

**The Mosaic Path: developing ancient Christian Touristic sites in a modern urban context – Karmiel, Israel**

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**Abstract**

During archaeological surveys and excavations, no less than eight churches and chapels were discovered in the municipal territory of the modern town of Karmiel, in northern Israel. According to a recent research, those were monastic churches and those monasteries were part of a large – and still quite obscure – monastic landscape in western Galilee in late antiquity. The aim of this paper is to suggest the use of this unique monastic heritage as a catalyzer for tourism development in and around the city of Karmiel.

**Key words** Monasticism, Galilee, Karmiel, Mosaic floors

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The small city of Karmiel is located in northern Israel on the border between upper and lower Galilee, on a main touristic rout leading from Akko on the Mediterranean coast to Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Karmiel was established in the mid 60s' of the last century and it hosts the annual dancing festival of Israel. Out of this event, the city has no other attraction and the tour buses that cross the country from west to east skip it. However, from an Archaeological and historical point of view, Karmiel has a unique importance in understanding the interaction between village, church and monks in late antiquity. During surveys and excavations conducted at Karmiel since its establishment until recently, the remains of a large village, dated to the 4-7<sup>th</sup> centuries, named Horvat Bata, were discovered, as well as the village church, and a small monastery within its defending wall. In the proximity of the village, another 11 churches and chapels were identified of which 6 were excavated, and 6 were identified as belonging to monasteries. This is an unusual phenomenon in the archaeological landscape of late antique Palestine, similar only to some sites in Trans Jordan (Piccirillo (1993) and in north-west Syria, around the city of Aleppo (Tate 1992). In the excavated sites of Karmiel, colored mosaic floors, some of which contained Greek Inscriptions, were uncovered. These mosaic floors can be connected with a short walking path that runs through the small parks of the city which surrounded by modern residential areas.

Our study of the archaeological evidence and their historical context (as there are almost none written sources mentioning this region) succeeded to rebuild the rural and the monastic sphere of eastern Mediterranean society in the dawn of middle ages. During the first half of the fifth century CE, new settlements began to appear in Western Galilee. Most of those settlements were villages, yet quite a few indications, following surveys and excavations, show that some of those settlements were monasteries (Ashkenazi and Aviam, forthcoming). It is safe to assume, albeit still not beyond any doubt, that monasticism in Western Galilee was a widespread phenomenon, no less than it was in other monastic centers in the Orient. We base our assumption on a careful appraisal of the typology of those settlements and by comparing their remains to certain monasteries in other, nearby, monastic centers. Yet, unlike other monastic centers in the East (and the West), this center is quite obscure: the region is not mentioned in the New Testament. Thus, there were no holy places to attract neither

pilgrims nor church fathers; no hagiographer dedicated his life work to a Galilean holy man and there are no signs of scribes, theologians, great teachers or intellectuals in those monasteries. However, in Galilee, the concentration of finds in a small area and the relatively good state of its preservation allow us to look at rural Galilee, and especially at Karmiel, as a test case for a better understanding of the relations between villages and monasteries in late antique east.

In a forthcoming study we have reviewed the map of the monasteries in Western Galilee during the Byzantine period and showed that as in other areas in the east, in Western Galilee we evident an economic prosperity in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. This prosperity was an outcome of both macro-and micro-processes. It seems that the Western Galilee was densely populated in the Byzantine period, with rural communities whose livelihood was mainly based on production of oil and wine. Apparently, the monasteries took a substantial roll in the overall economy of the villages, and helped the rural community to deploy and exploit the soil reserves at its disposal. Our study shows that the monasteries were not isolated but located a short distance from the villages. Their size was limited and in most cases, they contained agricultural installations that produced products in commercial quantities, well beyond the immediate needs of the monks. From the small number of inscriptions discovered in the churches of the excavated monasteries, we can assume that the monasteries did not necessarily depend on their separate clergy and they relied on the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the village.

### **The Village of Horbat Bata (Khirbat Sih)**

This is one of the most unusual Byzantine sites in Western Galilee, located in the center of the modern city of Karmiel. The village covers the entire dome-shaped, isolated hill and its southern slope. This is the only Byzantine village in Galilee and probably in Israel, of which we know was surrounded by a defense wall. During a survey conducted within the village, we succeeded in identifying, among the dwellings, a pottery kiln on the eastern side of the village, an oil press in its center, some cisterns and a large reservoir. Two churches were excavated at the site—a large one on the top of the hill and a small one at the bottom (Yeivin 1992: 109–128; Vitto 1978: 16). The Large Church was probably the village-church and was presumably a central church for the small settlements nearby.

