

Exciting New Discovery in Judean Desert from Time of Maccabees Mystifies Archaeologists

A structure from the time of the Ptolemies and Seleucids containing 2,200-year-old weapons and fabrics has been unearthed north of Nahal Zohar in the Judean Desert.

The excavation, led by the Israeli Antiquities Authority and the Ministry of Heritage, found what they described as a “mysterious pyramid-shaped structure” with a way station beneath it.

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In what appears to be a collection of large stones in a heap, the structure bears little resemblance to the carefully carved constructions in Egypt. However, perhaps even more exciting than the structure itself is the treasure it contains.

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“What we have here is one of the richest and most intriguing archaeological excavations ever found in the Judean Desert,” the excavation directors – Matan Toledano, Dr. Eitan Klein and Amir Ganor – announced on behalf of the IAA. “This pyramidal structure we discovered is huge, and made of hand-hewn stones, each one weighing hundreds of kilograms.”

The statement continued, “Already in the first excavation week, the volunteers found written historical documents, exceptional bronze vessels and remains of ancient furniture, which, thanks to the desert climate, were preserved in amazing

condition. This is a very promising site – every moment new findings are discovered, and we are filled with anticipation for what else the next three weeks might produce!”

At first, the remains were thought to date from the time of the First Temple, but it soon became clear that the site dates back to the Hellenistic period, when the land of Israel was under Greek Ptolemaic rule.

Papyrus documents written in Greek were unearthed, along with bronze coins of the Ptolemies and of Antiochus IV, and weapons, wooden tools and fabrics from the Maccabean era. They also found sewing items, such as beads, buttons and a needle, and ancient seeds that could potentially be regrown.

“We still do not know for certain what the building’s purpose was,” the excavation directors said. “Is this a guard tower, guarding an important commercial route through which the Dead Sea resources of salt and bitumen were transported to the coastal ports? Or at some point was this enormous structure on the mountaintop marking a grave, or serving as a monument in ancient history? It is an enthralling historical mystery – and to our delight, the public coming to volunteer in the excavation are our partners in uncovering the answers.”

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The excavation efforts are part of a broader initiative to prevent archaeological treasures in the region from being looted. The national project began eight years ago and is sponsored by the Ministry of Heritage, the Judea and Samaria Civil Administration Archaeology Department, and the IAA.

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The entire Judean Desert region, including about 180 kilometers of cliffs and 900 caves, has been explored by the

Robbery Prevention Unit survey team, using abseiling equipment and advanced technologies.

Thanks to their systematic search, thousands of rare items have been discovered, including papyrus fragments, wooden utensils, weapons, leather items, hoards of coins and ancient scrolls hidden away in caves.

IAA Director Eli Escusido invites visitors to see the excavations, saying, "The Judean Desert survey is one of the most important archaeological operations ever undertaken in the State of Israel's history. The discoveries are exciting and even emotional, and their significance for archaeological and historical research is enormous. Right now, just before Passover and with the onset of Spring, I invite the people of Israel to come and participate! In such a challenging time as we are in, a few days of staying in and experiencing discovery in the Judean Desert offer a connective and uplifting experience for everyone."

The IAA is ready to welcome volunteers who want to participate in the excavation, setting up an organized camp with food and water available, along with interesting lectures about archaeology each evening. The excavation will continue for another three weeks.

More details about volunteering with the excavations can be found on the Israel Antiquities Authority website.

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