

1,600-Year-Old Samson Mosaic Brings Roman Era to Life

A captivating Roman-era mosaic portraying the biblical hero Samson has been revealed by archaeologists at the 1,600-year-old synagogue in Huqoq, an ancient Jewish village situated in the Lower Galilee.

The international archaeological effort, led by Professor Jodi Magness from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has unearthed a mosaic of significant proportions near the main entrance of the synagogue. This extraordinary mosaic features a Hebrew inscription encased in a beautiful wreath. The wreath is flanked by a pair of majestic lions resting their forepaws on the heads of bulls. Surrounding the entire mosaic panel is an ornate border adorned with depictions of predatory animals engaged in the pursuit of their prey.

Adjacent to the centerpiece, an Aramaic inscription can be found, possibly recording the names of the generous benefactors who financed the mosaic's creation or the skilled artisans responsible for its intricate design. The inscription serves as a timeless testament to their contribution, an enduring desire to be remembered.

In previous excavation seasons, mosaic panels portraying key moments in the life of the biblical figure Samson were uncovered. These vivid depictions included scenes of Samson's exploits with foxes, as described in Judges 15:4, and the heroic act of Samson carrying the Gaza gate on his shoulders, detailed in Judges 16:3.

This year's excavation has further enriched the Samson narrative, as newly exposed sections revealed a Philistine horseman and a slain Philistine soldier, their faces displaying remarkable classical features. Previous discoveries

at Huqoq included depictions of biblical heroines Deborah and Jael. In 2022, a mosaic panel was found, divided into three horizontal sections. It vividly brought to life scenes from Judges chapter four, illustrating the prophetess and judge Deborah under a palm tree, gazing at the shield-bearing Barak.

Additionally, the mosaic portrayed the Kenite woman Yael driving a tent stake through the temple of the Canaanite general Sisera. These remarkable findings represent the earliest known depictions of these biblical heroines.

Throughout the decade-long Huqoq excavation project, a series of discoveries have illuminated our historical understanding. A mosaic panel captured the moment when two of Moses' spies carried a pole with a cluster of grapes, as mentioned in Numbers 13:23. An inscription accompanying a man leading an animal on a rope proclaimed "a small child shall lead them," a verse from Isaiah 11:6. Animal figures, identified by an Aramaic inscription, represented the four beasts linked to the four kingdoms described in the book of Daniel, chapter seven. A significant mosaic panel in the northwest aisle depicted Elim, the oasis where the Israelites camped, surrounded by 12 springs and 70 date palms after their departure from Egypt, as recounted in Exodus 15:27.

Other remarkable discoveries included depictions of Noah's Ark, the parting of the Red Sea, Jonah being swallowed by three fish and the construction of the Tower of Babel. In addition to their historical significance, traces of reconstruction and expansion during the early 14th century (AD, the late medieval/Mamluk period) were found at the synagogue.

This period coincided with the creation of an international highway connecting Cairo and Damascus, which passed alongside Yakuk (Huqoq's medieval name), indicating the growing strategic importance of the region. The era also witnessed the rise of a local tradition associating the nearby Tomb of

Habakkuk with religious pilgrimage.

As the 2022 and 2023 excavation seasons come to a close, the responsibility for the site will be handed over to the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael-Jewish National Fund. The new custodians plan to develop the site into a unique tourist attraction, inviting visitors to marvel at these remarkable historical gems firsthand. {eo}

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