### **The Monasteries of Karmiel**

#### **1) Kh. Bata**

At the foot of Kh. Bata's hill, attached to the village wall, a second church and a much moderate one was found. It was decorated with limestone chancel screens carrying crosses, had rooms around it, including an oil press, and was thus identified by the excavator as a monastery (Vitto 1978: 16).

#### **2) Horbat Kenes (khirbat Kanissa)**

H. kenes is located on the top of a hill, just north of H. Bata. Salvage excavation was carried out by the Israel Antiquities Authority, uncovering a large church (Avshalom-Gorni and Aviam, 1996: 25). Mainly rock-cut foundations and mosaic floors were preserved from the church which was built directly on the bedrock. The central nave was paved in white and red stone pavers. The two isles were paved with colorful mosaics in geometric design. There are six Greek inscriptions on the pavement of the church. To the south, adjacent to the church there is a small chapel, paved with mosaic and a small cross-shape baptistery in front of its apse.

#### **3) Horbat Zaggag (Khirbat Kazaz)**

This tiny site of about one fourth of an acre is located atop a small, isolated hill, about 1 Km. west of H. Bata. As the pottery were all dated to the Byzantine period, and colored tesserae, roof tiles and a winepress were recorded, it was suggested during the survey that the site was a monastery. In 2006, a small excavation was launched.<sup>1</sup> Three rooms were identified one of which was an oil press. On the summit, a small chapel with an inner apse was discovered. The apse was paved with a colorful mosaic floor in the design of a conch. The small size of the site, the rooms around a chapel and the two agricultural installations all point to a clear identification of the site as a monastery (Fig. 3).

<sup>1</sup> The site, excavated by M. Aviam on behalf of the Institute for Galilean Archaeology, has not yet been published.

**4) Horbat Kav**

The site, located on a small hill, 1 Km. west of H. Zaggag, was severely damaged during quarrying operation in the 1960s. Two salvage excavations were conducted. The first, on the northern edge of the site, revealed the remains of a building that had been destroyed in a fire (Stern, Abu Uqsa and Getzov 2000: 11–14; 17). A hoard of 50 gold coins was discovered in an oil lamp retrieved from between the stone pavers in the courtyard. The hoard dated to 663 CE at the earliest, the Early Islamic period (Syon 2000–2002: 211–223). The second excavation, on the top of the hill, uncovered a small church with remains of a mosaic floor, a small baptismal chapel beside it and another small chapel. The church was surrounded by rooms, and there was a very large winepress attached to the north. Two heavy weight stones were found, not *in situ*; they were probably part of an oil press. It is very likely that the church with the surrounding rooms and winepress, and probably the chapels as well, belonged to a monastery. As the site was badly damaged, it is hard to tell whether the entire complex, with additional rooms, was part of the monastery as well.

**5) Khirbat el Kabra**

The site is located atop an isolated hill at the eastern fringes of Karmiel. The pottery collected at the site are from the Byzantine and Mamluk periods. Colored mosaic tesserae were found between the foundations of walls on top, as well as roof tiles, all point to the existence of a monastery.

**6) Khirbat Ras ed-Dweir**

A small site on top of an isolated hill, half a kilometer west of Kh. El Kabra. An oil press was found between the ruins of the southern side and colored mosaic tesserae were collected on the surface as well as roof tiles. The Arabic name ‘Dweir’ means monastery.

**7) Givat Zakif**

A solid structure atop a high isolated hill in the center of the Bet Kerem Valley, north of Karmiel. During the survey pottery from the Byzantine period, roof tiles and mosaic tesserae were found. The walls were robbed and only the foundations were left. However, it is very clear that there is an apse to the east. The size of the site and the finds, point in our opinion for the identification of the site as a monastery.

