

For the past several decades, archaeologists have been exploring a site known as Givati in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Wadi Hilweh. They are finding remains of the city's little-known history in the period after the Babylonian siege in 586 B.C.





Under the Holy City

A long-running excavation in Jerusalem unearths evidence for two of the city's least-known eras

By ANDREW LAWLER

JUST STEPS FROM THE walls of Jerusalem's Old City, Tel Aviv University archaeologist Yuval Gadot stands in a deep pit and peers at two massive and finely dressed limestone pillars framing a doorway. More than 2,500 years ago, they marked the entry into a large two-story building in a prestigious area of the bustling city. Stepping across the threshold, Gadot points at a rough stone surface bordered with soil that has an eerie yellow hue. When the building burned, "the earth was heated to such a high temperature that it turned the ground into a yellow crust," he says. The fire that swept through the structure in August 586 B.C., when a Babylonian army invaded the doomed city, also collapsed the second floor, sending plaster, stone, and timbers crashing down. "They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem," records the Hebrew Bible's Book of Chronicles. "They burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there."

That description fits neatly with what Gadot and his colleague, Yiftah Shalev of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), found when they began to excavate the structure in 2017. But not everything was lost. Even though the building was one of the casualties of the conflagration, evidence of its once-impressive appearance remains. Gadot and Shalev's team found chunks of thick plaster floors and wooden timbers that rested on sturdy square pillars. Amid the rubble, the team unearthed storage jars that contained residue of seasoned wine and small dishes that may have been filled with hors d'oeuvres. This suggests that the second floor may have been an elegant reception room for important guests. In one chamber, excavators uncovered the right shoulder of a goat or sheep, the

portion of the animal typically reserved for sacrifice. They also found an agate seal carved with a Hebrew name, “Ikkar, son of Matanyahu,” as well as a lump of clay bearing the impression of a seal with the name of “Nathan-Melech, servant of the king,” a high-ranking official and perhaps the same one mentioned in the Bible as a courtier under King Josiah in the decades just before the Babylonian invasion. These finds suggest that the building, which may date back to the eighth century B.C., was an important administrative space when Jerusalem was the capital of early Judea. Gadot believes it may have served as a kind of conference center. “It’s a game changer,” he says as he surveys the ruin. “It puts a spotlight on a significant piece of Jerusalem’s urban fabric. We can really see, for the first time, how the royal elite of Judea lived.”

Yet what excites him even more than uncovering evidence of this monumental building are smaller finds related to the dimly understood 400-year period that stretched from the Babylonian destruction to the rise of the homegrown Hasmonean Dynasty, which emerged beginning in 140 B.C. These discoveries—made during the city’s largest and longest-running excavation—provide insight into the lives of Jerusalem’s inhabitants not found in ancient texts. They are also upending old notions about a city considered holy by billions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

THE SMALL SWATH OF LAND—an irregular trapezoid about the size of a city block—where the team works sits on the northwestern slope of a rocky ridge that projects from the city’s famous acropolis, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary. The area currently being excavated has a long and varied history. It was at the heart of Jerusalem for nearly 1,000 years until a Roman army destroyed the city in A.D. 70. In the following century, the Roman emperor



the Magnificent (r. A.D. 1520–1566) ordered Jerusalem’s crumbling walls rebuilt in 1535, the site lay outside the city and was inhabited mainly by grazing sheep and goats. In the late twentieth century, it was a dusty lot used to park tour buses; local boys who lived in the rapidly expanding Arab neighborhood of Wadi Hilweh also used it as a soccer field.

Undisturbed ground in one of the world’s most densely packed cities is rare, and millennia of construction has often obscured or obliterated older layers. A plan to build a large visitor’s center in the area now being excavated, which Israeli Jews refer to as the Givati site, provided an unusual opportunity for archaeologists to examine large swaths of the city’s past. Initial work began in 2005. Two years later, a team led by IAA archaeologists Doron Ben-Ami and Yana Tchekhanovets launched in-depth excavations. The site lies in East Jerusalem, which, like the West Bank, is considered by the international community to be Israeli-occupied territory. Under the 1954 Hague Convention, which Israel is a party to, archaeological digs in occupied territories are limited to salvage work at ancient sites under threat, and then only in cooperation with authorities of the territory. But the Givati excavation has proceeded without the cooperation of Palestinians, who have opposed the dig through demonstrations, complaints to the United Nations, and lawsuits claiming that the work has damaged nearby Arab homes.

