**What is Beneath the Temple Mount?**

**As Israeli archaeologists recover artifacts from the religious site, ancient history inflames modern-day political tensions**

Non-Muslims use a wood ramp to enter the complex, home to the gilded Dome of the Rock, an Islamic shrine, and the Western Wall, holy to Jews. (Polaris)

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My stint as an amateur archaeologist began one morning on the southern slope of Mount Scopus, a hill on the northern outskirts of Jerusalem. Inside a large hothouse covered in plastic sheets and marked “Temple Mount Salvage Operation,” a woman from Boston named Frankie Snyder—a volunteer turned staffer—led me to three rows of black plastic buckets, each half-filled with stones and pebbles, then pointed out a dozen wood-framed screens mounted on plastic stands. My job, she said, was to dump each bucket onto a screen, rinse off any soil with water from a garden hose, then pluck out anything of potential importance.

**From This Story**

It wasn’t as easy as it sounded. A chunk of what looked like conglomerate rock turned out to be plaster used to line cisterns during the time of Herod the Great, some 2,000 years ago. When I tossed aside a shard of green glass I thought was from a soft-drink bottle, Snyder snatched it up. “Notice the bubbles,” she told me, holding it up to the light. “That indicates it’s ancient glass, because during that time, oven temperatures didn’t reach as high as they do now.”

Gradually, I got the hang of it. I spotted the handle of an ancient piece of pottery, complete with an indentation for thumb support. I retrieved a rough-edged coin minted more than 1,500 years ago and bearing the profile of a Byzantine emperor. I also found a shard of glass from what could only have been a Heineken bottle—a reminder that the Temple Mount has also been the scene of less historic activities.

The odds and ends I was gathering are the fruits of one of Israel’s most intriguing archaeological undertakings: a grain-by-grain analysis of debris trucked out of the Temple Mount, the magnificent edifice that has served the faithful as a symbol of God’s glory for 3,000 years and remains the crossroads of the three great monotheistic religions.

Jewish tradition holds that it is the site where God gathered the dust to create Adam and where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac to prove his faith. King Solomon, according to the Bible, built the First Temple of the Jews on this mountaintop circa 1000 B.C., only to have it torn down 400 years later by troops commanded by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who sent many Jews into exile. In the first century B.C., Herod expanded and refurbished a Second Temple built by Jews who had returned after their banishment. It is here that, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus Christ lashed out against the money changers (and was later crucified a few hundred yards away). The Roman general Titus exacted revenge against Jewish rebels, sacking and burning the Temple in A.D. 70.

Among Muslims, the Temple Mount is called Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary). They believe it was here that the Prophet Muhammad ascended to the “Divine Presence” on the back of a winged horse—the Miraculous Night Journey, commemorated by one of Islam’s architectural triumphs, the Dome of the Rock shrine. A territorial prize occupied or conquered by a long succession of peoples—including Jebusites, Israelites, Babylonians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, early Muslims, Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans and the British—the Temple Mount has seen more momentous historical events than perhaps any other 35 acres in the world. Nonetheless, archaeologists have had little opportunity to search for physical evidence. For one thing, the site remains a place of active worship. The authority that controls the compound, an Islamic council called the Waqf, has long forbidden archaeological excavations, which it views as desecration. Except for some clandestine surveys of caves, cisterns and tunnels undertaken by European adventurers in the late 19th century—and some minor archaeological work conducted by the British from 1938 to 1942, when the Al-Aqsa Mosque was undergoing renovation—the layers of history beneath the Temple Mount have remained tantalizingly out of reach.

Thus the significance of those plastic buckets of debris I saw on Mount Scopus.

Today the Temple Mount, a walled compound within the Old City of Jerusalem, is the site of two structures: the Dome of the Rock to the north and the Al-Aqsa Mosque to the south. In the southwest stands the Western Wall—a remnant of the Second Temple and the holiest site in Judaism. Some 300 feet from the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in the southeast corner of the compound, a wide plaza leads to underground vaulted archways that have been known for centuries as Solomon’s Stables—probably because the Templars, an order of knights, are said to have kept their horses there when the Crusaders occupied Jerusalem. In 1996, the Waqf converted the area into a prayer hall, adding floor tiles and electric lighting. The Muslim authorities claimed the new site—named the El-Marwani Mosque—was needed to accommodate additional worshipers during Ramadan and on rain days that prevented the faithful from gathering in the open courtyard of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Three years later, the Waqf, with the approval of the Israeli government, announced plans to create an emergency exit for the El-Marwani Mosque. But Israeli officials later accused the Waqf of exceeding its self-stated mandate. Instead of a small emergency exit, the Waqf excavated two arches, creating a massive vaulted entranceway. In doing so, bulldozers dug a pit more than 131 feet long and nearly 40 feet deep. Trucks carted away hundreds of tons of soil and debris.

