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המכללה האקדמית כנרת - 13300					



Walls under the family's yard.

Rabei Khamisy

the church nave and one of its aisles, Khamisy deduces. It is based on the conservative structure of Byzantine churches that he suspects the apse is under that un-touchable garden.

Another hallmark of Byzantine churches was a special pit for holy water, and they found one in the postulated atrium.

Khamisy and Aviam agree that the church dates to the fifth or sixth century. By the early seventh century, the land was under Muslim control and while some church construction continued, it was less and the mosaic artwork was less fine.

They also note the clear east-west orientation of the church, based on the pillars and mosaics. "In Byzantine, 99.9 percent of the churches were oriented east-west," Aviam explains: the sun rises in the east, the sun is the light and the light is Jesus. While worship of Helios the sun god was pagan, the Byzantines did not cavil at the imagery of the sun's personification, conflating it with the savior – in art, not in faith, Aviam stresses.

Also, the size of the church is typical of the Byzantine period, Khamisy adds. He's confident this will be borne out when they rip up the room next door.

Supporting the theory that this was a monastery, remains of an olive press were found under the home of another next-door neighbor, Qaysar Farran.

The Crusaders help themselves

In the near future, the Arrafs and Khamisy plan to attack the second ground-floor room in the Ottoman edifice, expecting to find more of the nave, and the northern aisle too.

But where is the apse? "I have a whole section of nave, I see its borders. The area between the pillars is beautifully preserved, so I know where the nave begins. I have the atrium, which provides the western border, and I have the water pit so I know how long the atrium was. And because Byzantine architecture is conservative – when I

have a nave and an aisle, I can guess where the apse was," Khamisy says, with some frustration. "But we haven't found it, and probably won't."

Why the pessimism? Not just because it could still lie under the unpersecuted part of the garden, but because it could be gone.

The original village excavators found small stuff and the mosaics 145 years ago, but no big stones, columns or capitals, Khamisy says. "A church like that should have two rows of at least five columns each. There are none. The Ottoman house [built in 1875] has perhaps old stones. They couldn't have vanished into thin air."

In 614, the Persians swept over the land, wreaking havoc – including in the Galilee. The church could have been destroyed then. And then came the Muslim conquest, followed by the 641 earthquake, and subsequent demographic change. Mi'ilya lay all but fallow, its ruins exposed. And then, some 700 years after this church or monastery existed, the Crusaders arrived. And it seems they helped themselves to the Byzantine buildings' stone bricks and even their ornamentation to build their castle or another church a couple of hundred meters uphill from the church ruins, in 1150 or thereabouts. "The capitals near the castle likely came from the church," Khamisy remarks.

Fact is, if the church's capitals had remained in situ, over the years the Arrafs and other local families would have found them and exhibited them lovingly in their gardens, he points out.

The village waxed greater again under the Crusaders in the 12th and 13th centuries, becoming King Baldwin III's center of rule, and the home of what may have been the biggest winery in the Crusader kingdom, including finds from the Mamluk and Roman periods.

Khamisy led its excavation in 2017, financed by Mi'ilya restaurateur Salma Assaf. She too bore the cost of having her building excavated. At about the same time, hundreds of villagers footed the bill to renovate parts of the dangerously crumbling castle.

Arguably, though once the seat of a Crusader king, Mi'ilya is at its greatest today as the villagers come together to discover, recover and exhibit the past hidden in the floors beneath their feet. They don't have to do it, Khamisy points out. They know perfectly well that if they find something, they'll feel compelled to conserve it and might not be able to live in their own house anymore.



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The village excavating itself found a Byzantine church

Residents of Mi'ilya, in the Galilee, found mosaics and ruins of a church, possibly even a monastery, beneath their homes

Ruth Schuster

Families hand down legends from generation to generation. Those told in the hilltop village of Mi'ilya in northern Israel are a little unusual. Instead of tales of derring-do or secret recipes for soup, the elders of the Arraf family told tales of what they glimpsed over a century ago when digging the foundations of their homes on the steep hillside, and again over 70 years ago: ruins of buildings and cisterns, pottery, bones, and sundry artifacts. And mosaics.

Now their children and grandchildren are excavating beneath their very own homes and gardens, on their own dime. Perhaps unusually, they are discovering that the stories were right.

The Arrafs had built their family homes over the looted ruins of a Byzantine church dating to the fifth or sixth century, says Rabei Khamisy, the Mi'ilya born-and-bred archaeologist behind the village's auto-excavation.

Altogether, three mosaics were found under two houses belonging to the Arrafs – each found separately during various family earthworks.

The church's nave, with an exquisite mosaic, lies under Eliyya and Samya Arraf's living room. The atrium, the entrance to the church, is in their yard. The atrium mosaic is simpler than the nave and aisle mosaic, with bigger tesserae (tiles) about 2 centimeters (three-quarters of an inch) in size. Beneath the home of Michel Arraf (Eliyya's brother), some 15 meters away, lies another high-quality mosaic.

Theoretically the two fine mosaics could have belonged to two churches. But Byzantine Mi'ilya had only about 500 to 600 residents, who wouldn't likely have sustained two churches right next to one another, Khamisy says. Based on the evidence, he thinks the Arrafs may be living on the ruins not of a church or two churches, but a monastery complex.