Gadot maintains that the fight over who owns the land today is unrelated to rigorous research into all eras of Jerusalem’s past, not just its Judean heritage. “Up to now, there has been no clear archaeological evidence establishing Jerusalem’s size or even its location in the centuries following the Babylonian destruction,” he says, climbing up a ladder that leads out of the ruined building. “We have a gap of over four hundred years in the archaeological record.”

JERUSALEM IS PERCHED ON the slopes of the rugged Judean highlands that separate the fertile Mediterranean coast to the west from the forbidding desert surrounding the Dead Sea to the east. Far from any port, river, or significant crossroads, the area was settled some 5,000 years ago, its first residents drawn to a spring that spilled from the eastern side of the narrow, rocky ridge that the team is now investigating. Excavations conducted more than a decade



Two large limestone pillars at the Givati site mark the entrance to what may have been an important official building that was destroyed by fire by the Babylonians in the sixth century B.C.



This image of the destruction layer of the burned building shows yellow-tinted soil (bottom right), which geologists say indicates the structure burned extremely quickly at a very high temperature.

ago by the IAA's Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron near this water source, located on the opposite side of the slope from the Givati site, showed that Jerusalem's Middle Bronze Age (2000–1600 B.C.) residents protected the spring with two massive towers and channeled its water through rock-hewn tunnels. They built a modest settlement on the ridge, on a spur of land that extended out from the hill that would become the city's acropolis. The first mention of "Jerusalem" appears during this era, and it may derive from Shalem, the name of a Canaanite god of dusk.

At the dawn of the Iron Age, sometime after 1000 B.C., a

nomadic tribe took the city from the local Canaanites and made it the capital of what was called Judea. Biblical texts speak of a grand capital of a large empire overseen by a wealthy king named Solomon, but archaeologists have uncovered few traces of the city. Instead, they have found a modest town that slowly expanded from the ridge, down the steep slopes below, and on to the acropolis to the north. By the sixth century B.C., Jerusalem sprawled across the neighboring western hills. Its rulers bored a new tunnel through the rock to bring the spring's water to the base of the ridge so people could access it more easily. They also built defensive walls around the urban area, though they later proved inadequate to stop the Babylonian onslaught.

In the wake of that attack, according to both ancient Babylonian and biblical accounts, much of the Judean elite was deported to Babylon, in what is now Iraq, then the world's largest metropolis. Within a half century, however, the Babylonians succumbed to a rising power from the east led by the Persian king Cyrus the Great (r. ca. 559–530 B.C.). Cyrus assumed control of the former Babylonian Empire and ushered in an era of relative peace and prosperity that lasted until Alexander the Great established complete control of his vast realm in 330 B.C. The biblical Books of Ezra and Nehemiah assert that the exiled Judeans returned home, and a successor to Cyrus appointed a Judean governor who rebuilt the city's temple and walls.

Scholars have long argued that much of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, was written in Jerusalem during the Persian era (ca. 539–332 B.C.). Historians therefore assumed that the city must have rebounded quickly after the Babylonian destruction of 586 B.C. Despite 150 years of excavation, archaeologists had found few traces of occupation from the centuries that followed the devastating fire and exile of the city's elite. "Until now, we only have three small walls from the Persian period," says Shalev over coffee at a café near the dig site. "We know so little from this time." Some scholars have argued that the population dropped from several thousand to a mere hundred or so and that the city shrank back to its original core on the ridge. How such a small settlement supported the priests and scribes required to author many of the Bible's



Artifacts recovered from the burned building include a seal (top left) inscribed with the Hebrew name "Ikkar, son of Matanyahu," a seal impression (top right) inscribed with the name "Nathan-Melech, servant of the king," and pottery vessels (above) that may have been used to serve food when the building functioned as a reception space.

books remains one of Jerusalem's many mysteries.

