

Tell Umm Amer (Saint Hilarion Monastery) in Gaza

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The archaeological site of Tell Umm Amer, located 8.5 kilometers south of Gaza City in the coastal refugee camp of Al-Nuseirat, hosts various remains that date back more than four centuries, from the late Roman Empire to the Umayyad period. The location appears on the sixth-century Madaba map under the name of Tabatha.

The earliest building on the site – a huge fourth-century Byzantine basilica, built in the shape of a cross – is associated with Saint Hilarion, a native of Tabatha and the father of Palestinian monasticism. It is said that Hilarion, born of pagan parents, travelled to Egypt where he converted to Christianity. After his return to the area of Gaza in 329 AD, he established the Tell Umm Amer Monastery, one of the oldest monasteries in Palestine, on a hill that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. The site bears an exceptional testimony to Christian faith in Gaza and has also

been registered on the tentative list of UNESCO's World Heritage because of its extraordinary historical, cultural, architectural, and religious value for the region.

The monastery's entrance featured a square court with a fountain at its center. The chapel, replete with corridors and marble columns, was built according to the Corinthian style of architecture. The site also contains walls and foundations that are the remains of another church, a burial site, a public cemetery, a baptismal font, and several dining rooms. Many other facilities were part of the monastery, such as water cisterns, clay ovens, and drainage channels. Its floors were made of limestone, marble tiles, and elaborate colored mosaics that depict plant and animal scenes. In one of the rooms can be seen a brown mosaic floor that bears the words, "With the blessing of our father, Hilarion." In total, the actual



area of the site extends to more than 50 dunums (5 hectares).

The monastery was also furnished with large baths that could serve both the pilgrims and merchants on their way from Egypt to the Fertile Crescent through Via Maris. The ancient trade route ran close to the site of the monastery with imposing views over Gaza City. Saint Hilarion Monastery was probably a center of missionary work in the Gaza region, at first blush isolated in the desert, yet actually at the center of various affairs at communications crossroads.

The severe seventh-century earthquake greatly damaged the site and led to its eventual abandonment. Later, some of the stones from the ruined monastery were used in the Islamic era to build fortifications around the complex during the rule of Caliph Omar Abdel-Aziz.

The site was discovered in 1993 and uncovered by local archaeologists in 1999. Today, the site stands amidst olive groves and dwellings of the adjacent town. However, this extraordinary finding requires better protection. In order to avoid its possible rapid deterioration, the mosaics were covered with a protective layer of sand, and its crumbling walls were shored up with sandbags. The preservation activities were conducted by L'École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, the UN cultural agency UNESCO, and students from Gaza's Islamic University.

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