

'Cave of Skulls' Yields Significant Biblical Discovery

JERUSALEM, Israel – A small 3,800-year-old textile colored with an expensive dye known as “scarlet worm” (Tola’at Hashani) in the Bible, used for costly fabrics in the Jewish Tabernacle and garments of the Levitical priests, has been identified by researchers after its discovery eight years ago in the Judean Desert.

After the textile, (just two centimeters x two centimeters) was found in the Cave of Skulls, a joint project by the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA), Bar-Ilan University, and Hebrew University determined through carbon dating that the red dye indeed came from oak-scale insects at the time of the Middle Bronze Age (1767-1954 B.C.).

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Scientists say it is the earliest evidence of such a textile containing dye made from these insects.



The Bible mentions the color “scarlet worm” 25 times, often in conjunction with fine blue (Tekhelet) and purple (Argaman). In 2 Samuel 1:24, the writer exhorts, “Daughters of Israel, weep for (King) Saul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold.”

The fabric was found as part of a Heritage Project conducted by the IAA and Hebrew University to preserve and protect Judean Desert antiquities from theft.

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Dozens of textiles were found in the cave, but the small red fabric stood out because of its bright color, indicating it could be the precious scarlet dye.

Dr, Na'ama Sukenik, who curates the Organic Material Collection at the IAA, explained, "In ancient times, the dye was produced from the female scale insect, which lives on the Kermes oak tree."

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