

Intriguing Bethlehem as Immanuel's Birthplace

Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.



Bethlehem.

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INTRODUCTION:

William A. Thomson ministered as a missionary for 45 years in Syria and Palestine. His description of sites in Bible lands are masterpieces of word pictures. His three-volume work, *The Land and the Book*, is a must for armchair travelers.

Our discussion of Bethlehem is suitably introduced by Thomson's description of the difficult journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem:

As we drew near to Bethlehem to-day my fancy was busy with that little family which more than eighteen hundred years ago approached it along the same road. What a momentous journey was that which brought Joseph and Mary to this city of David that David's greater son might here be born, according to the word of the Lord.

The narrative in the second chapter of Luke for unaffected simplicity is not surpassed by anything even in the most ancient books of the Bible. It requires considerable knowledge of the geography of Palestine, and a decided effort of the imagination, to appreciate or fully comprehend this record. The journey was taken by compulsion. Joseph and Mary were very poor, and must have traveled on foot four days at least, through the miry plain of Esdraelon, and over the bleak mountains of Samaria and Judea.

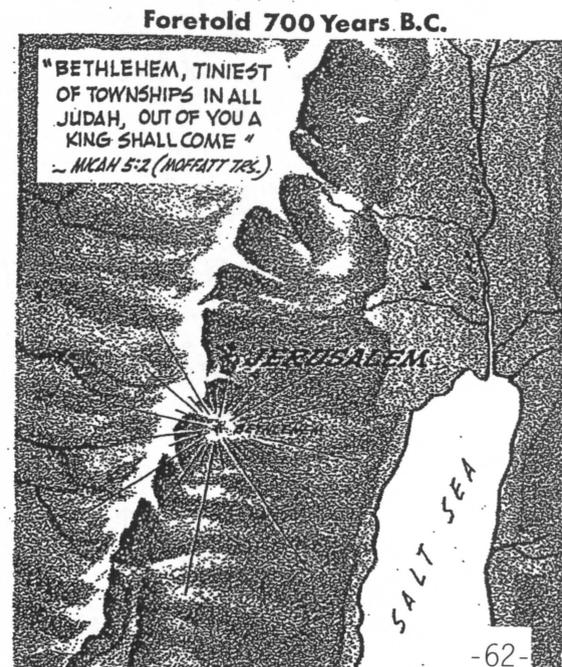
If our Christmas be rightly placed, the journey was made in the depth of winter.

"Pray ye," says our Lord, "that your flight be not in winter, and woe unto them that are with child in those days." Such was the condition of Mary, and to travel at all must have been a severe trial. To do so in poverty and want, on foot, and in midwinter, was extremely dangerous, and yet not one word of sympathy drops from the pen of the narrator; there is not even the slightest allusion to those perplexing and most distressing circumstances. The simple fact of the journey is stated, and that, when they arrived at Bethlehem, "she brought forth her first-born son, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." Was ever any great event in the history of man thus recorded? The very simplicity of the story stamps it divine (Thomson, *The Land and the Book*, 1907, Vol. I, 30-31).

Everyone knows that Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus and a number of additional facts make it a town of great significance.

1A. **Bethlehem:** Town of Antiquity

Bethlehem is located about five miles south of Jerusalem near the chief north-south route linking Jerusalem with Hebron and the Negeb. The word *Bethlehem* means "house (place) of bread" and its significance lies in the fact that it is located in a fertile region characterized by an abundance of corn (for making bread) as well as figs, vines, almonds, and olives.



It was originally called Ephrath or Ephratah, which means “fruitful.”

The first historical mention of Bethlehem is found in one of the Amarna letters in the early fourteenth century B.C. in which Abdu-Heba, prince of Jerusalem, complains that Bit-Lahmi has gone over to the Apiru. The word *Bit-Lahmi* or *Beit-lahm* (“house of flesh”) represents the Arabic attempt to translate the word *Ephratah*, just as Bethlehem appears to be the Hebraic attempt to translate *Ephratah*. The first Biblical mention of Ephrath is in Genesis 35:16-19 and Genesis 48:7, where it is noted as being located just a short distance from the burial place for Jacob’s wife, Rachel. From this we can deduce that the city (or town) of Ephrath existed as early as Jacob’s return to Palestine, and perhaps even earlier.

After the conquest of Caanan, the city bears the name Bethlehem-Judah (Judg. 17:7; Ruth 1:1-2; 1 Sam. 17:12), probably to distinguish it from the small and remote place of the same name in Zebulun, located approximately seven miles west-northwest of Nazareth (Josh. 19:15-16; Judg. 19:1).

