

Archaeology and Cultural heritage program

Report for BU news letter

Şīyār al-Ghanam “Shepherds’ Field” Bayt Sāhūr

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As part of the MoU with the Franciscan partners, the Archeology and Cultural Heritage program at BU in partnership with PIAC University of Rome have availed to students from both universities the chance to do archaeological excavations at the



archaeological site of Şīyār al-Ghanam /Shepherds’ Field in Bayt Sāhūr. These excavations are part of the re-excavations and rehabilitation project at the archaeological site “*Dayr Khirbet Şīyār al-Ghanam*”. The aim of the Project is to rehabilitate the site (the monastery and the churches, agricultural and industrial installations, and the inhabited areas of the site). Spanning a decade, this project will involve training students from PIAC and BU on the rules and methods of archaeological fieldwork work, especially excavations, survey and investigation, and the methods of restoration and rehabilitation of the archaeological site, in addition to spreading community awareness regarding the need for preserving cultural heritage. The archaeologists of BU with their PIAC counterparts will develop joint research projects on the Şīyār al-Ghanam Monastery in Bayt Sāhūr.

The site of Şīyār al-Ghanam is considered one of the most important archaeological sites in the eastern rural region of Bethlehem. It offers unequivocal evidence of a historical context that attests to the smooth continuity of the life of the monastery and the surrounding rural area, spanning from the end of the Byzantine period to the Early Arab-Islamic period in the Jerusalem countryside.

Location and Identification

Bayt Sāḥūr (Palestine grid 170/123) is a Palestinian town located 1 kilometer east of Bethlehem. In the 19th-century *Survey of Western Palestine (swp)*, Conrad remarks that Bayt Sāḥūr is a sort of suburb of Bethlehem, sharing the same ridge and overlooking the broad plateau to the east, traditionally known as the 'shepherds' plain.¹

From the end of the 15th and until the mid-20th century, there were two separate, but adjacent places, known as Bayt Sāḥūr: Bayt Sāḥūr al-Naṣārā, translated as "Bayt Sāḥūr of the Christians," the subject of our fieldwork, and Bayt Sāḥūr al-ʿAtīqah, translated the "ancient Bayt Sāḥūr." The latter is mentioned by Mujir ad-Din at the end of the 15th-century in the biography of a Muslim scholar, Shaʿbān b. Sālīm b. Shaʿbān, who lived in the place and died there in 1483 (AH 888) at the age of 105. In 1596, Bayt Sāḥūr appeared in the Ottoman tax registers, once again as two villages: Bayt Sāḥūr al-Wadi (corresponding to Bayt Sāḥūr al-ʿAtīqah) and Bayt Sāḥūr al-Naṣārā. The residents of the two villages paid taxes on their wheat, barley, flocks, and fruit trees. In the latter half of the 19th century, Victor Guérin noted during his visit to the area that Bayt Sāḥūr al-ʿAtīqah was located about 40 minutes to the southeast of Jerusalem, a short distance to the south of Wādi al-Nār, "the Qideron valley".²

Bayt Sāḥūr al-Naṣārā is home to sites held sacred by Christians, with the "Shepherds' field" standing as the most significant. These plain harbors two locations, each asserting to be the precise location where the angel's announcement occurred: Kanīsat al-Raʿwāt, "the Church of the Shepherds" under Greek Orthodox custody, and Khirbat Ṣiyār al-Ghanam, translated as "the Ruins of the sheepfold" under the stewardship of the Franciscans. The latter site is the focus of the present archaeological fieldwork and research project under by PIAC University and BU.

Religious Traditions³

Since the end of the first century AD, Christian traditions hold that the Annunciation of the birth of Christ was proclaimed to the shepherds. Moreover, according to Catholic traditions, the Catholic Shepherds field is identified as the place narrated in the Gospel of Luke, where an angel of the Lord visited the shepherds and announced to them the birth of Jesus.⁴ An unknown pilgrimage text (probably by Egeria, one of the earliest documented Christian pilgrims, ca. 381-384) recounts the sacred memories evoked by the surroundings of Bethlehem: not far from there, the text states, a church called the Shepherds is located,

¹ Waren C & Conder C.R., *The Survey of Western Palestine, Jerusalem*, vol. 3, 1884, p 29.

² Sharon, M., *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae*, (CIBA) -B-C-, Leiden, Vol 2, 1999, Pp 154-156.

³ It is impossible to determine whether the traditions refer to the Roman Catholic site at *Khirbat Ṣiyār al-Ghanam* or the Greek site at *kanīsat al-Raʿwāt*.

