

# Byzantine Basilica with Graves of Female Ministers and Baffling Mass Burials Found in Israel

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The Holy Mother Sophronia. Theodosia the deaconess. Gregoria the deaconess. These are some of the women lovingly memorialized at a magnificent Byzantine basilica that Israeli archaeologists have uncovered in the southern city of Ashdod.

The splendidly mosaiced church, built in the fourth or fifth century C.E., is being hailed as one of the earliest and largest Christian basilicas found in Israel. It is also one of the most unusual, partly due to the number and prominence of graves and inscriptions dedicated to female ministers. Then as now, women in the clergy were usually overshadowed by their male counterparts.

And if that wasn't enough, when the archaeologists investigated the graves dug beneath the floors of the 1,600-year-old basilica, they encountered an additional, darker, puzzle. It appears that most of these holy tombs were reused at a later date. Instead of just finding the skeletons of the people memorialized in the church's Greek inscriptions, researchers uncovered jumbles of bones belonging to dozens of individuals who had been unceremoniously dumped in and covered in lime sometime in the sixth century.

Such mass graves are typical of large disease outbreaks – in antiquity and today as well when dealing with the death wrought by COVID-19.

While the bones from the basilica are still being studied, experts hypothesize they may have found rare evidence of a plague pandemic that swept through the Byzantine Empire and the rest of Eurasia in the sixth century C.E.

“Besides the unusual amount of funerary inscriptions and the prominent place given to women, we found that this church is like one huge cemetery – everywhere we touch we find these strange mounds of skeletons,” says Prof. Alexander Fantalkin, an archaeologist from Tel Aviv University who heads the dig.

Parts of the basilica were first uncovered in 2017 and it has since been fully excavated. The site was once part of the town of Ashdod Yam, which back in the Iron Age, more than 2,500 years ago, functioned as the main port for the Philistine city of Ashdod, located just a few kilometers inland. Both these ancient settlements are now part of the modern Israeli city of the same name.

Starting with the Assyrian conquest of the area at the end of the eighth century B.C.E., ancient Ashdod declined in importance. Then, during the later Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods, Ashdod Yam grew to become the dominant settlement in the region. Known as “Azotos Paralios” (“Ashdod by the Sea” in Greek) it appears as a major town, featuring large public buildings, in the Madaba Map, a sixth-century mosaic map of the Holy Land found in a Byzantine church in Jordan.

Fantalkin and his team were excavating the seaside acropolis of Ashdod Yam in 2017 when the Israel Antiquities Authority asked them to investigate a nearby plot of land adjacent to a modern villa, where mosaic tiles kept cropping up on the sandy surface.

“I sent over a few volunteers and almost immediately they found the first inscription,” the archaeologist recalls. “I thought, ‘okay, it’s a nice, small church.’ But boy was I wrong: it just kept getting bigger and bigger.”

Ultimately the archaeologists uncovered a classic three-nave basilica with multiple attached rooms and chapels. Unfortunately, part of the church is covered by the modern villa that was built a few decades ago on the site. But what survives is still spectacular: The floors of the basilica were covered with exquisite mosaics depicting crosses, elaborate geometric patterns, as well as animal scenes and a dozen inscriptions memorializing both men and women, in roughly equal proportions.

The oldest text was an inscription in one of the side naves that was paved “in memory of the priest Gaianos and Severa the deaconess,” and carries a date that translates to the year 416 C.E. Since the mosaic paving of the nave must have been done some time after the construction of the church, this suggests that the building existed before, possibly already in the late fourth century, Fantalkin says.

Speaking of dates, this is another unusual feature of the Ashdod Yam basilica. Its inscriptions carry year numbers that don’t correspond to most calendars commonly used in that period.

For example, the dedication to Gaianos and Severa is dated to the year 169, in the time of the bishop Heraclius. But the question is: 169 of what calendar? Heraclius is known to have been a bishop of Azotos in the fifth century, plus there were no Byzantine basilicas in Israel (or anywhere) in the middle of the second century C.E. According to Dr. Leah Di Segni, an expert in Greek epigraphy from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the dedicatory inscriptions follow a rare chronology that is based on the millennium of Rome. This was celebrated in 247 C.E. to mark 1,000 years from the city’s traditional foundation date in 753 B.C.E.

