

Archaeologists discover ancient Jewish artifacts, part of Jerusalem walls

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue

Israeli archaeologists have made two recent discoveries expanding knowledge of Jewish history as far back as the time of the First Temple in the seventh century BC.

In one find, Israeli archaeologists unveiled the earliest known reference to Jerusalem in the Hebrew language that doesn't come from the Bible. On a small piece of papyrus, part of a wine-shipping order, is written in ancient Hebrew: "From the king's maidservant, from Na'arat, jars of wine, to Jerusalem."

Plundered from a cave in the Judean Desert (in what is today the West Bank) by antiquities robbers, the papyrus was recovered by the Israel Antiquities Authority's robbery prevention unit, dated, and analyzed.

The papyrus, or scroll, like the Dead Sea Scrolls found nearby decades ago, was preserved thanks to the Judean Desert's extremely dry climate.

Eitan Klein, deputy director of the robbery prevention unit, said that any one of three kings mentioned in the Hebrew Bible for that time period could have been the wine's intended recipient.

"The document represents extremely rare evidence of the existence of an organized administration in the kingdom of Judah," Klein said. "It underscores the centrality of Jerusalem as the economic capital of the kingdom in the second half of the seventh century BC."

Questions arose about the papyrus's origins at a Jerusalem archaeology conference soon after the papyrus was unveiled.

"How do we know it isn't a forgery intended for the antiquities market?" asked Aren Maeir, an archaeologist at Bar-Ilan University, who was not involved in the acquisition or analysis. "After all, there are well-known cases in which writing was forged on an ancient platform. It's very possible that only the papyrus itself is ancient."

In archaeology much more weight is given to an object's authenticity if it is dug up from an undisturbed excavation than if it is found elsewhere.

Amir Ganor, director of IAA's robbery prevention unit, said he and his colleagues—including renowned biblical scholar Shmuel Ahituv—"tried in every possible way to check the papyrus."

Carbon-14 dating proved that the papyrus is from the First Temple period, and an epigraphic examination found that the lettering is consistent with seventh-century BC writing.

"We used the methods used to check the Dead Sea Scrolls," Ganor said. "If someone has an additional method, he's invited to apply it. We, as a country, were obligated to get our hands on this, and I'm certain it's authentic."

The second recent archaeological find was the location where the Roman army breached the outer walls of ancient Jerusalem before capturing the city and destroying the Second Temple nearly 2,000 years ago, the Israel Antiquities Authority said.

An exploratory survey last winter at a future construction site uncovered the spot. After expanding the excavation archaeologists discovered the remains of a tower jutting from what they believe was the Third Wall,

the outermost wall surrounding Jerusalem at the end of the Second Temple period.

Opposite the tower's western facade they found dozens of catapults and stones the archaeologists are certain were used by the Romans, led by Titus, against the Jewish guards who defended the wall from the tower.

Rina Avner, one of the lead archaeologists, said that the discoveries confirm a detailed account of the battle by the contemporary historian Josephus.

"It was amazing," Avner said. "We found pottery from the Second Temple period within the cement of the wall, which was on the same level as the balustrades. We dated the embedded pottery to AD 70, the year Josephus said the Romans attacked the city and destroyed the Second Temple, forcing the Jews into exile."

Archaeologists and other Israelis pointed to the discoveries as additional proof that Jews lived in Jerusalem thousands of years ago. The find comes amid an outcry after the United Nations' world heritage organization, UNESCO, ratified two resolutions referring to the Temple Mount solely by its Muslim name, Haram al-Sharif or Noble Sanctuary. The resolutions made no mention of Jewish and Christian religious or historical ties to the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism and the third holiest in Islam.

That action "erases history and actually tries to destroy our past and the Christians' past," Avner said.
—Religion News Service