

Israel discovers large Byzantine-era wine press

February 15 2010, By AMY TEIBEL , Associated Press Writer



Israeli Antiquities authority workers are seen at a site where a 1400 year old wine press was found near the kibbutz of Hafetz Haim, central Israel, Monday, Feb. 15, 2010. Israeli archaeologists said Monday that they've discovered an unusually shaped 1,400-year-old wine press that was exceptionally large and advanced for its time. (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner)

(AP) -- Israeli archaeologists said Monday that they've discovered an unusually shaped 1,400-year-old wine press that was exceptionally large and advanced for its time.

The octagonal press measures 21 feet by 54 feet (6.5 meters by 16.5 meters) and was discovered in southern Israel, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) south of both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

"What we have here seems to be an industrial and crafts area of a

settlement from the sixth to seventh century, which was situated in the middle of an agricultural region," said excavation director Uzi Ad of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

During this period, the whole area was part of the Byzantine Empire - the eastern half of the old Roman Empire.

"The size of the wine press attests to the fact that the quantity of wine that was produced in it was exceptionally large and was not meant for local consumption," Ad said in a release.

The wine was probably intended for export to Egypt, then a major export market, or to Europe, he said.

An identical wine press was previously uncovered 12 miles (20 kilometers) away, north of Ashkelon, he added.

The shape of the press' collecting vats was impractical because sediment would collect in the corners, Ad noted. They must have been built in this manner, and not in the customary circular or square shape, for aesthetic reasons, he concluded.

"This is a complex wine press that reflects a very high level of technology for this period, which was acquired and improved on from generation to generation," he said.

The entire apparatus originally measured 49 feet by 54 feet (15 meters by 16.5 meters) and included a central treading floor with a mosaic pavement where the grapes would be trod on. The juice produced from the grapes would flow from the treading floor to a distributing vat and from there through holes into two collecting vats located on either side, he said.

Rectangular surfaces originally paved with a mosaic floor were also discovered around the treading floor. The grapes were probably placed there before being trod on, and the initial fermentation of the grapes would sometimes begin there, he said.

Eli Eskozido, head of the Nahal Soreq Regional Council, where the press was discovered, said the site would be conserved and opened to the public.

The excavation was carried out in an area that will be farmland for a new community that is to be built for settlers evacuated from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

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