So, in the case of the above-mentioned inscription, 247 plus 169 equals 416 C.E. The custom of counting years from that millennial celebration is only found in later inscriptions connected to Georgian Christians, Di Segni notes. That’s why, initially, the archaeologists thought the Ashdod Yam basilica may have been a Georgian place of worship.

However, once the dig advanced, it became clear there was nothing connecting the basilica to the Georgian Church, she says. It now seems more likely that this chronology was developed at Ashdod Yam and possibly later adopted by Georgian Christians, who had a monastery near the town, she concludes.

This however is only one of the many mysteries posed by the Ashdod Yam basilica.

### **Long-lost daughter?**

For one thing we don’t know to whom the church was dedicated. The central apse housed the main altar and a tomb, probably from the late Roman period, preceding the construction of the basilica.

When the archaeologists opened the grave, they found a single skeleton, buried without any artifacts – a simple burial typical of early Christian holy persons, says Dr. Hila May, a physical anthropologist from Tel Aviv University who is studying the human remains from the site.

It was common for early Christians to identify ancient tombs belonging to saints, martyrs or prophets, and build churches around them to promote pilgrimage and worship, May says. The holy person’s tomb was also the only burial that was not recycled in later times as a mass grave, May notes.

Unfortunately, any mosaics or inscriptions in the apse, which could have helped clarify the tomb’s attribution, have not survived, and the church is not mentioned in known ancient texts, Fantalkin says.

While May’s analysis is not yet complete, she suspects that the skeleton in the tomb belonged to a woman. This opens up an interesting theory.

According to the New Testament (Acts 8:40), Philip the evangelist was transported by the Holy Spirit to Azotos Paraliot, where he preached. The saint also had four unmarried daughters who were gifted prophetesses (Acts 21:9) and played an important role in the early Church. It is therefore possible that, given Philip's connection to Ashdod Yam, a tradition may have developed that one of his daughters was buried there and an ancient local tomb may have been identified as her grave, ultimately leading to the construction of a basilica that was particularly beloved by female ministers, Fantalkin says.

This, at the moment, is pure speculation, but whoever the person buried in the apse was, she (or he) must have been seen as someone holy enough to merit the construction of such a magnificent church and to push many faithful to choose it as their final resting place.

### **Ministry of female deacons**

While there are similar burials and memorial inscriptions in many Byzantine churches, the amount of texts and the high number of deaconesses and other female ministers mentioned is unique, says Prof. Joseph Patrich, an archaeologist and Byzantine expert from the Hebrew University who did not take part in the dig.

These women probably had a high status and had the means and power to be memorialized in such fashion, Di Segni adds. For example, the "Holy Mother Sophronia" was likely the mother superior of a nearby convent, she suggests. As for the deaconesses, who make up most of the women mentioned in the inscriptions, these could have been nuns or secular women of an older age and high class, Di Segni says. In the Byzantine Church, deaconesses had an important role in the baptism of women and other rites, as well as in ministering to female converts, the sick and poor, explains Dr. Balbina Bähler, a historian from the University of Göttingen who is part of the project.

The ministry of female deacons (from the Greek "diakonos" – servant or assistant) was eliminated in most Christian denominations over the centuries, but recently there have been calls to bring back this ancient order. Both the Orthodox Church of Greece and the Patriarchate of Alexandria and Africa have restored the role, while Pope Francis has set up a commission to study the possibility of a similar move for the Catholic Church.

Going back to Ashdod Yam's "Church of the Deaconesses," as some scholars now call it, the archaeologists did investigate other burials in the complex. And, as is often the case, they uncovered more questions than answers.

For example, the above-mentioned mosaic pavement dedicated to Gaianos the priest and Severa the deaconess lay over two tombs, each of which contained a complex burial with two layers.

In the lower, earlier burials the researchers found two adults, one possibly a woman wearing a golden earring, and a man. The latter's skull was found spiked on an iron spearhead that had skewered him through the jaw (spoiler alert: it killed him).

In the adjacent tomb, likely from the same period, the bodies of four or five children were recovered, from babies to teenagers, May says.

Were the two adults early Christian martyrs who had been killed in a wave of persecutions? And were their children massacred and buried with them? It's possible, but we don't know for sure yet, the anthropologist says.

What is clear is that the tomb of the adults was reopened in a later phase of the basilica's history and transformed into a mass burial for some six people, mostly adults, who were dumped atop the remains of the putative martyrs and liberally sprinkled with lime, she says.

