

Jordan discovers what could be first church on earth

Excavations are continuing on a hilltop in the rural Jordanian town of Rihab to find additional evidence that supports a recent epoch-making discovery of what renowned archaeologists believe could be the first church on earth.

'We believe this is the world's first church, where early Christians took refuge after they escaped Roman persecution in Jerusalem and came here to perform their rituals in secrecy,' archaeologist Abdul Qader al-Hosan told DPA.

Al-Hosan is head of the state-run Rihab Centre for Archaeological Studies and a professor of archaeology at Hashemiyah University.

'The evidence we have indicates that this church sheltered 70 disciples of Jesus Christ and was built between 33 and 70 AD,' he said.

'We believe they remained in this cave until the Christian religion was endorsed by the Romans,' he added.

The chapel, which lies directly underneath the Saint Georgeous Church, was dug in an underground cave, the exterior outlet of which leads to a cluster of churches, which were built successively at different times, according to al-Hosan.

Therefore, Rihab, 60 km north-east of Amman, is called the town of 30 churches, he said.

Al-Hosan said that he 'deeply believed that Jesus Christ visited Rihab in the early days of Christianity'.

'According to authenticated history, Jesus Christ spent part of his life in Jordan's Ajloun area, 32 km north of Rihab, and was earlier baptised at a site 40 km south-west of Amman,' he said.

A mosaic inscription in Greek on the floor of St Georgeous Church described the early Christians as 'the 70 beloved by God and Divine'.

St. Georgeous is believed to be the oldest 'proper' church in the world, built in 230 AD, according to the inscription in the church.

Going three steps into the cave, one can see a circular area with a 2.5-metre radius, believed to be the apse, and several stone seats for the clerics.

The cave also includes the living places of the first Christians. 'A wall with an entrance is the only partition separating the altar from the living area,' said Hosan, who holds a doctorate in archaeology from Istanbul University.

'This tunnel is believed to have been used by the first 70 Christians as a gateway to their water system. We hope when we open the tunnel soon, we will get further evidence that this worship place is the first church on this globe,' he added.

Al-Hosan said that his excavation team had found pottery believed to have been brought by early Christians from Jerusalem 'because such products were not familiar to people in northern Jordan in that period'.

His team also found 'skeletons and bones' in a cemetery situated next to the chapel.

'It is divided into three parts, which we believe were devoted to men, women and children,' he said.

The City of Rehabis, as it was called during the Roman era, was one of the 10 allied cities, or Dekapolis, which were under the military control of the Roman empire but which were economically and religiously independent, al-Hosan said.

He reproduced letters from at least three churches in Jordan describing the discovery as an 'amazing event'.

Archimandrite Nektarios, bishop of the Greek Orthodox archdiocese, called the discovery of the cave an 'important milestone for Christians all around the world'.

Abdul Jalil Mustafa (© IANS / India eNews)