2A. **Bethlehem: Town of Royalty**

Bethlehem was the birthplace of David and where he was anointed as king by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:4-13); and it was from the well of Bethlehem that three of David’s heroes brought water for him at the risk of their lives when he was in the cave of Adullam (2 Samuel 23:13-17). The town was distinguished above every other city as the birthplace of the God promised Messiah (Matthew 2:6; compare this to Micah 5:2).

Because of Bethlehem’s close association with David and the events of his life, it became known as the “City of David.” However, it would seem that the elevation of David to the kingdom did not affect the fortunes of his native homeland, and it appears that the only recollection of it that he manifests is when he longs for the water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem (2 Sam. 23:15).

3A. **Bethlehem: Town of Prophecy**

Micah prophesies that Bethlehem would be Messiah’s birthplace (Micah 5:2):

*“But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Though you are little among the thousands of Judah,
Yet out of you shall come forth to Me
The One to be Ruler in Israel,
Whose goings forth are from of old,
From everlasting.”*

Ephrathah is the ancient name of Bethlehem (Gen. 35:16, 19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; cf. Josh 15:60 LXX) and distinguishes it from other towns named Bethlehem, such as the one in Zebulun (Josh. 19:15). Its use identifies Bethlehem as the town in which David was born (1 Sam. 17:12), thus establishing a connection between the messianic King and David...

...The term “of old” can indicate only great antiquity, and its application to a future ruler—one yet to appear on the scene of Israel’s history—is strong evidence that Micah expected a supernatural figure. This is in keeping with the expectation of *Isaiah in 9:6*,

expected a supernatural figure. This is in keeping with the expectation of Isaiah in 9:6, where the future King is called *el* ("God"), an appellation used only of God by Isaiah. It is also in keeping with the common prophetic tradition of God's eventual rule over the house of Israel (Isa. 24:23; Mic. 4:7; et.al.). Only in Christ does this prophecy find fulfillment (Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Micah, 1985, 427).

4A. **Bethlehem: Town of History**

Bethlehem plays a significant part in the Old Testament, in the history of the Israelites, both before they entered Egypt and slavery, and after the Exodus. It appears in the Old Testament as Ephrat, where Rachel the beloved matriarch of the Jewish People, the favorite wife of Jacob, died during childbirth.

The Tomb of Rachel, is a pilgrimage place for Jews and Muslims alike. Among other Biblical mentions and Holy Sites in Bethlehem: Rachel's tomb, Naomi and Ruth; Samuel anoints King David and the well from which David's warriors brought him water.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is the oldest continuously operating church in the world.



It should also be remembered that the church father Jerome moved from Europe to Bethlehem. He learned the Hebrew language and for more than thirty years lived in the very same cave in which Christ was born, translating the Word of God into the Latin language, the Latin Vulgate, which became the official translation for the Roman Catholic Church. Jerome's love for the Lord led him to learn His language and translate His Word at the place of His birth. The section of the cave in which Jerome lived is still pointed out to tourists today and the most impressive monument to Jerome is found in the courtyard outside of the Church of the Nativity.

It is the relationship of Bethlehem to Christ that has insured its place in Christian history. Micah 5:2 was understood to indicate that the Messiah, like David, would be born in Bethlehem not Jerusalem. Matthew 2:1-12, Luke 2:4-20, and John 7:42 all report that Jesus was born in that humble village. Flash forward three centuries, during the reign of the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine, the Church of the Nativity was constructed (about AD 326). It was destroyed during the Samaritan revolt (around AD 529) and rebuilt by Justinian I (527-565). That ancient structure forms the basic unit that is still in use today although many modifications have occurred, especially during the Middle Ages. According to Christian legend during the Persian Conquest, AD 614, the church was preserved when the invaders saw the three Magi in a mosaic of the birth of Jesus and recognized their clothing as Persian.

5A. **Bethlehem: Town of Fertility**

M'Clintock and Strong superbly describe the strategic location of Bethlehem, surrounded by fine orchards and fertile fields:

There never has been any dispute or doubt about the site of Bethlehem, which has always been an inhabited place, and, from its sacred associations, has been visited by an unbroken series of pilgrims and travelers. The modern town of *Beit-lahm* lies to the E. of the main road from Jerusalem to Hebron, 4½ miles from the former. It covers the E. and N.E. parts of the ridge of a "long gray hill" of Jura limestone, which stands nearly due E. and W., and is about a mile in length. The hill has a deep valley on the N. and another on the S. The west end shelves down gradually to the valley; but the east end is bolder, and overlooks a plain of some extent. The slopes of the ridge are in many parts covered by terraced gardens, shaded by rows of olives with figs and vines, the terraces sweeping round the contour of the hill with great regularity. The many olive and fig orchards, and vineyards round about, are marks of industry and thrift; and the adjacent fields, though stony and rough, produce, nevertheless, good crops of grain. On the top of the hill lies the village in a kind of irregular triangle, at about 150 yards from the apex of which, and separated from it by a vacant space on the extreme eastern part of the ridge, spreads the noble basilica of St. Helena, "half church, half fort," now embraced by its three convents, Greek Latin, and Armenian. (John M'Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. I, [1894], 782).

