



## ARTS & CULTURE

# Ancient Altar Rediscovered at Jerusalem's Church

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Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre is believed to be the site of Jesus's crucifixion and burial. It is one of the holiest sites in Christianity.

Pressed against a wall of the **church** is a stone that contains writings and marks created by centuries of **pilgrims**.

But the 2.5 x 1.5 meter stone turned out to be far more important when its other side was uncovered during recent repair work at the church.

Researchers believe the design on the long-hidden part of the stone is evidence that it was once the front of a high **altar**. The altar is the center of a church where religious ceremony takes place. It would have been in use centuries ago.

On the stone would have been "pieces of glass, pieces of small, finely made **marble**," said Amit Re'em. He is an archaeologist for the Israel Antiquities Authority who researched the stone with Ilya Berkovich of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

They said the design combines Classical, Byzantine and early Islamic art in which small pieces of colorful marble are used to fill in circular cuttings on the stone.

It stood at the **sanctuary** of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Re'em said.

Similarly decorated altars have been found inside churches in Rome dating to the 12th and 13th centuries, the researchers said.

They believe the stone fits with past archaeological findings and with pilgrims' accounts of the creation of the church. The Crusaders, a Christian military mission, founded the Church and formed its main altar in 1149.

The altar was used by the Catholic clergy to celebrate mass until the Crusaders left Jerusalem, Re'em said. Afterward, it was used by the Greek Orthodox church until it was damaged in a fire in 1808. The altar was forgotten until the recent repair work, Re'em said.

The researchers' findings are expected to be released by the end of the year by Israel's Exploration Society.

Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantina is with the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. He welcomed such research at the church.

"Works from people of art, people of archaeology, contribute to us, contribute to the belief of the church, to the conviction of the church, that this is the place...on which Jesus Christ was crucified...buried and from which he came to **resurrection**," he told *Reuters*.

I'm Dan Novak.

*Dan Novak adapted this story for VOA Learning English based on reporting by Reuters.*

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## Words in This Story

**church** — *n.* a building that is used for Christian religious services

**pilgrim** — *n.* a platform or table used as a center of worship in Christian ceremonies and services

**altar** — *n.* a raised place on which sacrifices and gifts are offered in some religions

**marble** — *n.* a kind of stone that is often polished and used in buildings and statues

**sanctuary** — *n.* a place where someone or something is protected or given shelter

**resurrection** — *n.* the event told about in the Bible in which Jesus Christ returned to life after his death

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