

Biblical Archaeology Sees Golden Age in Israel

At a time when many archaeological sites and antiquities throughout the Middle East are being looted and destroyed, the City of David Foundation, in September, hosted its annual conference to enable the general public to experience some of the most important archaeological discoveries in Jerusalem in recent years.

A special portion of this year's conference was devoted to the theme "Jerusalem of Gold," highlighting several never-before-seen golden artifacts.

"The people in ancient times, like today, used gold for the most important things in life. It shows what they held dear and what was most important to them," Ahron Horovitz, senior director of Megalim, the City of David's Higher Institute for Jerusalem Studies, told .

The main themes of the artifacts on display related to war, beauty, and holiness or sanctity. Among the golden artifacts is the largest cache of gold coins ever discovered in Jerusalem, comprising 264 gold coins that date back to the end of the Byzantine period in the 7th century CE. The coins were found in the "Givati Parking Lot dig" conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority in the City of David neighborhood.

The coins are unique in that they were minted in Jerusalem, not in Constantinople—the Byzantine imperial capital—and were likely made in preparation for the Byzantine war against the Persians.

"The coins were found stacked one on top of another and were never dispensed," Horovitz said. "There may be a story of intrigue here as to why they never were used, such as it being

stolen.”

Additionally, a golden medallion featuring inscriptions of a menorah, shofar, and Torah scroll are on display for the very first time. The medallion was found in the Ophel excavation south of the Temple Mount and was believed to have been hung on a Torah scroll as a breastplate.

The discovery of the Jewish medallion, dating back to the time of upheaval in Jerusalem during the Persian-Byzantine wars, was a surprise for archaeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar, who unearthed the artifact. There are normally not many Jewish items found from that period.

Mazar estimated that the medallion originates from the Persian conquest of Jerusalem in 614 CE. That year, many Jews helped the Persians conquer Jerusalem from the Byzantines, only to have the Persians turn against the Jews and ally with the Byzantine Christians later on, leading to the Jews’ expulsion once again.

“These finds tell us about the Jewish presence in Jerusalem in the late Byzantine period, which we didn’t know much about,” renowned Israeli archaeologist Dr. Gabriel Barkay, who spoke at the City of David conference, told .

“The artifacts help us understand that there was a strong messianic desire of the Jewish people at that time; many of them likely came from abroad in hopes of construction of the Third Temple,” he said.

Horovitz said the artifacts highlight the special bond Jews have with Jerusalem, as well as Jewish continuity in the holy city.

“It shows us that the Jews have a very special bond and connection with Jerusalem that continues to today,” he said. “So when modern day Israelis come and see these artifacts, they can feel that they are part of Jerusalem from a long time

ago.”

Another golden artifact on display was an earring made of gold inlaid pearls and emeralds that dates back to the Roman period. A copy of this earring was given to First Lady Michelle Obama by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when she visited Israel in 2013.

Finally, one of the most unique and rare items on display was a golden bell discovered by Eli Shukron, an Israeli archaeologist and former director of City of David excavations for the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Throughout the years, Shukron has made a number of very significant finds from the period of the Second Temple of Jerusalem in and around the City of David, including the Pool of Siloam (mentioned numerous times in the Old and New Testaments), tunnels leading from the Western Wall, an ancient pilgrim road to Jerusalem, and the legendary citadel captured by King David when he conquered the city from the Jebusites.

One of the items Shukron discovered during his excavations of one of the Western Wall tunnels was a golden bell believed to have been part of the official vestments of the high priests of the Jewish Temple.

Described in Exodus 28:31-35, the priestly robe, also known as the “ephod,” was a sleeveless purple-blue or violet garment worn by the high priests that was fringed with small golden bells alternating with pomegranate-shaped tassels of blue, purple, and scarlet wool.

The golden bells were a necessary part of the ephod and needed to ring when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies.

“At first I just thought it was a ball and didn’t realize it was the golden bell from the high priests until I shook it and heard the ringing,” Shukron told . “No other artifact from the high priests like this has ever been discovered before.”

The City of David conference came amid a perilous time for Middle East archaeology, as sites from North Africa to Iraq have come under assault by Islamic fundamentalists and looters taking advantage of the breakdown of central governments.

"I think it is an atrocity," Horovitz said. "Islamic fundamentalist groups are on an ongoing crusade to destroy antiquities because they consider it against their religion, or they fear that their religion will be undermined by excavations that will show things that they are not happy about."

The situation for artifacts is particularly dangerous in Syria and Iraq, where the Islamic State jihadist group has taken over large swathes of territory.

According to a report by *The Guardian* in June, Islamic State looted about \$36 million in antiquities from the al-Nabuk region in Syria.

Reports indicate that much of the illegal smuggling, which is taxed by the Islamic State, is done by local Syrians and Turkish nationals, who then smuggle the artifacts across the border into Turkey and sell them to international antiquities traffickers on the black market.

Meanwhile, in the Iraqi city of Mosul, which was conquered by the Islamic State in June, the terror group has already destroyed important religious sites such as the Tomb of Jonah (the famous biblical prophet who was swallowed by a whale), and has threatened the Mosul Museum, which contains numerous artifacts from the nearby ancient city of Nineveh.

"These areas are where human culture began; they are the cradle of civilization. [Islamic State] is destroying the heritage of mankind," Horovitz said.

The frightening situation in the Middle East stands in stark contrast with Israel, which has one of the most robust and

highly regulated antiquities departments in the world and is eager to preserve the country's diverse past.

Nevertheless, the City of David Foundation, which works with the Israel Antiquities Authority in excavating important areas in Jerusalem, has come under intense scrutiny from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which has called on the City of David to halt historical excavations.

"We should think about proper care of the cultures of the past," Barkay said. "Instead of condemning these acts of looting that go on all the time in these Arab countries, UNESCO is obsessed with excavations and acts of preservation in Jerusalem because of political reasons."

He added, "UNESCO should deal with salvaging the heritage of mankind instead of political matters."

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