⁴ *Luke*, 2: Pp 8-10.

where there is a large garden.⁵ This account draws on information cited by the twelfth-century Benedictine monk Peter the Deacon in his work, *Liber de Locis Sanctis*, in *Corpus Christianorum, Ser Lat.* 175, 96. Towards the latter part of the 4th century, St. Jerome mentioned the location of the shepherd in various texts, associating it with the Biblical *Migdal- Eder* (which translated to the “Tower of Eder” in Heb., with *Eder* meaning flock”).⁶ In the early 5th century, the field was mentioned in the anecdotes about the ascetic Posidonius, who lived “beyond the Field”; these stories were compiled in a collection written 419-420 AD. One such anecdote states: *Stories told about Posidonius the Theban are hard to relate and are very many indeed--how great his meekness was, and what a great ascetic he was, and how complete was his goodness. I do not think I ever met another such as he was. For I lived with him for a year in Bethlehem when he lived beyond Poimenion <the Field>, and I was witness to his many virtues.*⁷

During his visit to the Shepherds Field in the middle of the latter half of the seventh century, Bishop Arculf referred to three tombs in which the three shepherds were buried in a church near the Tower of Gader, situated about a mile to the east of Bethlehem.⁸ An 8th century guidebook for pilgrims also mentions the “monastery of the Flock”: “*And to the east of Bethlehem is the monastery called the Sheepfold. There the angel appeared to the Shepherds and said to them, “Stop staying here in the fields. Break into song!”*”⁹ Although the church on the site was destroyed sometime after the eighth or ninth century, the site was still visited by pilgrims. Greek sources called the place “Haghion Poimaneion.”¹⁰ The visit to the monastery of *Khīrbat Šīyār al-Gḥanam* persisted throughout the Middle Ages, and the visitors’ described ruins in the place, including a natural cave and the remains of a tower.¹¹

Site Ownership and History of Archaeological Research.

This area, which has been known since ancient times as *Šīyār al-Gḥanam*, belongs to the people of *Khīrbet al-Mazār*, located northwest of *Bayt Sāḥūr*, an area that is deserted nowadays. The land was eventually acquired by the *al-Marāshda* and *Shomali* families in *Bayt Sāḥūr*.¹²

⁵ Abu 'Amar et al., *Archaeological minor sites in the Mediterranean Basin: Bayt Sāḥūr in Palestine, Gadara in Jordan, Vito Soldano and Finziade in Italy*, 2014, p. 44.

⁶ *Gen.* 35:21, Pl. 23, 1044.

⁷ Meyer, R.T., *Palladius, The Lausiatic History*, New York, 1965, Paragraph: 36, 1.

⁸ Arculfus, *The Pilgrimage of Arculfus in the Holy Land about the year 680*, VI. trans. James Rose McPherson. London: Palestine Pilgrims’ Text Society, 1895, P..

⁹ Wilkinson, J., *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, Warminster, 2002

¹⁰ Abu 'Amar et al., *Archaeology*, P 48.

¹¹ Bannoura T., *Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit sahur “Efrata”*, Jerusalem, 1982, P.208.

¹² *Ibid*, P. 209.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Carlo Guarmani, working on behalf of Maritime Messageries Imperiales de la France, embarked on a mission to identify Catholic religious places in Bayt Sāhūr, guided by Christian religious traditions and the Bible. During his explorations and probably asking the people of Bayt Sāhūr about these places, he was informed of the ruins of a monastery in Khirbat Şiyār al-Ghanam. He bought the land in 1857 and began excavating the site right away.

The history of archaeological research in Khirbat Şiyār al-Ghanam can be divided into two phases: The first, characterized by non-scientific and non-systematic excavations, was carried out in the place in 1857 and later in 1934 by Guarmani. The second phase marked by scientific and methodological excavations, commenced under the direction of Virgilio Corbo in 1951-2. Guarmani uncovered three tombs in the grottos south of the ruins of the 6th-8th century monastery.

The Franciscan Fathers gradually acquired the rest of the land in a series of purchases in 1902, 1903, and 1906.¹³ During the British Mandate in 1934, Father Saler of the Franciscans undertook the task of cleaning the area that Guarmani had previously excavated extending the excavations to reveal the remnants of two mosaic floors, walls, channels, and small finds. A resident reported the excavations to the police and the Department of Antiquities. Dr. D. C. Baramki, who held the position of the chief archaeologist in the Department, issued a directive instructing the Franciscan's custody of the Terra Santa to cease the excavations.¹⁴

Unsystematic excavations stopped at the site in 1934 for a period of 17 years, until the middle of the twentieth century. In 1951-1952, Virgilio Corbo carried out practical and systematic archaeological excavations in Khirbat Şiyār al-Ghanam. Corbo's excavations in the area revealed the remnants of a rural settlement dating back to the 1st century AD and a Byzantine monastery which revealed the existence of two historical phases-- one at the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth century and the other from the sixth century. The present work underscored the rich historical tapestry of Khirbat Şiyār al-Ghanam, offering a deeper understanding of its ancient origins and the civilizations that once thrived there.

¹³ Mgr. Mislim, *Les Saints Lieux*, t 3, Paris 1876, nota A. p. 688; Abu 'Amar et al., *Archaeology*, P 48.

¹⁴ Beit Sahur, IAA Arcive: Atq/233, Reg. B. XVII. M.U. Y.Y.