### **A time of death**

This phenomenon is repeated throughout the church. When the archaeologists opened a tomb at the entrance of the basilica marked as belonging to "Theodoros the magistranos" (a local official in charge of collecting taxes at the port), they were hoping to excavate the artifact-rich tomb of a man of means. Instead they found another jumble of bones, representing the poorly preserved and lime-covered remains of up to 10 people, who had clearly taken over the grave of the magistranos at a later date.

The fact that the graves were reused is evident even without opening the burials. Most are covered with patched-up mosaics, indicating that these parts of the church's floor were at some point ripped out to bury fresh bodies and then repaired, says Dr. Lihi Habas, an archaeologist from the Hebrew University and an expert on Byzantine mosaics.

In some cases, there were attempts to restore the original patterns of the floor decoration, with varying success, while in others they simply fixed the holes with plain white mosaic tiles, Habas says.

"They didn't try to hide the patches, you can see very clearly the difference between the original and the changes," she notes. "When it's a lower-quality fix, it clearly means that it was a rush job."

The rushed floor repairs, the mass burials, the use of lime – normally employed to limit smells and contagion – all point to a time of crisis and widespread death. This leads the researchers to suggest that the later burials may be connected to the so-called Plague of Justinian, which hit the Byzantine Empire in the 540s. The epidemic, named after the emperor at the time, is said by ancient historians to have killed millions and to have contributed significantly to the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire. However, in recent years, some scholars have questioned whether this epidemic was really so devastating, as little evidence of its effects had been found in the archaeological record. In 2013, researchers did identify traces of *Yersinia pestis*, the pathogen responsible for the plague, in human remains from a sixth century cemetery in Germany, but much more data is needed to understand the scope and reach of this ancient pandemic.

That is why May and colleagues will be looking for the DNA of *Y. pestis* in the skeletons from Ashdod Yam. If they indeed find the bacteria, it will be the first evidence of Justinian's Plague found in Israel and will provide invaluable information on the spread of the disease and evolution of the pathogen, May says.

### **Lost, found, reburied**

After roughly two centuries of tumultuous existence, the story of the Church of the Deaconesses came to an abrupt end when the complex was destroyed by a huge fire around the year 600, Fantalkin says. The conflagration may be connected to a natural disaster, like an earthquake, or possibly the Persian invasion of the Levant during the devastating Byzantine-Sasanian war of 602-628, the archaeologist suggests.

Whatever the cause of the basilica's downfall, ironically, it was the collapse of the building's roof that entombed the floors in a sort of time capsule of burnt tiles and beams, preserving for posterity the splendid mosaics and the enigmatic graves that lay beneath.

The rediscovery of the Church of the Deaconesses has caused ripples of excitement not only among researchers, but also among Christian religious leaders. Top Orthodox clergy held a liturgy there in July to

pray for the souls of the dead and Jerusalem Patriarch Theophilos III called on Israeli authorities to protect the church's remains.

"It is our fervent hope and desire that this site be preserved intact, and ultimately be made accessible both to scholars and to pilgrims, like all other holy places in our region," Theophilos said at the ceremony. "This would be a living testimony of the history of this ancient city and would promote peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and mutual respect."

The Ashdod municipality, which has supported the dig over the last years, plans to open the site to the public "as soon as possible," says Ofer Dery, CEO of the city's tourism development company. Currently, they are awaiting a conservation plan for the church's remains that must be drawn up by the Israel Antiquities Authority, Dery says.

The entire area that was once Ashdod Yam is slated to become an archaeological park, incorporating not only the newly-discovered basilica, but also an existing Islamic-era citadel as well as other ancient churches and buildings still to be excavated, says Saar Ganor, the IAA's chief archaeologist for the Ashkelon region, which includes Ashdod.

"We see Ashdod Yam as a site of huge importance, on the level of Caesarea," Ganor says, referring to the impressive remains of the port city built by Herod the Great on Israel's northern coast. "But for this, the city of Ashdod needs to allocate a budget."

This institutional ping-pong will likely continue to play out for a while and it is impossible to forecast now when the site will open to the public.

In the meantime, Fantalkin and his team have reburied the remains of the basilica to protect them from the elements and vandalism, in the hope that someday, hopefully soon, the treasures of the Church of Deaconesses will see the light again.

<https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/2021-11-15/ty-article-magazine/byzantine-basilica-with-female-ministers-and-baffling-burials-found-in-israel/0000017f-e722-dc7e-adff-f7af11070000>