

Church walls in Negev reveal depiction of 1,500-year-old contemporary ships

The excavations are part of a town's expansion program for opening a new neighborhood for Rahat and suburban residents led by the Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin in the Negev.

By JUDY SIEGEL-ITZKOVICH MAY 23, 2024 12:15. **Updated:** MAY 23, 2024 16:43

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YouTube Video 📌





The remains of the church discovered in Rahat.
(photo credit: Assaf Peretz, Israel Antiquities Authority)

Church walls showing 1,500-year-old Byzantine-era masonry of that era have been found in archaeological excavations by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) in the Bedouin town of Rahat in the Negev.

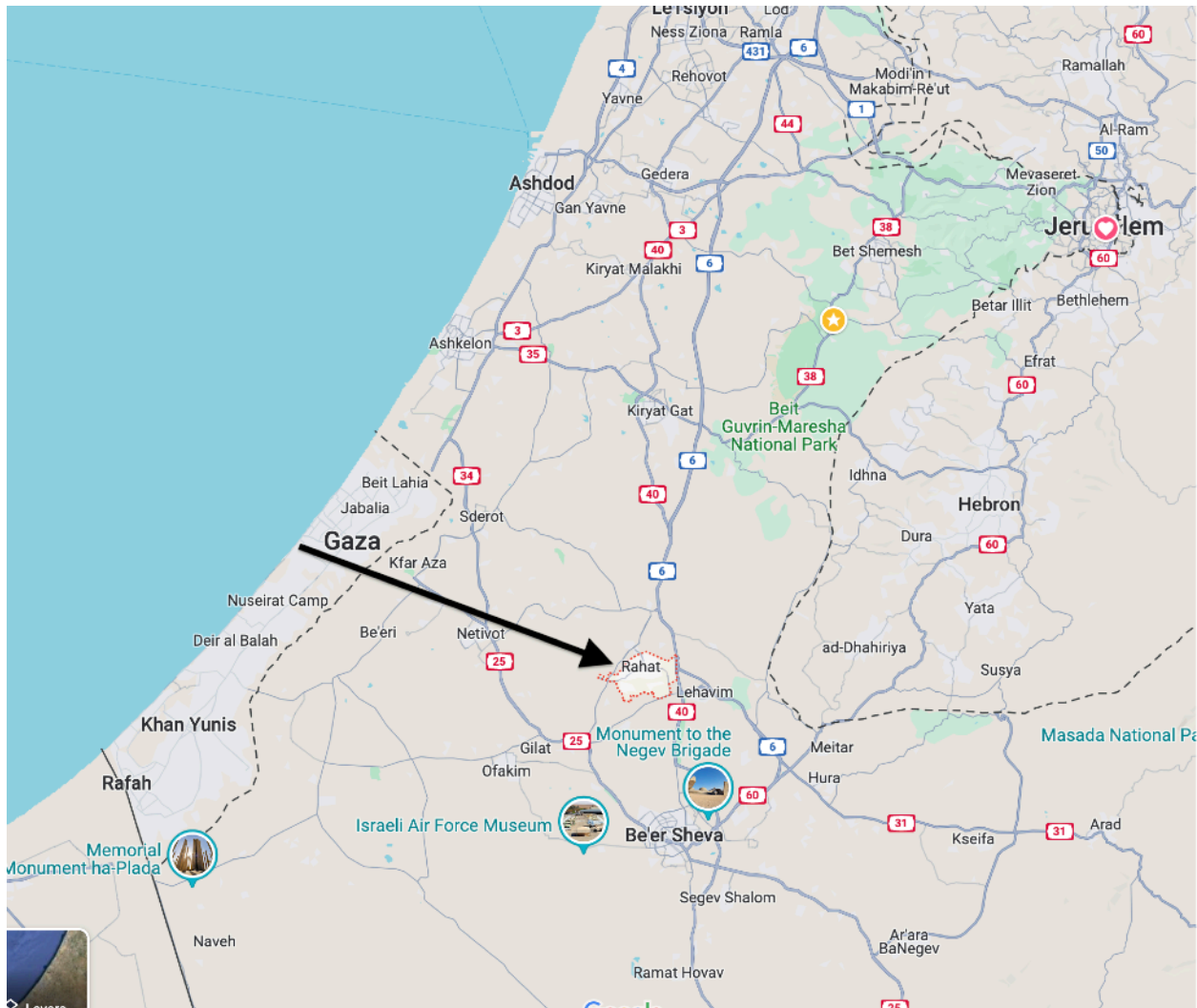
The excavations are part of the town's expansion program, which is launching a new neighborhood for Rahat and suburban residents, led by the Authority for Development and Settlement of the Bedouin [in the Negev](#).



Archaeologist Daria Eladjem points to a ship drawing in the excavation.
(credit: Yoli Schwartz, Antiquities Authority)



The excavators explained that the intriguing drawings could have been left by Christian pilgrims arriving by ship to the Gaza port. Their first inland stop was this Rahat church before continuing on to other sites throughout the country.



These finds, along with explanations of the town's and region's history that were uncovered in these excavations, will be displayed for the first time at the

Rahat Conference on Tuesday, June 4, in the Rahat Municipal Cultural Hall. The public is invited.

“This is a greeting from Christian pilgrims arriving by ship to Gaza Port,” said excavation directors Oren Shmueli, Dr. Elena Kogan-Zehavi, and Dr. Noé David Michael on behalf of the IAA and Prof. Deborah Cvikel of the University of Haifa’s maritime civilizations department.

“The excavated site tells the story of settlement in the northern Negev at the end of [the Byzantine period](#) and in the beginning of the Early Islamic period. Pilgrims visited the church and left their personal mark in the form of ship drawings on its walls. The ship is indeed an old Christian symbol, but in this case, apparently, it is a true graphical depiction of real ships in which the pilgrims traveled to the Holy Land,” they said.

The site of the ancient church with the ship drawings is indeed next to an ancient Roman road that led from the Mediterranean coastal port of Gaza to Beersheba, the Negev’s main city.

“The pilgrims began their pilgrimage following Roman roads leading to sites sacred to Christendom, such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the monasteries in the Negev Hills, and in the Sinai. It is reasonable that their first

stop, after alighting from the ships in Gaza port, was this very church revealed in our excavations south of Rahat. This site lies only a half-day's walk from the port," said the scholars.

According to Cvikel, "One of the ships drawn on the church walls is depicted as a line drawing, but one can see that its bow is slightly pointed and that there are oars on both sides of the vessel. This may be an aerial depiction of the ship, though it seems the artist was attempting a three-dimensional drawing. It may be that the lines below it depict the path beaten by the oars through the water. Ships or crosses left by visiting Christian pilgrims as witness to their visit are found also in Jerusalem's [Holy Sepulchre church.](#)"

Another drawing depicts what is apparently a two-masted ship. The main mast lacks a sail, but it seems to show a small flag at the top. The foremast is slightly facing the bow and bears a sail known as an artemon. The exacting detail indicates the artist's familiarity with maritime life.

"Since the drawing was found upside down, it seems the person placing the stone during construction was either unaware it bore a drawing or didn't care," Cvikel suggested.

IAA director Eli Escuzido said, “This surprising and intriguing find of ship drawings in a northern Negev, Byzantine-period church opens a window for us to the world of Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land 1,500 years ago and provides first-hand evidence about the ships they traveled in and the maritime world of that time. I invite all lovers of archaeology to the Rahat Conference, where many finds found in Israel Antiquities Authority excavations in the city will be on view for the public.”