

MACCABEAN-ERA COIN DISCOVERY SUPPORTS HANUKKAH HISTORY

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Summary: A 2,200-year-old wooden cylinder with 15 silver coins was discovered during excavations in the Judean Desert, providing the earliest archeological evidence of the Maccabean Revolt.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’” – Luke 15:7-9 (ESV)

Lost Coins Found After 2,200 Years

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah has roots that go back to the second century BC and it is even mentioned in the New Testament. Now, the first ever archeological evidence of the Maccabean Revolt and the story of Hanukkah was unearthed during excavations in the Judean Desert last May. Fifteen ancient silver coins were discovered in a wooden container hidden over 2,000 years ago in a crack of the Murbaat Cave in the Darageh Stream Nature Reserve which overlooks Israel’s Dead Sea.

The Judean Desert Excavation and Survey Project was carried out between March and May of 2022 by the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) with the Archaeological Office for the Military Administration of Judea and Samaria, in cooperation with the Ministry for Jerusalem and Heritage. The uniform silver coins were at the bottom of a cylindrical wooden container, carefully placed between layers of sheep’s wool and wrapped in a purple woolen cloth. Packed soil and small stones were at the top of the container covering the coins. According to archeologists, the earliest of the coins was made in 176 BC and the latest in 171-170 BC. One of the coins featured a handwritten engraving of the name “Shalmal” in Aramaic script. Today the value of the coins would be about 30,000 shekels or \$8,700.

Researchers determined the coins were tetradrachma (large silver coins originating in ancient Greece), each worth four drachma that were minted by Ptolemy VI Philometor, who reigned over the Greek state of Ptolemaic Egypt from 180-164 BC and again from 163-145 BC.

At the same time Ptolemy was king of Egypt, his uncle, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, ruled the Seleucid Empire which included Judea. Jewish tradition calls Antiochus “The Wicked” because of the strict regulations he set over the Jews which led to the Maccabean Revolt.

Antiochus defiled the Jerusalem Temple by vandalizing it and setting up an idol on the altar. He outlawed certain Jewish practices such as circumcision and Sabbath observance and put to death anyone who would not pray at the altars dedicated to Greek gods he had placed in every town.



Archeological Evidence for the Maccabean Revolt

The discovery of the coins is exciting because it provides the earliest archeological evidence from the Judean desert in support of the Maccabean/Hasmonean Revolt, which took place between 167–141 BC, when rebels pushed back against Hellenistic influences and Antiochus’ decrees calling for suppression of Jewish religious practices. Other physical evidence related to the Hasmonean Dynasty

has been discovered before, but evidence for the initial revolt has been scarce. The Revolt is described in the Books of

the Maccabees, which are included in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, as well as in the Vulgate, the Latin Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church.

These accounts tell of the dramatic events that led people to hide their belongings in the Judean Desert, particularly due to the plundering of the Jerusalem Temple treasures by Antiochus and the destruction of the Jerusalem city wall in the years that led up to the Revolt, explained Dr. Eitan Klein, who studied the coins together with IAA numismatic expert Dr. Gabriela Bijovsky.

1 Maccabees 2:29-37 reads: Then many who were seeking righteousness and justice went down to the wilderness to dwell there: they, their sons, their wives, and their cattle, because evils pressed heavily upon them. And it was reported to the king's officers, and to the troops in Jerusalem in the city of David, that men who had rejected the king's command had gone down to the hiding places in the wilderness. Many pursued them and overtook them; they encamped opposite them and prepared for battle against them on the Sabbath day.... and they died, with their wives and children and cattle, about a thousand persons.

"It is interesting to imagine who the man was who fled to the cave and hid his personal property here intending to return to collect it. He was probably killed in battle and his possessions awaited almost 2,200 years until we retrieved them," said Dr. Klein.



"This is an absolutely unique find, presenting the first clear archaeological evidence that the Judean Desert caves played an active role as the stage of the activities of the Jewish rebels or the fugitives in the early days of the Maccabean Revolt, or the events that led up to them," Klein continued.

"This moving find, coming just before the festival of Hanukkah, is symbolic, emphasizing once again the importance of our activity in the field of heritage," said Zeev Elkin, Israel's Minister of Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage, who has invested much in

recent years to save and preserve many heritage sites in the Judean Desert, Judea and Samaria.

"The Survey and Excavation Project carried out by the Israel Antiquities Authority in the Judean Desert over the past six years has proved itself, in that thousands of archaeological artifacts have been saved from destruction and plundering, including parts of biblical scrolls, arrowheads from the Bar Kochba Revolt, a 10,500-year-old basket and more," added Amir Ganor, who directed the Murbaat Cave excavation on behalf of the IAA.

The History of Hanukkah

The Jewish holiday of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, celebrates the miracle performed by God in the recovery of Jerusalem from the Seleucid Empire and the subsequent rededication of the Second Temple at the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt.

A priest named Mattathias started the revolt in 167 BC when he refused to offer a sacrifice on an altar of an idol. He killed the Greek officer demanding the sacrifice when another Jewish man stepped forward to do it. Mattathias tore down the idol and shouted, "Let everyone who is zealous for the law and who stands by the covenant follow me!" (1 Maccabees 2:27). Along with his five sons, they rallied the Jewish



people and began a guerrilla war taking over the northern villages of Judea. As they went, they tore down altars to idols and killed anyone who worshiped them. Mattathias put his son Judah Maccabee in charge before he died.

