

Wrong religion: Israeli ruins re-identified

By KAROUN DEMIRJIAN

March 17, 2010

JERUSALEM — Israeli archaeologists have announced that ruins long thought to be of an ancient synagogue are actually the remains of a palace built by Arab caliphs 1,300 years ago.

The site, on the banks of the Sea of Galilee, was identified as a synagogue in the 1950s because archaeologists found a carving of a menorah, a seven-armed candelabra that is a Jewish symbol. But scholars said in a report published this week that the identification was an error, and that the site was a winter palace used by the caliphs of the Umayyad dynasty, the same rulers who built Jerusalem's gold-capped Dome of the Rock.

Early Arab historians had described the palace, calling it al-Sinnabra, but its location was previously unknown.

The new identification came as part of a broader reexamination of the site, which contains ruins dating back to the Bronze Age.

The Umayyad caliphs ruled the Islamic world from 661 to 750 A.D., expanding its borders from modern-day Spain to Pakistan.

Archaeologists from Tel Aviv University and Hebrew University conducting the new review said this week that the confusion arose from the relatively primitive archaeological techniques of the 1950s.

The palace was also dismantled down to its foundations after the fall of the dynasty, leaving nothing behind but a foundation and few clues to help date the structure.

Archaeologists at the time also believed, erroneously, that the early Arab caliphates did not carry out many large-scale building projects.

Researchers first began to raise doubts about the origins of the structure in the 1990s, but it wasn't until 2002 that archaeologist Donald Whitcomb from the University of Chicago first suggested that the site might in fact be the missing Umayyad palace. That identification was confirmed by archaeologists this week.

The identification of the structure as a synagogue was based on the image of a menorah that the early excavators found carved into the top of a pillar base. But the scholars behind the new review of the site realized that the carving was a red herring — that surface would have been covered by a pillar in the original structure, so the carving must have been added later.

The researchers say it's possible the ruins were later used as a synagogue, or possibly just as a canvas for ancient graffiti.

Rafi Greenberg, a professor of archaeology at Tel Aviv University who is directing the project, said the palace's correct identification would help show the architectural continuity between the

Roman and early Arab empires. "This is happening at many sites that are being re-dated with better resolution and understanding," he said.