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Archaeologists Find Misspelled Sixth-Century Greek Texts Near Galilee



Archaeologists have discovered three sixth-century Greek inscriptions — complete with bad grammar and misspellings — in the remains of a burnt church in the Hippos-Sussita Excavation Project, near Israel’s Sea of Galilee.

The Hippos/Sussita site is an archaeological dig in Israel overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Its name encompasses both the Greek word for horse, “hippo,” and the Hebrew word for a female horse, “sussita.”

Hippos was the site of a Greco-Roman city which flourished between the third century BC and the seventh century AD, but declined under Muslim rule and was completely abandoned after an earthquake in the year 749.

According to a feature in The Times of Israel, although a burned-out church was found on the archaeological site 15 years ago, it was only this year that researchers returned to find evidence of the precise date of the conflagration of the church.

They named the remains of that particular building “Burnt Church” and tasked themselves with discovering the approximate date of its construction.

Among the findings made there were three ancient Greek mosaics with inscriptions written with bad grammar and many misspellings. This surprising discovery led the research team to wonder whether the artisan and the supervising church officials were actually native Greeks.

“There were so many mistakes, we thought perhaps it is not their lingua franca,” said excavation leader Dr. Michael Eisenberg in an interview with The Times of Israel. The spelling and grammar mistakes indicated confusion over the construction of possessive nouns in Greek.

It is possible that the residents of the Christian-majority city of Hippos in the fifth century could “perhaps read the Holy Scriptures in Greek” (if literate), but maybe not any more than that,” the archaeologist speculated.

Hippos was a relatively rich city which actually adopted Christianity slowly. There is no evidence of any Christian presence there at all before the fourth century AD.

A Byzantine-era pagan tomb of a man named Hermes has also been found outside the city walls; this is proof of the persistence of pagan belief relatively late in that area of the world.

The city was apparently Christianized gradually, becoming the seat of a bishop by at least the year 359. One bishop, Peter of Hippos, is listed in the surviving records of church councils which were convened in the years 359 and 362.

“I’m sure there are churches from the fourth century, but we haven’t found them,” Eisenberg stated. Findings indicate that the burnt church was constructed in two phases, in the second half of both the fifth and sixth centuries, but the mosaics are likely from the sixth century, he said.

Ancient Greek epigrapher Dr. Gregor Staab from the University of Cologne, Germany, told The Times of Israel that there was a decline in knowledge of classical Greek grammar in the region at that time.

“Similar mistakes occur and can be expected” in mosaics of this era and region, said Staab, arguing that the texts were written by someone who was not completely fluent in the language. He added that it “is certainly no new dialect.”

Hippos-Sussita researchers are working on deciphering the names of the donors listed on the inscriptions of the church, and will then cross-check them with historical and canonical records. In this way, they hope to be able to determine the time that the church was built.

Dr. Eisenberg said that a reliquary was discovered in the center of the church apse in earlier excavations. This was made of red limestone and most likely contained a body part of the saint to which the church is dedicated. An almost identical reliquary was discovered under the Northwest Church at Hippos, he added.

Ample evidence still exists that the church was destroyed by fire. Carbon samples found indicate that “huge logs, beams of wood,” were used in the building’s construction, according to Dr. Eisenberg.

It was further determined that the fire that destroyed the church was not caused by the Arabs who conquered the city in 637. Dr. Eisenberg believes that it was actually most likely razed during the Persian/Sassanian conquest of the land in the early seventh century.

When the Muslim armies invaded the area of Palestine, the city of Hippos surrendered to them. The Islamic conquest of the region was complete by the year 641. The new Arab rulers actually allowed the citizens of Hippos to continue practicing Christianity, a policy which was then continued by the Umayyad Caliphate.

Archaeologists say that the new Islamic regime did not pull down the churches. However, Christian imagery engraved on Byzantine-era brass bread seals (used for Communion bread) and chancel screens was covered over with a “paste” of tin and lead.

Christianity remained for years the dominant faith in the city, despite its multi-faith population. However, the population and economy of Hippos continued to decline after its conquest. An earthquake finally destroyed the city in 749, causing the residents to abandon it forever.

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