

## A BYZANTINE CHURCH AT BEITIN, PALESTINE

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### Introduction

Beitin is the village name in the West Bank, Palestine Territory. The village has some archaeological sites such as a *tell* (artificial mound) and Roman necropolis. Burj Beitin is the one of the sites located on the southeastern hill of Beitin. Nowadays, the area of approximately fifty meters by fifty meters is preserved as an archaeological site, where many fragments of former limestone building materials are scattered. At the southeastern part of the site, a partially collapsed “tower” six meters high remains, which is the origin of this site's name.<sup>1</sup> Keio University conducted excavations there twice, in 2013 and 2015, and some parts of the ancient church were revealed.

Beitin is thought to be “Bethel” in the Old Testament, where Abraham encamped on the way from Mesopotamia to Egypt (Gen 12: 8), and Jacob dreamed of a ladder from the heaven (Gen 28: 11–23; 35: 1–15). Therefore, Beitin has attracted attention of many scholars and theologians during the 19th century, and some of them visited Burj Beitin and pointed out the existence of the ancient church preceding the “tower” ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5]), although no excavations had been conducted there. It is therefore necessary to excavate Burj Beitin to understand the whole picture of the church and the relationship between it and the “tower.”

### Measurement and Surface Survey

Preceding the excavation, measurement of structures and a collection of materials on the surface were conducted. The results of the measurement (Fig. 1) show that the “tower” is standing in the southern part of a courtyard-like space with surrounding structures and walls. Remarkably, surrounding structures vary between the eastern part and the western part, by the method of construction and the directions of walls: the eastern structures are made with single walls, while the western ones are constructed with small chambers between double walls. Furthermore the result may indicate the difference of the construction date of them.

Moreover, a result of a collection of materials indicated that the site's origin was



Fig. 1: Map of the Burj Beitin

line of stones was unearthed just below the surface and as expected, the apse was discovered (Fig. 2). The size of the apse was about seven meters in diameter and 120 cm high at the highest point from the floor. The southern edge of the wall adjoined the northern wall of the “tower,” which complicated the excavation. However, the apse’s semi-circular shape remained unbroken by the “tower.” Furthermore, a mosaic floor was revealed in the apse, although it was badly preserved and had been destroyed by later activities and collapse.

A stone slab floor was unearthed about seven meters west of the apse. Although the whole picture of the floor was still unclear because it was revealed by a trench of only 1.5 m wide, large stones more than one meter long were used. This floor is thought to be a nave of the church.

At the west of the “tower” (Area B), a line of rectangular stones was revealed, which was about 75 cm wide and parallel with the southern surrounding wall. Finally, the line extended for about 18 m from the small chamber of the western wall to the “tower.” Moreover, another mosaic floor was revealed at the space between the southern surrounding wall and the stone line (Fig. 3). While at the other side of the stone line, the stone slab floor was unearthed, which was the same elevation as that of Area D.

mainly Byzantine period, and small residences were constructed in the Islamic period

## Results of the Excavations

Four areas were selected for excavation: inside the “tower” (Area A); west of the “tower” (Area B); east of the “tower” (Area C); and north of the “tower” (Area D).

In Area D, a semi-circular



Fig. 2: The apse in the Area D



Fig. 3: The mosaic floor in the Area B



Fig. 4: The gate in the Area B

At the western edge of the site, the gate with two pillar bases was found in the middle of the western surrounding wall (Fig. 4). The interval between the bases was about 1.7 m, and the apse was located on the line that extends to the east, which should mean this was the main entrance of the church. Moreover, in the chamber south of the gate, the floor with stone slabs was uncovered. Considering the state of the floor, it is very likely that the floor extended to the whole area around the entrance room.

In the chamber at the southwestern corner of the surrounding wall, mosaic floors were partially revealed. Although these floors also had been extensively destroyed in later periods, some decorations (guilloche, wavy lines, and grapes, for example) were found.

## Summary

As a result of the excavations, a great church was unearthed at Burj Beitin, about 40 m from east to west and 28 m from north to south (Fig. 5). This is as large as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and enough to say it was one of the chief churches around the area.

However, many points are still unclear about the aisle, especially the character of the stone line. Stone pillars cannot have been set on it, because no pillar bases were found there. Therefore, wooden pillars or mudbrick walls may have been used. If wooden pillars were used, this church had four aisles. The Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem are known as the only churches of this type in Israel–Palestine, and both are large churches constructed in the fourth century. Therefore, the church of Burj Beitin would be an important example. On the other hand if mudbrick walls were constructed on the stone line, the mosaic floor would be a part of a small room adjoining the south of the church.

To solve the questions, further excavations should be continued, especially in the

aisle area, while it would be important to identify the construction date through analyzing pottery remnants.



Fig. 5: The entire picture of Burj Beitin

## Notes

1. *burj* means “tower” in Arabic.

## References

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