

# Interim report on Khirbet Yattir in Judea: a mosque and a monastic church

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup> (H.E., J.M. and E.S.)

The site of Khirbet Yattir lies on a rocky hill in the southern Judean highlands between Beersheba and Arad, c.12 km northwest of the latter. This marginal area between the Judean mountains to the north and the Beersheba basin to the south has a semi-arid, desert (steppe) climate. The mean annual rainfall of 200-300 mm is barely sufficient for dry-farming. This region represents a transitional zone between the Mediterranean woods of the Hebron mountains to the north and the desert vegetation to the south and east. Today the site of Khirbet Yattir is located in the midst of a forest consisting mostly of pine trees, planted by the Jewish National Fund since the 1960s. The line of trees terminates just to the east of the site, at Israel's pre-1967 border with Jordan (the Green Line). Because of its proximity to the old border, the site was never previously excavated.

Yattir is mentioned four times in the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that it was inhabited during the 10th-7th c. B.C.<sup>2</sup> The next reference dates to the 4th c. of the present era, when Yattir/Iethira is described by Eusebius as a 'large Christian village'.<sup>3</sup> The site is depicted in the late 6th-c. Madaba mosaic map.<sup>4</sup> The ancient name is preserved by the Bedouin tomb of Sheikh el-Atiri located at the top of the hill. Since the time of E. Robinson, the identification of this site with ancient Yattir/Iethira has been accepted.

The hill on which the ancient settlement was built is made of limestone overlaid by chalk. The chalk is covered by a hard crust called *nari*. Once the *nari* crust is pierced, cisterns and caves can easily be hewn into the soft, water-impermeable chalk layer below. The visible ancient remains, including stone walls and occasional intact vaults, encircle the E side of the hill, forming a crescent that leaves the W slope bare (fig. 1). Wells located to the east of the site attracted early settlement. Generally, each ancient house at Khirbet Yattir has its own cistern in an open courtyard, as well as a cave cut into the chalk layer that could be used for storage or dwelling purposes. One of the caves on the NW slope contains a *columbarium* (dove-cote), the southernmost example known to date in Palestine.<sup>5</sup> Wheat and barley have always

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1 This is an interim report on the excavations of 1995-98 directed by H. Eshel (Bar-Ilan University), J. Magness (Tufts University), and E. Shenhav (Keren Kayemet LeIsrael). For an earlier report on the excavations see H. Eshel, E. Shenhav, and J. Magness, "Khirbet Yattir," *AJA* 102 (1998) 797-99. We plan to continue excavations for another two seasons (summers of 1999 and 2000). All dates refer to the present era unless otherwise indicated.

2 Joshua 15:48; Joshua 21:14; I Samuel 30:27; II Samuel 23:28; I Chronicles 6:42, 11:40.

3 F. Larsow and G. Parthey (edd.), *Eusebii Pamphili Episcopi Caesariensis Onomasticon* (Paris 1862) 233, ll. 4-9.

4 Eusebius mistakenly identified the village of Ether of Simeon mentioned in Joshua 19:7 with Yattir/Iethira in Judah, mentioned in Joshua 15:48. In Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, both villages are localized at the village of Iethira. This confusion is reflected in the Madaba map, where the village of "Iethor, also Iethira" is represented southwest of Beersheba, perhaps on the road to Elusa. Although M. Avi-Yonah proposed that the mosaicist was therefore depicting the Ether of Simeon rather than Iethira in Judah, no remains of a Roman-Byzantine village have been discovered in that area. See M. Avi-Yonah, *The Madaba mosaic map, with introduction and commentary* (Jerusalem 1954) 72-73, pl. IX; H. Donner, *The mosaic map of Madaba, An introductory guide* (The Netherlands 1992) 72.

5 See Z. Meshel, S. Ben-Yosef, and U. Dror, *The Yattir region, A (partial) survey of the landscape and sites* (Tel Aviv 1987) 50-51 [Hebrew]; for *columbaria* in Hellenistic Palestine see A. M. Berlin, "Between large forces: Palestine in the Hellenistic period," *BA* 60 (1997) 8.