**What shaped the monastic center in Karmiel?**

A series of laws enacted from the days of Theodosius I to the time of Justinian shaped the church’s status in the public sphere, and especially the monasteries. The legislation granted the church exemptions, credits and preferences that strengthened its position in the cities and the rural areas. This legislation encouraged lay people to join the clergy and reinforced the status of the monasteries, especially in the countryside (Thomas 1987: 4). Some laws were aimed directly at the monasteries, and encouraged the building of monastic structures, especially in the countryside. The policy of the imperial administration in favor of monastic settlements in rural areas together with the Church’s encouragement of monks to dwell in the countryside perhaps explains the vast distribution during the fifth and sixth centuries CE. Of monasteries in rural Galilee, and in Karmiel. Another important legislation that may influenced the spread of monasteries in rural areas was the act of the emperor Arcadius, from 398, giving legal ownership on *agri deserti* – uncultivated lands that were private property of the imperial court - to farmers that made the soil fertile (Hirschfeld 2005 : 533-534). This act might have also motivated the villagers to initiate the erection of monasteries in deserted lands around the village.

Not only legislations had their impact on rural Galilee. If we examine economic changes in and around the Mediterranean during the fifth–sixth centuries, we may find macro-factors that should have had a moderate, yet vital, influence on micro regions in the east (Kingsley and Decker 2001: 2). The geo-political changes that took place in the western basin of the Mediterranean during the fifth and sixth centuries affected the trade roots and the commerce of agricultural production. Recent studies show that vast quantities of oil and wine from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean were exported to consumers in the west. We believe that the monasteries in Karmiel took part in the growing production of oil and wine in Galilee that aimed to meet the demand in the west. It seems that the monasteries in Karmiel as part of western Galilee monasticism were an integral part of the rural community and the rural landscape (Patrich 2004: 422–426). Life in the monastery was not so different

from life in the village, except that here—as a monk—one could enjoy the endorsement of the civil administration together with the modest admiration of neighbors and kin.

### The touristification of Karmiel monasteries

The Mosaic Path of Karmiel could act as a very different touristic attraction, different because it reflects a unique phenomenon that is rarely evident in biblical touristic sites. The tourist that will visit the city of Karmiel will walk through remains of ancient Christian habitats that are usually ignored. The remains of the monasteries at Karmiel can offer a rare opportunity to take a glimpse through everyday life of an ancient Christian village and its monastic surroundings. Developing a site of this kind can potentially attract at least three different kinds of tourist populations.

The first is the local Israeli population. Despite the often non-Jewish context, many Israelis consider archeological sites as very interesting and attractive. The journalist and author Amos Elon observes that "It is intriguing . . . to observe the extraordinary appeal of archeology as a popular pastime and science in Israel. . . Archeology in Israel is a popular movement. It is almost a national sport. Not a passive spectator sport but the thrilling, active pastime of many thousands of people, as perhaps fishing in the Canadian lake country or hunting in the French *Massif Central*" (Elon 1971: 280). A concentration of five or six mosaic floors in walking distance and which is entitled 'the Mosaic path' will catch the eye and ear of almost every Israeli Tourist.

The second kind of tourist population is the repeat visitors. Israel has a reputation of a destination that deserves more than one visit. Fuchs and Reichel (2011) observed that more than 42% of the tourists in their study were repeat visitors, and Ron and Timothy (forthcoming) observed Christian pilgrims that had visited the Holy Land for 42 times. Although repeat visitors tend to return to previously visited sites, it is assumed that adding newly developed sites would be perceived as a positive contribution.

The third kind is 'the inquisitive tourist', who seeks for unvisited and unknown attractions such as newly discovered ancient sites. we paid attention during our surveys, excavations and visits, that as the news or even rumors about a new discovery of an ancient interesting site are published, hundreds of visitors, both individuals and families, are visiting the site during the first weeks after the discovery.<sup>2</sup>

These three tourist populations can be defined as cultural and heritage tourists, and are potential visitors to this category of sites in general, and this specific site in particular. We believe that these three groups will visit the sites through the year long as it is connected to an important touristic root, easy access, ancient religious context and the combination of esthetics and historical knowledge. Development of the Mosaic Path of Karmiel requests further excavations, preservations and reconstructions that should be financed by both the ministry of tourism and the Karmiel municipality.

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<sup>2</sup> For an example to this phenomenon see a late discovery of mosaic floor in Horbat Midras in Israel: [http://www.antiquities.org.il/article\\_Item\\_eng.asp?sec\\_id=25&subj\\_id=240&id=1784&module\\_id=#as](http://www.antiquities.org.il/article_Item_eng.asp?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=1784&module_id=#as)

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