

# Khirbet Tawas



By Awni Mohammad Shawamra

Located 14 kilometers south of Hebron and rising 498 meters above sea level, Tawas is one of the villages to the west of the town of Dura, surrounded by the villages of Beit Awa, Sikka, and Al-Majd. Tawas has gained importance through the ages because it lies on the main road that links Hebron with Beer es-Saba. Surrounded by fertile agricultural land that today features olive and almond trees as well as vineyards, the location was attractive for human settlement. The inhabitants of Tawas, most of whom belong to the Abu Arqoub family that is associated with Sufism, believe that they are descendants of Caliph Omar Ibn Al-Khattab. They still adhere to traditional Palestinian customs in their dress, cuisine, and weddings and employ traditional farming and harvesting methods.

General view of the village of Tawas from the west. Photo by Awni Shawamra.



As the inhabitants of Tawas retained their Christian faith during the early Islamic period (frequently in Palestine, Christian villages are found in the vicinity of Muslim towns), it had a church that dates back to the late seventh century. Khirbet Tawas lies to the southeast of today's village and is one of the most important archaeological sites in that area; it still bears witness to the greatness of Byzantine civilization. The archaeologist Pater Andreas Evaristus Mader visited the site in the late nineteenth century and mentioned that it contains the ruins of a church with an atrium, narthex, and mosaics, in addition to

walls that were 1.2 meters thick, and two rows of four columns that stand 1.8 meters apart, the shafts of which measure half a meter in diameter. There is also a fallen stone with a Maltese cross cut into it.

The first archaeological excavations at the site were conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority between 1967 and 1968, followed by other excavations that uncovered a 33.80-by-12.10-meter basilica-type church. Its floor is paved with colorful mosaics that include multiple geometric and floral decorations in addition to three Greek inscriptions. The first one



Tawas church. Photo courtesy of Yuval Peleg, "A Byzantine Church at Khirbet Tawas," Jerusalem, 2012, p. 229.<sup>1</sup>

an ionic column capital. In the late nineteenth century, Khirbet Tawas was also mentioned in the *Palestine Exploration Fund Survey of Western Palestine*. The site includes caves that were used as burial sites in the Byzantine era, water cisterns, foundations, heaps of stones, and two rock-cut winepresses as well as the remains of a chapel that featured an apse of 3.6 meters in diameter,

includes the names Stephen and Peter and reads: "(Cross) under the most (illustrious) Stephen (and) Peter (... was done) all (the Work Amen)," indicating that Stephen and Peter enjoyed authority and a prominent position in Tawas.

The second inscription reads: "For the Salvation of Orestes the Landowner the Work was done."

The Orestes mentioned in the inscription is a member of the area's upper class; he was the landlord of the village but not a resident there. His name was mentioned to acknowledge his generous donation of land for the establishment of the church.

The third inscription reads: "(Cross) For the Salvation of the bishop Zacharias and of ... the Chorepiscopus, and for those who have of the offered and offer." The first bishop, called Zacharias, was bishop of Beit Jibrin (Eleutheropolis-Ἐλευθέρωπολις), and Tawas was under his authority. Chorepiscopus was



Tawas church inscriptions. Photo courtesy of Leah Di Segni, "Greek Inscription from the Church at Khirbet Tawas" (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, 2012, pp. 242–244 and Peleg, 2012, pp. 234–236<sup>1</sup>

the highest-ranking member in the church after the bishop, and he most likely helped the rural community build the church by providing instructions as well as technical assistance and financial support.

Unfortunately, the church, along with the site in general, suffered from the earthquake that struck Palestine during the late Umayyad rule in the year 749 and was not rebuilt after this incident.

*Awni Shawamra is the Director of the Research and Publication Department at the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. He can be reached at [Awni111@yahoo.com](mailto:Awni111@yahoo.com).*

SCAN  
TO SHARE



<sup>1</sup> Yuval Peleg, "A Byzantine Church at Khirbet Tawas," in *Christians and Christianity: Churches and Monasteries in Judea* (in Hebrew), Noga Carmin, ed., Israel Antiquities Authority, Vol. IV, Jerusalem, 2012, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Leah Di Segni, "Greek Inscription from the Church at Khirbet Tawas" (in Hebrew), in *Christians and Christianity: Churches and Monasteries in Judea*, Noga Carmin, ed., Israel Antiquities Authority, Vol. IV, Jerusalem, 2012, pp. 242–244; and Peleg, 2012.