke periods (late 8th – early 16th century) and again in the Late Ottoman period (19th century to 1917) through the British Mandate period (1917-1948).

Prior to the excavation, there were indications that an ancient church lay below the remains of the Late Ottoman village, leading to its investigation. According to one 19th century explorer, Victor Guerin (Guérin 1869), the remains of marble columns were once seen on the surface. A British Mandate period map show a sheik's tomb situated at the highest point of the hill in the site, a further indication that the remains of an earlier building of religious character was once located beneath.

Figure 1. Map of Israel and the Area of Alumah



Source: Daniel Varga.

The Church

In the excavation, at the center of the hill, remains of a Byzantine church were uncovered two and a half meters below the present-day surface (Figure 2). A few remains including pottery sherds and badly preserved foundation walls dating to the Mameluke and Late Ottoman periods were revealed in the layers above the church. The later walls did not damage the remains of the church floor but a number of Late Ottoman trash pits did penetrate the floor level.

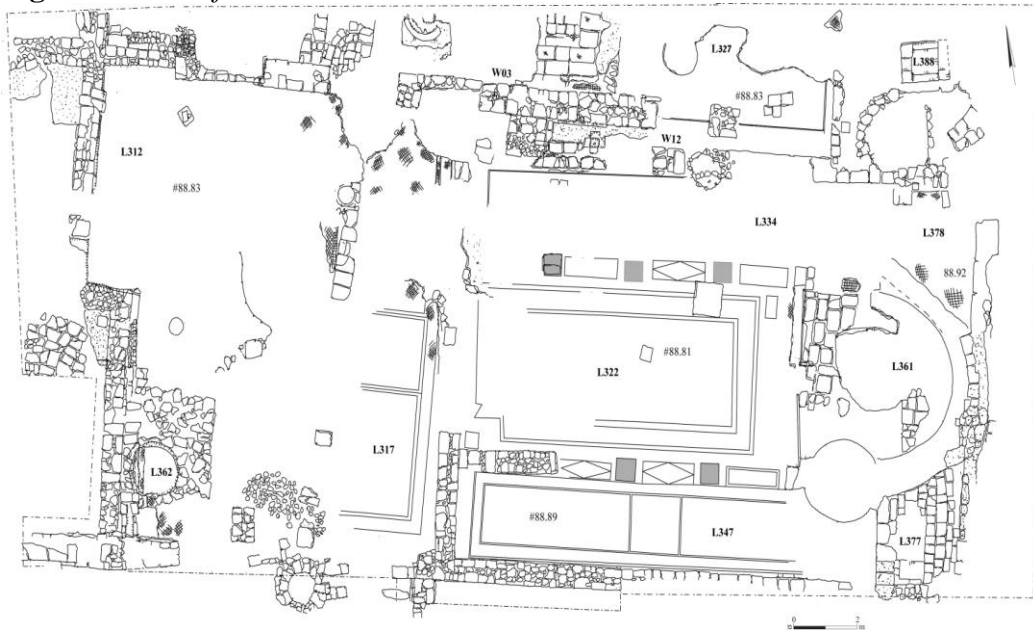
Figure 2. *Aerial Photo of the Church*



Source: Courtesy of Sky View and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The church has a basilica plan (Figure 3), measuring 31 m. in length and 15 m. in width. The church consists of a central hall (nave) with two side aisles separated from the central hall by rows of marble columns. The entrance into the central hall of the church opened by way of a rectangular, transverse hall, the *narthex*, into an *atrium*, a large, open courtyard, paved with a white mosaic floor.

The walls of the church were constructed of dressed stones of sandstone and limestone.

Figure 3. Plan of the Church

Source: Daniel Varga

The *narthex* contained a well-preserved mosaic floor decorated with colored geometric designs. In the center of the *narthex* mosaic, opposite the entrance to the main hall, is a twelve-row dedicatory inscription in Greek containing the names of the church fathers and regional ecclesiastic leaders as well as the foundation date of the basilica in the month of *Artemisius* at 493/494 AD (Figure 4). The inscriptions tell us that the church was under the jurisdiction of *Leontius* the bishop of Ashkelon.

The main hall (the nave) has a colored mosaic floor adorned with vine tendrils forming thirty-six medallions. The central mosaic in the hall measures 22 x 12 m. The workmanship of the mosaics was particularly skillful and similar to those uncovered in the churches at Beer' Shema (Gazit & Lander 1992) and Beit Loya (Gutfeld 2009). The tesserae are made from local sandstone, and some are of glass.

Figure 4. *Aerial photo of the Medallion Inscription in the Nartex*



Source: Courtesy of Sky View and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The medallions contain depictions of various animals such as a zebra, leopard, turtle, wild boar (Figure 5), and various birds (Figures 6, 7) as well as botanical and geometric designs. Two medallions contain dedicatory inscriptions in Greek commemorating senior church dignitaries and donors: *Demetrios* and *Herakles*. The two officials were heads of the local regional church.

