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Mending the Mosaics of the Byzantine Church of Khirbet et-Tireh

December 28, 2018 | Salah Al-Houdalieh



This beautiful mosaic floor adorning a Byzantine-era church at the site of Khirbet et-Tireh near Jerusalem was preserved thanks to support from the J.M. Kaplan Responsive Preservation Initiative.

In this essay, Salah Al-Houdalieh, the director of the Khirbet et-Tireh excavation and restoration project, discusses recent efforts, funded by CAORC's [J.M. Kaplan Responsive Preservation Initiative](#), to conserve and restore mosaic floors from an ancient Byzantine church near Jerusalem.

Khirbet et-Tireh, located approximately 16 km northwest of Jerusalem, is a multi-period site with Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic remains. Although the site had long been neglected by archaeologists and begun to suffer from urban expansion and looting, several seasons of excavation conducted by Al Quds University beginning in 2013 have unearthed an extraordinary range of monuments and features, including underground chambers from the Roman era, a Byzantine and early Islamic fortification system, two Byzantine churches, and more than 400 square meters of mosaic pavement.

Most of the site's spectacular mosaics have already been consolidated and preserved but with the support of CAORC's [J.M. Kaplan Responsive Preservation Initiative \(RPI\)](#), our team of nearly a dozen specialists, students, and local community members has been able to completely restore the exceptional mosaic carpets of Khirbet et-Tireh's Eastern Church.

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Aerial view of the Eastern Church at Khirbet et-Tireh. The preserved mosaics, which adorn the church's southern side rooms, can be seen in the upper part of the photo.

The Eastern Church complex measures approximately 30 by 25 meters. Our excavations revealed several finely made mosaic carpets, featuring both geometric and figurative patterns rendered in shades of black, gray, yellow, orange, pink, red, green, and blue, all on a white background. The mosaics originally featured a number of animal depictions as well, but many of these were altered in antiquity and replaced with white tesserae, clear evidence of iconoclastic influences.

In summer 2018, with support from the RPI program, our team not only completed the conservation and restoration of the mosaics in the Eastern Church, but also worked to raise awareness among the local community of the importance of Khirbet et-Tireh, and made major strides towards developing the site as an archaeological park. Because the site is located in an urban setting and therefore easily accessible, we received a range of interested visitors, including locals, foreigners, and schools groups of various ages. These encounters allowed us to engage the local community in safeguarding Palestine's archaeological resources and to educate visitors about the importance of archaeology for both cultivating local identity and supporting the local economy. Several visitors even volunteered for a day or two to help restore and conserve the mosaics.



Professor Salab Al-Houdalieb (left, back facing) speaks to a group of local visitors about the history and importance of Khirbet et-Tireh.

In addition, the project allowed archaeology and conservation students from Al Quds University to participate in hands-on mosaic conservation and gain valuable first-hand experience in the field. Such practical learning has served to enhance their skills as future professionals and given them a solid foundation to take advantage of future employment opportunities in archaeology and cultural heritage preservation.



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Through the project at Khirbet et-Tireh, local students and volunteers gain valuable first-hand experience in mosaic conservation and restoration.

Furthermore, as awareness of the site’s importance and tourism potential has grown, various local authorities, including the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate that owns and administers much of the site, have begun to develop plans to protect Khirbet et-Tireh from urban encroachment and has also pledged to support continued excavation and restoration efforts. There are even plans to develop a new museum that will communicate the history of the site and showcase its remarkable finds for visitors.

The J.M. Kaplan-funded Responsive Preservation Initiative (RPI), administered by CAORC, provides critical funding to support urgent preservation, documentation, and site management efforts at cultural heritage sites around the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean.

Learn more about RPI-funded projects at www.caorc.org/rpi-grantees.
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