When the team led by Gadot and Shalev began to excavate the burned building, they carefully sieved the soil inside. In the soil, archaeologist Abra Spiciarich of Tel Aviv University found



A fragment of a pottery vessel found at the Givati site depicts a deity resembling the Egyptian god Bes.

compelling evidence that the building had been completely abandoned soon after the fire: Tiny bones belonging to snakes, bats, and rodents appear to date to the calamity's aftermath. The building was inhabited again eventually, though in a very different style than it had been before. In one corner, the team found a hovel constructed from loose rock littered with sherds of Persian period pottery. "It's like when refugees reuse the ruins of an old house," says Shalev. "This is crisis architecture." At least in the Persian period's early decades, residents eked out a living amid remnants of past grandeur.

Drawing largely on biblical texts, historians had assumed that Jerusalemites of this era isolated themselves from the wider region, eschewing, for example, foreign wine and graven images. Yet the Givati dig suggests a more complicated picture. Spiciarich found enormous numbers of bones from fish eaten during the Persian period that were caught as far away as the Nile in Egypt. Previous excavations in the area had shown similar patterns of consumption in the years before the Babylonian destruction, but the patterns were a surprise in these later layers. "They may have been squatters, but they had access to the same sort of fish that people here were eating previously," Spiciarich says. "There was urban continuity."

Another surprising find was a fragment of a vessel, likely a drinking jug, with a face whose features are reminiscent of the Egyptian deity Bes. The artifact is similar to examples dating to the sixth century B.C. excavated in Egypt and at sites along the Mediterranean Coast in what was then Phoenicia. This was, however, no import; analysis of the clay showed that it was made locally, perhaps an indication that Phoenician merchants called Jerusalem home. "We don't know who these people were," says Gadot, "but they certainly did not reject images." The discoveries suggest that the residents of Jerusalem did not live in self-imposed isolation but were closely tied to the cosmopolitan world of the Persian Empire.

When Alexander the Great's armies conquered Jerusalem and the surrounding area in 331 B.C., the city came under the control of the Greeks. Along with the new rulers and new language came the art, architecture, philosophy, and politics associated with Hellenistic culture. Alexander's sudden death in 323 B.C. led to factional fighting among his successors, and for the next two centuries, Jerusalem found itself on the shifting and violent frontier between the Ptolemaic Dynasty based in Egypt and the Seleucid Dynasty centered in today's Syria.

Although it lasted for nearly two centuries, Jerusalem's Hellenistic era seemed to have left little evidence. In recent years, however, Gadot and Shalev have exposed another monumental building just yards from the one destroyed in 586 B.C. Constructed around 200 B.C., it also featured what may have been a large reception room, resembling that of its earlier neighbor. The artifacts uncovered within the building have unmistakable signs of Greek influence that are clearly at odds with Judean taboos on human images and worshipping foreign deities. Along with a gold earring shaped like an antelope or gazelle, the team found a clay seal incised with an image of the Greek goddess Athena, another with an athlete, and a third decorated with stars.

Spiciarich also identified second-century B.C. remains of catfish, considered unclean by Jewish religious law, in the building, as well as a small number of bones from pigs, another culinary taboo. This might signal the presence of foreigners, or Hellenized Judeans, or both. She also found a large number of bones from young cattle, evidence that the animals were raised primarily for their meat in this era rather than slaughtered only when they were no longer useful as draft animals.



A gold earring with the head of an antelope or gazelle and a seal carved with the image of the Greek goddess Athena were both found at the Givati site.

These are hints of Jerusalem's slow but steady recovery from the Babylonian conquest. "There was a market economy, with Jerusalem as a regional trading center," says Spiciarich. At this time, the city's merchants shifted their trade focus from Egypt and the Mediterranean Coast to the Sea of Galilee in the north and the River Jordan to the east. This change likely signals the disruption of Jerusalem's older trade links due to the persistent conflict between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid powers.

