

6 Ancient Findings in the Footsteps of the Maccabees

Just in time for Hanukkah – beginning the evening of Nov. 28 in 2021 – archeologists revealed new evidence of the long battle between Hellenists and Hasmoneans in the holy land.

Hanukkah celebrates the 164 B.C. victory of an army, led by a father and sons known as the Maccabees, over Hellenist (Seleucid) conquerors who had outlawed Jewish practices and defiled the Temple in Jerusalem.

In the years after the Maccabees purified and rededicated the Temple, battles against the Seleucids continued under Maccabee descendants as they established the Hasmonean dynasty.

And now archeologists have unearthed a Seleucid fortification destroyed 2,100 years ago by the Hasmoneans in Lachish Forest.

Israel Antiquities Authority archeologists and student diggers found weapons, burned wooden beams and dozens of coins in the structure.

“The excavation site provides tangible evidence of the Hanukkah stories,” said excavation directors Saar Ganor, Vladik Lifshits and Ahinoam Montagu.

“It appears that we have discovered a building that was part of a fortified line erected by the Hellenistic army commanders to protect the large Hellenistic city of Maresha from a Hasmonean offensive. However, the finds from the site show that the Seleucid defenses were unsuccessful.”

They believe the building was destroyed under Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus around 112 B.C. His conquests are described in the Books of the Maccabees and by Roman-era historian Josephus.

"The stories of the Maccabees are coming to life before our eyes," said Israel Antiquities Authority General Director Eli Eskozido.

But this is hardly the first find relating to the heroes of Hanukkah.

Maccabee Manion Hiding Under Modern Home

When Theo and Miriam Siebenberg built a house in Jerusalem's Old City in 1970, Theo had a hunch that ancient Jewish leaders had inhabited this area close to the Temple Mount.

Eighteen years of digging confirmed that the Siebenberg house sits on several layers of Jewish history going back about 3,000 years.

Among these layers are the remains of a Hasmonean mansion that Biblical Archaeology Review called "an engineering and structural marvel."

The Siebenbergs turned the excavations under their home into a museum.

Visitors can see 200-pound stones from the ancient mansion piled along one wall as a tangible "memorial to the Maccabee house that stood here 2,000 years ago," Miriam Siebenberg said.

Coin Cache in Hasmonean House

Sixteen silver coins dating to the Hasmonean period (135–126 B.C.) were discovered in April 2016 in an Israel Antiquities Authority excavation near Modi'in, hometown of the Maccabees.

The treasure was hidden in a crevice against a wall of a Jewish agricultural estate also discovered during the excavation.

While the silver coins honor Seleucid emperors, numerous

bronze coins were also discovered, bearing the names of Hasmonean kings such as Yehohanan, Judah, Jonathan and Mattathias.

Excavation director Avraham Tandler said the cache is “compelling evidence that one of the members of the estate needed to leave the house for some unknown reason. He buried his money in the hope of coming back and collecting it, but was apparently unfortunate and never returned. It is exciting to think that the coin hoard was waiting here 2,140 years until we exposed it.”

Hasmonean Village Discovered

Remains of a 2,000-year-old Hasmonean village were discovered in 2019 during the digging of the foundation for a new school building in Jerusalem.

The village contained a large wine press, fragments of storage jars, a large columbarium (dovecote), an olive press, a large ritual bath (mikveh), a water cistern, rock quarries and a many-chambered burial cave leading to a large courtyard.

“It seems that this burial estate served a wealthy or prominent family during the Hasmonean period. The estate was in use for a few generations as was common in that era,” said Israel Antiquities Authority excavation director Ya’akov Billig.

Winter Places in Jericho

The Jordan Valley city of Jericho, about 15 miles east of Jerusalem, was the relatively warm spot chosen by three kings of the Hasmonean dynasty to build their winter palaces.

Constructed in stages from the end of the second century B.C., the palaces apparently were destroyed by an earthquake in 31 B.C.

Excavated over 10 seasons beginning in the 1970s by Hebrew

University archeologist Ehud Netzer, the Hellenist-style palaces featured an open courtyard surrounded by rooms.

There were elegant colonnaded rooms for entertaining, bathtubs decorated with colored frescos, ritual and swimming pools, towers and moats, orchards and ornamental gardens. A building believed to be a synagogue was found in 2001 in the northeastern part of the Hasmonean palace complex.

Hasmonean oil lamp in City of David

A perfectly preserved oil lamp from the Hasmonean era was discovered in 2020 during excavations of the Pilgrimage Road in Jerusalem's City of David, just outside the Old City walls.

The Pilgrimage Road is the monumental thoroughfare through which pilgrims ascended to the Temple Mount in the Second Temple period (516 B.C. to 70 C.E.).

The clay oil lamp is decorated with geometric patterns including a branch and leaves on the spout. Israel Antiquities Authority archeologists say it is typical of the first century B.C., in the final years of Hasmonean rule.

Excavation Director Ari Levy said such lamps were used for lighting buildings and streets, and in Shabbat and Hanukkah candle-lighting rituals.

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