Figure 5. *Photo of a Medallion with a Wild Boar Depiction*



Source: Nicky Davidov - Israel Antiquities Authority.

Figure 6. *Photo of a Medallion with a Bird Depiction*



Source: Nicky Davidov - Israel Antiquities Authority.

Figure 7. *Photo of a Medallion with a Bird Depiction*



Source: Nicky Davidov - Israel Antiquities Authority.

On both sides of the central nave there is a narrow hall (side aisles) (Figure 8), which also have colorful mosaic floors depicting botanical and geometric designs and Christian symbols (Figure 9).

Figure 8. *Aerial Photo of the Southern Aisle*



Source: Courtesy of Sky View and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Figure 9. *Aerial photo of a New Testament Motive at the Southern Aisle*



Source: Courtesy of Sky View and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The apse and the two service rooms at the eastern end of the church (the *protessis* and the *diaconicon*) were badly damaged by the Late Ottoman trash pits, little of the rooms were preserved.

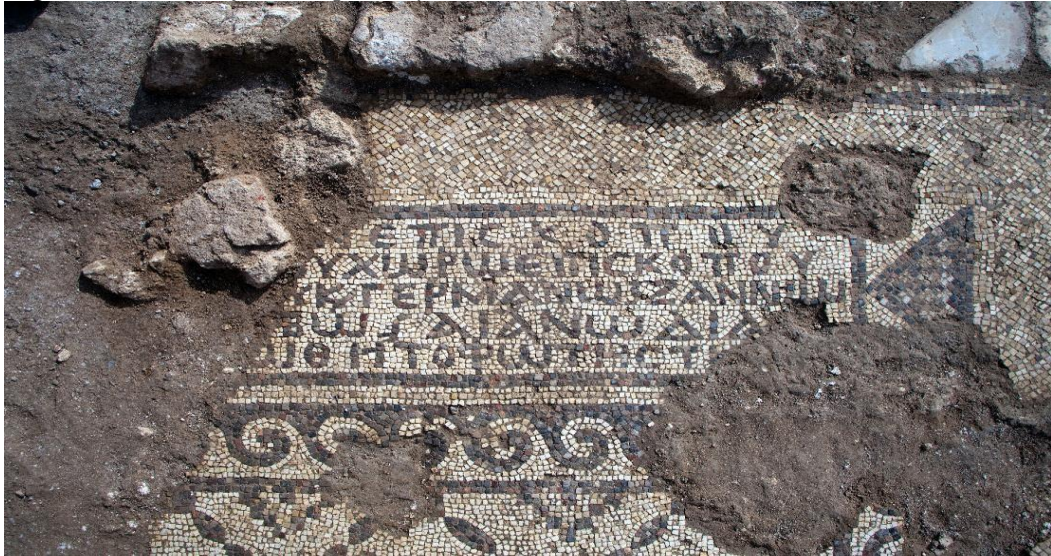
An additional wing of the church, attached to the northern aisle along the north side of the church, is a baptistery (Figure 10). This wing is paved with mosaics decorated in the form of geometric designs and includes two Greek inscriptions. The inscriptions point to its use as a baptistery as well as mentioning the names of church officials and donors (Figure 11).

Figure 10. *Aerial Photo of the Baptistry Room*



Source: Courtesy of Sky View and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Figure 11 *Photo of the Baptistry Eastern Inscription*



Source: Nicky Davidov -Israel Antiquities Authority.

A pottery workshop, located a few meters northwest of the church, apparently produced storage jars. This area yielded numerous finds, including, amphorae, cooking pots, bowls and different types of oil lamps of the Byzantine period. Glass vessels typical of the same period were also discovered at the site, and these indicate a rich and flourishing local material culture.

Sometime before the Abbasid period, a fire appears to have destroyed the southern aisle the debris of which covered and protected the mosaic floor. During the Abbasid period (late 8th – 10th century), the *atrium*, the baptistry wing and northern aisle of the church were used as part of industrial and storage facilities. In addition a number of granaries and pits were sunk into the floors, creating structural damage including the destruction of some walls and mosaic pavements. Roughly ninety percent of the pottery sherds uncovered over the floors of the church in these areas date to the Abbasid period.

Conclusion

The church was part of a small Byzantine village that probably served as a center of Christian worship for neighboring communities in the Late Antique. The church would also have served travelers and pilgrims traveling along the nearby central road that led from Jerusalem to the coastal city of Ashqelon by way of Eleutheropolis. Churches and Monasteries along main roads on Byzantine Palestine are a common phenome as it can be seen at Yavne Yam along the road from Ashdod to Yavne (Sion 2010) and Nir Galim (Gorzalczany 2002) along the road from Ashdod and Jaffa among many others.

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