

Uncovering Biblical Hannah's Final Resting Place

Preserving a Byzantine Church and Convent

Parker Blackwell August 08, 2022

A [Byzantine church](#) and convent believed to be dedicated to biblical Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, received new life after being excavated for the second time. Excavators at the site of Horvat Hani are taking a second look at the small hilltop convent that overlooks Israel's coastal plain. A notable pilgrimage site from the early Byzantine period to the time of the Abbasids, Horvat Hani has long been a focus for biblical scholars who suggest it could be connected to the burial site of Hannah, wife of Elkanah and mother of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1). The renewed excavations, under the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), have once again brought to life the church's incredible mosaics and intriguing religious complex.



Aerial view of the floor mosaic at the convent believed to be dedicated to biblical Hannah. *Courtesy Idan Yunish, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

Digging into Horvat Hani

Beginning in the third century C.E., the hilltop church at Horvat Hani was built upon a rock-cut tomb that marked the burial of a woman of great importance. Excavations revealed decoration and imagery associated with women, as well

as several female burials. The site consists of several structures, including a church, burial crypt, living quarters, and a pilgrims' hostel. By the fifth century, Horvat Hani had grown into a large convent, ready to accommodate [visiting pilgrims](#).



Aerial view of the church complex uncovered at Horvat Hani. *Courtesy Idan Yunish, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

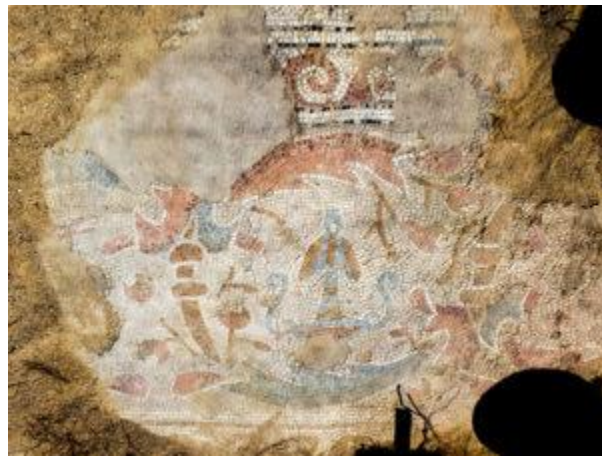
A rediscovered [mosaic](#) was likely made during the early Byzantine period and was one of many that decorated the floors of the church and convent. Other mosaics at the site feature short inscriptions, including one that reads “God bless Athanasia the abbess,” which support the site’s identification as a nunnery dedicated to biblical Hannah. The renewed excavations at Horvat Hani are part of the IAA’s Nature Defense Forces Project, which allows members of the army to participate in heritage preservation projects.



Excavators uncover floor mosaics as part of the IAA’s Nature Defense Forces Project. *Courtesy Gilad Stern, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

What's In a Name?

The long-term occupation and highly decorated interiors evidenced at Horvat Hani affirm its centrality in the early Christian world. What remains unclear, however, is the site's role in biblical times. Is Horvat Hani the final resting place of biblical Hannah?



Floral motifs from the mosaic excavated in the Byzantine convent of Horvat Hani. *Courtesy Gilad Stern, Israel Antiquities Authority.*

Some scholars, such as Eitan Klein of the IAA, maintain that the convent may memorialize the burial place of biblical Hannah. These interpretations refer to the site's Arabic name, Khirbet el-Burj el-Haniya ("the Tower of Hannah"). While several biblical figures have a name closely resembling Haniya, many believe that the site is dedicated to the mother of Samuel because the biblical story takes place in the southern Shephelah where Horvat Hani is located. Moreover, scholars believe that biblical Hannah's story (barren but blessed with child) is consistent with the fertility motifs found throughout the site. Other scholars, such as the site's first excavators, Uzi Dahari, and Yehiel Zelinger of the IAA, believe that it is still an open question as to whose burial was commemorated at the site.

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