Against all odds, Judah was successful in taking back Jerusalem from the Seleucids. On December 25, 165 BC, the Temple was rededicated to God after months of cleansing it of the defilement of Antiochus. Celebrations continued for eight days. A miracle is said to have happened when there was only enough oil to keep the menorah lit for one day, but the candles stayed lit for eight full days until the newly made oil was ready. Hanukkah is the celebration of this miracle. The Revolt lasted until 160 BC when Judah was killed at the Battle of Elasa. The war itself continued, until ultimately ending in 134 BC when the Maccabees gained independence and formed the Hasmonean Kingdom. This was the first time that the Jews had established their own self-ruled sovereignty in the Land of Israel since the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonian Empire centuries earlier. Independence lasted for about 80 years, until the conquest by the Romans. Hanukkah is also known as the Festival of Lights and the Feast of Dedication and is mentioned in John 10:22. It appears that Jesus celebrated Hanukkah at the Temple in Jerusalem. According to biblical archaeologist Roger Liebi in his book *The Messiah in the Temple* (p. 385), there were 80-foot high lamps in the Temple's Court of the Women that were lit by young priests climbing ladders during the Feast of Booths and during the eight consecutive nights of the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah). At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon. – John 10:22-23 (ESV)

Kozak shows off bronze arrowheads inscribed with the Greek letters of beta and epsilon on December 13, 2022. The arrowheads were recently discovered in a forgotten box at the Tower of David in Jerusalem during renovations. (credit: Melanie Lidman/Times of Israel)

Maccabean Period Arrowheads Rediscovered

Another interesting Maccabean-era discovery happened recently during renovations of the Tower of David Museum located at the entrance to the Jaffa Gate in the Old City. Some 60 bronze and iron arrowheads were found in a long-forgotten cardboard box in one of the guard towers.

“I was with one of the managers, and I just couldn’t believe what I was looking at,” recalled Eilat Lieber, the director of the museum, who found the five boxes of artifacts behind an old air conditioner.

The first thing Lieber did was call Renee Sivan, an archaeologist who had excavated the Tower of David in the 1980s. Sivan remembered that a paper had been planned to be published about the intricate markings of the Greek letters

epsilon and beta on some of the bronze arrowheads but had been set aside when other matters captured the researchers’ attention.

Jerusalem was controlled by the Selucids before the Hasmoneans took control and there was much political intrigue and back and forth control of the city including the sacking of Jerusalem and the Temple by Antiochus IV in c. 167 BC. The exact date of the arrowheads and other related artifacts is uncertain.



Forgotten for decades, the arrowheads sat among the large collection of war items that cluttered the space along the Tower’s ancient walls which date back to the First Temple period. Located in a prime geographic area, the Tower of David has seen its share of warfare through the years. Along with the box of arrowheads, slingshot bullets inscribed with winged lightning icons and more than 100 ballista, carved stone balls that were flung from the walls as projectile missiles, can be found. The massive number of artifacts found at the Tower “shows us the power of the siege that was here in Jerusalem, and that it was not an easy fight; it was a very strong battle,” said Reut Kozak who is part of the all-female team of local archeologists at the Tower of David.

Updating the Tower of David Museum

The Tower of David Museum was considered a state of the art, groundbreaking museum when it first commenced.

“When the museum opened to the public in 1989, it was a different concept. It was the end of the ’80s, and people were really excited about graphic design and screens,” said Lieber. At that time using new technology to tell the ancient stories of the site was novel in museums but the genuine artifacts themselves weren’t displayed. “Especially over the past decade, screens and technology are everywhere, and the originals are really rare,” Lieber explained. “Now, people are looking for the authentic, the real evidence, especially when we’re talking about the media, and what’s real and what’s fake.” “It was clear to us, and especially to me as a curator, that the power of the original is necessary here to build the new concept and context together with the beauty of the past,” Lieber added. The majestic walls and arches of the historical site can be overwhelming for visitors, but smaller artifacts are easier to relate with, Lieber explained. It has been difficult to locate some of the original artifacts from the excavation because, as required by law, they were turned over to the IAA. In the years since, many key items were loaned permanently to museums around Israel.

Within the Tower’s ancient walls, the story of Hanukkah and the Maccabean Revolt come to life. The site holds some of the best-preserved excavations of daily Hasmonean life during the time of the Maccabees. These include private homes near the original city walls of Jerusalem which are made of traditional rough-hewn Hasmonean stones in contrast to smooth Herodian stones.

“These arrowheads are part of the story that we’re telling the visitors every day, and especially now on Hanukkah,” said Lieber. “It gives so much power to the story, to be able to see real evidence of the story they’ve known since they were very young children.”

Conclusion

The re-discovery of the arrowheads from the Maccabean time period and the silver coins from the Judean Desert demonstrates that Hanukkah has its roots in real history. Not only is Jewish history preserved in writing but in the ground as well.

“We will not cease to look for and excavate historical discoveries such as this,” said Civil Administration Archaeology Staff Officer Hananya Hizmi, in reference to the desert coins. “We have taken steps to save and preserve many heritage sites in the Judean Desert and in Judea and Samaria, and I commend all the participants in this important task.”

The Maccabean Revolt coins will be exhibited to the public in the Hasmonean Heritage Museum in Modi’in in central Israel, as part of the “Israel Heritage Week” that will take place this month during Hanukkah. And as the Tower of David renovations come to a close, the new museum is scheduled to open in spring of 2023, with displays of hundreds of artifacts discovered on-site.