

עמק שווה
عمق شبیه
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The Nea Church

History and Significance of the Church

The Nea Church is situated at the southern end of the Jewish Quarter. It was built in the 6th century CE by the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian I, and its full name is the New Church of the Theotokos. The construction of this church constituted one of the largest building enterprises in Jerusalem in the Ancient World. In order to build the church, Justinian I ordered the construction of an artificial lot by filling in the slopes of Mount Zion. The church stands partly on the bedrock and partly on fill¹.

Even though the church was recognized in the literature, its location was unknown until it was discovered by Professor Nahman Avigad, as part of his excavations of the Jewish Quarter during the 1970s. The church extended over 147X58 meters (the size of a soccer field)². The locations of the various remains give an indication of the original size of the church: its northeast corner was unearthed in the vicinity of Batei Hamahase (the area of the 19th century shelters for the poor) from whence it stretches east, beneath the parking lot of the Jewish Quarter and the Resurrection Garden. Its southeast corner was unearthed outside of the current Old City walls. It is visible from the B'nai B'rit Garden.

The construction of the church symbolized Jerusalem's most significant golden age. The city flourished and enjoyed a time of relative peace that prevailed in the region throughout the Byzantine period. The church housed the many crusaders who visited the city³. The decision of Justinian I to call it the Church of Theotokos (In Latin: Mother of God), reflects his position in the theological controversy over Mary Mother of Jesus, and if she indeed gave birth to a son of flesh and blood who became a God or whether she gave birth to a God, directly from the womb⁴.

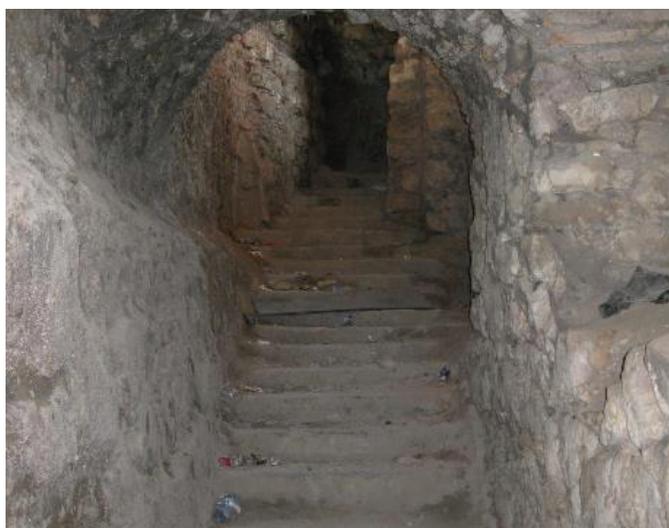
Another reason for building the church was Justinian I's desire to reconstruct the beauty and splendor of the Second Temple, and even surpass as a way of stating Christianity's superiority over Judaism⁵. According to some sources, Justinian I commanded that the treasures from the Temple, which were looted during its destruction, be returned to Jerusalem. Some even believe that these treasures were placed within the church and additional excavations in its cellars are likely to expose them⁶. There are even claims that Justinian I ordered that all the pillars of the destroyed temple be used for the construction of the church⁷.



A vault in the cellars of the Nea



The Apse - currently on the property of a school in the Jewish Quarter



The vaults, reinforced with modern concrete



The stairs leading to the cellars

According to a study by Oren Gutfeld, who analyzed the artefacts discovered in the excavation of the Nea Church, the latter was in use even after the Byzantine period, at least until the Umayyad period (the 7th and 8th centuries CE)⁸, and possibly even during the Abbasid period (the 9th and 10th centuries CE). Once it was no longer in use, the church was forgotten and knowledge of its location lost until it was unearthed in the excavations of the Jewish Quarter after the city was conquered in the Six Day War in 1967.

Status of the Site's Preservation

Despite the historical and archaeological importance of the church, it stands neglected and forgotten. Other sites which were unearthed during archaeological excavations in the Jewish Quarter after the conquest of the Old City were preserved and developed into major tourist sites. Yet, the Nea Church has undergone very little conservation. The gate to its enormous halls is locked. In order to visit them, it is necessary to coordinate a time in advance with the Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem. These requests are usually denied. According to the Company, the reason requests are denied is due to the lack of resources to develop and maintain the site; but in light of the extensive development works and preservation undertakings of archaeological and historic sites concerning the quarter's Jewish history, it is reasonable to wonder whether the reason it has been neglected may also have something to do with government entities who are wary of emphasis on other religions, particularly in the Jewish Quarter.

Emek Shaveh approached the Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter at the beginning of 2019, demanding that the site be made safe and accessible to visitors. Several weeks later, press releases came out indicating an intention to by the government to invest 200 million shekels for the development of the Jewish Quarter⁹. The Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter responded to our query several days after we approached them saying that they are looking into our demand.

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