Breakfast for foxes

The story begins in 1875, when the Arraf ancestors left the shelter of the Crusader castle on the hilltop and built a typical Ottoman-style house about 200 meters downhill from the stronghold.

Their peers were reportedly appalled. "When they decided to leave the protection of the castle, family legend has it that people warned their great-great-grandfather that they'd get eaten by foxes," Khamisy laughs.

Undaunted by the threat of man-eating midget ca-



One of the mosaics under the Arraf family home.

Rabei Khamisy

nids, the family commenced construction. While digging the foundations for the Ottoman house, they evidently found two of the mosaics, from the church and the atrium. This is based both on family lore and because Khamisy's recent excavations showed that the foundations of the house actually cut into the mosaics.

Khamisy: 'A church like that should have two rows of at least five columns each. There are none.'

In any case, in 1875 both mosaics were covered over and relegated to fireside tales. Years passed. As the family grew, during the British Mandate period in the 1930s, they built a three-room house near the Ottoman one. In 1952, they decided to expand their living space by connecting the two houses. Digging the foundations for the new home and an adjacent storage cellar in the yard, they rediscovered the mosaics later identified as church and atrium.

Nobody knew what these mosaics were, but the Arrafs were thrilled anyway and kept them open for a year. "Kids would come from school to see it," Khamisy says. "My father was 12 then and remembers it."

The Arraf kids at the time were apparently especially impressed. Rakad Arraf was 12 himself when the mosaics were found, in 1952. He

drew the stylized crosses in his physics notebook. That went missing, but decades later, at the behest of the family considering whether to deliver their home to posterity, he drew it again from memory – which turned out to be pretty accurate, Khamisy says.

Rakad's sister Juliette had been 10 and had a clear memory of the stylized, cross-shaped decorations, the archaeologist adds. When they dug where she indicated, they found that part of the mosaic. "It must have made quite an impression for them to remember it so accurately to this day," Khamisy remarks.

In 1953, the Arrafs covered up the church mosaic again (still not knowing what it was) and finished building the connecting building's foundations, Khamisy relates. The atrium mosaic remained viewable through a trap door in the yard into the storage cellar.

Then in the 1980s, Eliyya's brother Michel began groundwork for a house next door and found the third mosaic, also church-quality, which had been unknown.

Self-interest would have dictated that Michel cover the thing up and continue to build in peace. In practice, he demonstrated exemplary civic concern and called in the Israel Antiquities Authority, which in 1988 excavated it at the family's behest and expense, Khamisy explains.

The new mosaic was 6 by 3 meters and featured part of a "medallion" – an inscription in Greek. Following study of the mosaic, it too was covered up and construction resumed, but

its excavation for exhibition is also under discussion. Michel does aspire for it to be uncovered and exhibited, Khamisy says. He believes it to have adorned a building associated with the church.

Archaeologist Prof. Moti Aviam of the Kinneret College, an expert on the Byzantine churches in the Holy Land not connected with the Mi'ilya excavation, agrees: possibly the Arrafs are living on a monastery. Or Michel's mosaic was the bishop's house next door to the church. Or it was a small side chapel, which wasn't rare in these parts during Byzantine times.

"Kursi, for example [the site associated with Jesus' miracle of the swine], has a big monastery with two small chapels right by them. The ancient church in Karmiel also has a small chapel on the side," he says.

In either case, the inhabitants of the Ottoman house have moved upstairs while the nave and aisle shine on their ground floor. One room downstairs remains in use, which, Khamisy remarks, may be atop the entrance to the church.

During their decades of digging, the family also unearthed a number of Byzantine and later antiquities, including a Crusader-period clay oil lamp that is in perfect condition, Haaretz can affirm: The family still has it after more than 100 years.

Before going googly-eyed over the blessing of finding an early Christian house of worship in one's home, note that the Arrafs are paying for the dig themselves and have had to vacate the parts of their manse undergoing archaeological excavation.

ago, the apse lies underneath the ornamental vegetation.

In fact, the Arrafs did let Khamisy gingerly dig into one part of the garden, leaving most of it intact. There are walls, but no apse was identified thus far. Right now, further subterranean exploration of the garden is on hold.

By the way, Khamisy has a bird's-eye view of the digs because he lives right across the street.

Not the garden!

Another inconvenience will be having to build yet another home in the foreseeable future as the family continues to expand, Khamisy points out. Building a new home can run to 1.5 million shekels (about \$440,000).

Yet if something stuck in the family craw, it was less the loss of their living room and more the risk to their garden, father Eliyya and son Iyas tell Haaretz. Thick with thriving plants rooted in the ground and a wealth of potted specimens, the family – and especially mother Samya – had invested a great deal in it.

The rub is that according to Khamisy's structural analysis, based on the conservative layout of Byzantine churches 1,500 to 1,600 years

Conservative Byzantine architecture

Like all excavations in Israel, permission from the Israel Antiquities Authority was required and the institution Khamisy is affiliated with – he is a member of the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa – also gave its blessing. The dig is being done by villagers and volunteers for the mission, led by Khamisy, with the blessing of the Arrafs: father Eliyya, mother Samya and their sons Amjad, Ayman and Iyas.

Aside from the two mosaics in Eliyya and Samya's home, the archaeologists found the bases of three pillars, which was in keeping with the plan of Byzantine churches. In short, the mosaic in the house was part of



The large mosaic.

Rabei Khamisy