The monumental building from the Hellenistic era didn't survive for long. A few decades after it was built, it was covered by an immense fortification. In 2016, Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets found remnants of a large watchtower and a glacis, a sloping stone defensive feature. Based on coins and pottery discovered



Archaeologist Yana Tchekhanovets stands in front of the remnants of a large watchtower and glacis dating to the decades after 200 B.C., which she believes is an important fortification mentioned in the Bible and by the Roman-Jewish historian Josephus.

there, they identified this hitherto unknown military complex as a fort built in the decades after 200 B.C. They believe it is the long-lost Acra, a Greek term for a fortified acropolis, mentioned in the Bible's First and Second Book of Maccabees and by the first-century A.D. historian Josephus. This complex was the headquarters of the Seleucid garrison that maintained control over Jerusalem, and its precise location has been a matter of dispute. "Since 1841 there have been at least six proposed locations," says Tel Aviv University archaeologist Ayala Zilberstein. According to Zilberstein, analysis of the fort and related finds reveals that its construction obliterated what had been a residential or administrative neighborhood. She also maintains that arrowheads found at the site might be a sign of battles that raged around the fort, and is confident these discoveries establish that it is the Acra. Other archaeologists remain skeptical. The arrowheads "could just as well be a sign of hunting by elites," says Spiciarich, noting that a small but important percentage of the bones found in the area belong to deer and other undomesticated animals. Gadot and Shalev are withholding judgment for now. "It seems there was a fortress at this location, but the original date of its construction is still unclear," says Gadot. "We have to dig for a couple more years to understand whether these fortifications are linked to the Acra story."

A JUDEAN UPRISING LED BY the Maccabees eventually ousted most of their foreign overseers in 164 B.C., and the rebels gained control of the city's temple and reconsecrated the sanctuary in an event celebrated by Jews today as Hanukkah. The Maccabean revolt paved the way for the Hasmonean Dynasty and heralded the revival of Jerusalem as the capital of an independent Judean kingdom for the first time since the Babylonian invasion. But that autonomy proved fleeting. The Roman Senate was quick to recognize the new state, but a century later moved to incorporate the area into its growing empire. In 37 B.C., the Hasmoneans were replaced by the Roman client king Herod the Great (r. 37–4 B.C.), who launched a major renovation of the Temple Mount, nearly doubling its size. Later, in the 30s A.D., the Spanish-born Roman governor Pontius Pilate

ordered construction of a grand stepped street that climbed from the pool at the base of the ridge where the city was founded, passed through what is now the Givati site, and ended at the base of the sacred acropolis. These projects transformed Jerusalem from a provincial town into a major tourist and pilgrimage destination for both Jews and Roman citizens. Its renaissance, however, lasted only a few decades. Following four years of unrest and civil war, in A.D. 70 the Romans crushed the resistance and ransacked the city, much as the Babylonians had six centuries before.

During the reign of Hadrian, Jerusalem was restored to some of its former glory, and the luxurious villa that was excavated by Ben-Ami and Tchekhanovets was built. In 2008, their team uncovered a hoard of 264 Byzantine gold coins nearby that may have been hidden when the Persians briefly subjugated the city in A.D. 614, just two decades before Muslim forces conquered it. These finds contradicted

previous assumptions that Jerusalem became far smaller and less wealthy after it was sacked by Rome. Archaeologists working in other parts of the city recently concluded that Byzantine Jerusalem was more populous and prosperous than any other phase of the city in the premodern era. "Someone came here and built a villa with a courtyard surrounded by rooms and lined with pillars," says Gadot, standing in front of nine round stone columns just a few yards from the pillars leading into the building destroyed during the Babylonian siege. He says that the villa's outer walls will be left intact, but that the team will remove its inner walls to search for Hellenistic, Persian, and Iron Age remains that might lie directly below. After the Byzantine period, the area reverted largely to agricultural use, and archaeological evidence from this time is relatively sparse, apart from the early Muslim era marketplace that was largely dismantled to access remains of earlier periods below.

Specialists are currently examining remains from this marketplace's cesspits, which they hope will reveal residents' diets as well as the illnesses that plagued them. Along the site's western edge, a researcher bags samples from a recently discovered garbage or latrine pit. "This one is full of organic material that can give us a unique glimpse into life," says Gadot. The team plans to analyze residue on pottery from a variety of periods to determine what locals drank. They also hope to pinpoint the origin of the cedar, boxwood, and other materials used for construction that could reveal the city's links to the outside world. The results of this ongoing dig may provide insight into the day-to-day life of Jerusalem's people, an aspect of the city's history that receives scant attention in scripture. "The texts don't tell us everything," says Gadot. "And after a century and a half of work, we are still facing very big questions, from the size of the city to why it became such an important religious center. This is one place where we hope to find some answers." ■

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