Israeli archaeologists and scholars raised an outcry. Some said the Waqf was deliberately trying to obliterate evidence of Jewish history. Others laid the act to negligence on a monstrous scale.

“That earth was saturated with the history of Jerusalem,” says Eyal Meiron, a historian at the Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Eretz Israel. “A toothbrush would be too large for brushing that soil, and they did it with bulldozers.”

Yusuf Natsheh, the Waqf’s chief archaeologist, was not present during the operation. But he told the *Jerusalem Post* that archaeological colleagues had examined the excavated material and had found nothing of significance. The Israelis, he told me, were “exaggerating” the value of the found artifacts. And he bristled at the suggestion the Waqf sought to destroy Jewish history. “Every stone is a Muslim development,” he says. “If anything was destroyed, it was Muslim heritage.”

Zachi Zweig was a third-year archaeology student at Bar- Ilan University, near Tel Aviv, when he heard news reports about dump trucks transporting Temple Mount soil to the Kidron Valley. With the help of a fellow student he rounded up 15 volunteers to visit the dump site, where they began surveying and collecting samples. A week later, Zweig presented his findings—including pottery fragments and ceramic tiles—to archaeologists attending a conference at the university. Zweig’s presentation angered officials at the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA). “This is nothing but a show disguised as research,” Jon Seligman, the IAA’s Jerusalem Region Archaeologist, told the *Jerusalem Post*. “It was a criminal deed to take these items without approval or permission.” Soon afterward, Israeli police questioned Zweig and released him. By that point though, Zweig says, his cause had attracted the attention of the media and of his favorite lecturer at Bar-Ilan—the archaeologist Gaby Barkay.

Zweig urged Barkay to do something about the artifacts. In 2004, Barkay got permission to search the soil dumped in the Kidron Valley. He and Zweig hired trucks to cart it from there to Emek Tzurim National Park at the foot of Mount Scopus, collected donations to support the project and recruited people to undertake the sifting. The Temple Mount Sifting Project, as it is sometimes called, marks the first time archaeologists have systematically studied material removed from beneath the sacred compound.

Barkay, ten full-time staffers and a corps of part-time volunteers have uncovered a wealth of artifacts, ranging from three scarabs (either Egyptian or inspired by Egyptian design), from the second millennium B.C., to the uniform badge of a member of the Australian Medical Corps, who was billeted with the army of British Gen. Edmund Allenby after defeating the Ottoman Empire in Jerusalem during World War I. A bronze coin dating to the Great Revolt against the Romans (A.D. 66-70) bears the Hebrew phrase, “Freedom of Zion.” A silver coin minted during the era when the Crusaders ruled Jerusalem is stamped with the image of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Barkay says some discoveries provide tangible evidence of biblical accounts. Fragments of terra-cotta figurines, from between the eighth and sixth centuries B.C., may support the passage in which King Josiah, who ruled during the seventh century, initiated reforms that included a campaign against idolatry. Other finds challenge long-held beliefs. For example, it is widely accepted that early Christians used the Mount as a garbage dump on the ruins of the Jewish temples. But the abundance of coins, ornamental crucifixes and fragments of columns found from Jerusalem’s Byzantine era (A.D. 380–638) suggest that some public buildings were constructed there. Barkay and his colleagues have published their main findings in two academic journals in Hebrew, and they plan to eventually publish a book-length account in English.

But Natsheh, the Waqf’s chief archaeologist, dismisses Barkay’s finds because they were not found *in situ* in their original archaeological layers in the ground. “It is worth nothing,” he says of the sifting project, adding that Barkay has leapt to unwarranted conclusions in order to strengthen the Israeli argument that Jewish ties to the Temple Mount are older and stronger than those of the Palestinians. “This is all to serve his politics and his agenda,” Natsheh says.

To be sure, the Mount is a flash point in the Middle East conflict. Israel seized East Jerusalem and the Old City from Jordan in 1967. While Israelis saw this as the reunification of their ancient capital, Palestinians still deem East Jerusalem to be occupied Arab land (a position also held by the United Nations).The Temple Mount is precariously balanced between these opposing views. Although Israel claims political sovereignty over the compound, custodianship remains with the Waqf. As such, Israelis and Palestinians cautiously eye each other for any tilt in the status quo. A September 2000 visit to the Temple Mount by the Israeli politician Ariel Sharon was interpreted by Palestinians as a provocative assertion of Israel’s sovereignty, and helped spark the second intifada uprising, which, by some estimates, claimed as many as 6,600 lives, as rioting, armed clashes and terrorist bombings erupted throughout the Palestinian territories and Israel. At its core, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represents rival claims to the same territory—and both sides rely on history to make the case for whose roots in the land run deepest.