6A. **Bethlehem: Town of Deity**

In Bethlehem in a humble, natural limestone cave, the eternal creator God, the Savior of the world was born.

Interestingly, at His birth He was placed in a manger. Animals were usually brought into the lower level of rural and small town homes at night for safety, and in the winter, to provide warmth. The manger was usually carved from stone, measuring three to four feet in length. The cavity that usually held fodder for animals would be just the right size and located at just the right height for a baby! (The phrase "born in a manger," is unscriptural and patently an impossibility).

The angels had identified the manger as the place where the shepherds would find Jesus. Since they also mentioned the cloth wrappings used for newborns, the angels may only have been emphasizing the normalcy of His birth circumstances rather than intending to provide a means of identifying the baby. In any case, finding the baby lying in a manger, wrapped according to common practice, apparently caused no surprise to the shepherds or problem for the family members present. Jesus' birth, surrounded by a loving individuals, reflected the customs of a humble, first century family.

7A. **Bethlehem: Town of Ignominy**

The name Bethlehem will forever be associated with the murder of the infants. The Magi had been warned in a dream not to report to Herod and now Joseph was warned in a dream to flee with Mary and the child. They would stay in Egypt until the death of Herod, the monster.

The flight of Joseph was justified, because Herod was violently enraged because he felt he had been mocked and deluded by the Magi. Herod did not know how old the newborn king was, but he took no chances and included all the little boys in Bethlehem two years old and under. Their number was perhaps 15 or 20. It is no surprise that Josephus, the Jewish historian, makes no note of this small item in Herod's chamber of horrors. (Based on A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the N.T.*, Matthew, 20).



8A. **Bethlehem: Town of Obscurity**

It is a great mystery why a town so full of historical connotations and strategic importance does not rise to become a city of prominence. Bethlehem is omitted altogether from the list of the towns of Judah in Joshua 15. M'Clintock and Strong wonder about that omission:

This omission from the Hebrew text is certainly remarkable, but it is quite in keeping with the obscurity in which Bethlehem remains throughout the whole of the sacred history. Not to speak of the nativity, which has made the name of Bethlehem so familiar to the whole Christian and Mussulman world, it was, as the birthplace of David, a place of the most important consequence to ancient Israel. And yet, from some cause or other, it never rose to any eminence, nor ever became the theatre of any action or business. It is difficult to say why Hebron and Jerusalem, with no special associations in their favor, were fixed as capitals, while the place in which the great ideal king, the hero and poet of the nation, drew his first breath and spent his youth remained an "ordinary Judaeon village." No doubt this is in part owing to what will be noticed presently—the isolated nature of its position; but that circumstance did not prevent Gibeon, Ramah and many other places situated on eminences from becoming famous, and is not sufficient to account entirely for such silence respecting a place so strong by nature, commanding one of the main roads, and the excellence of which as a military position may be safely inferred from the fact that at one time it was occupied by the Philistines as a garrison (2 Sam. xxiii, 14; 1 Chron. xi, 16) (M'Clintock and Strong, Vol. 1, [1894], 780-781).

9A. **Bethlehem: Town of Tranquility**

Perhaps by divine design Bethlehem has remained a town of obscurity so that it would still be a place of tranquility. Even 2,000 years after the birth of the Savior, there is something calm and tranquil about the place. Certainly there are shops lining the entrance road into Bethlehem where local craftsmen sell their beautiful olive wood carvings and mother of pearl jewelry. However, once one approaches the Church of the Nativity and reverently enters the sacred compound, one feels something of the blessedness of the place where the eternal Son of Man became man. Then when the tourist descends to the large cavern below, pointed out as the place of the Savior's birth, and sings hymns of the nativity such as "*O Little Town of Bethlehem*," there is something special in the location that resonates in the heart of the visitor. Outside of Bethlehem what may or may not have been the shepherds' fields are still lovely places of contemplation as the visitor remembers the greatest of all Christmas miracles: **God manifested in the flesh** (1 Tim. 3:16).



BETHLEHEM IS A PLACE OF:

| | |
|-------------|--|
| ANTIQUITY | |
| ROYALTY | |
| PROPHECY | |
| HISTORY | |
| FERTILITY | |
| DEITY | |
| IGNOMINY | |
| OBSCURITY | |
| TRANQUILITY | |



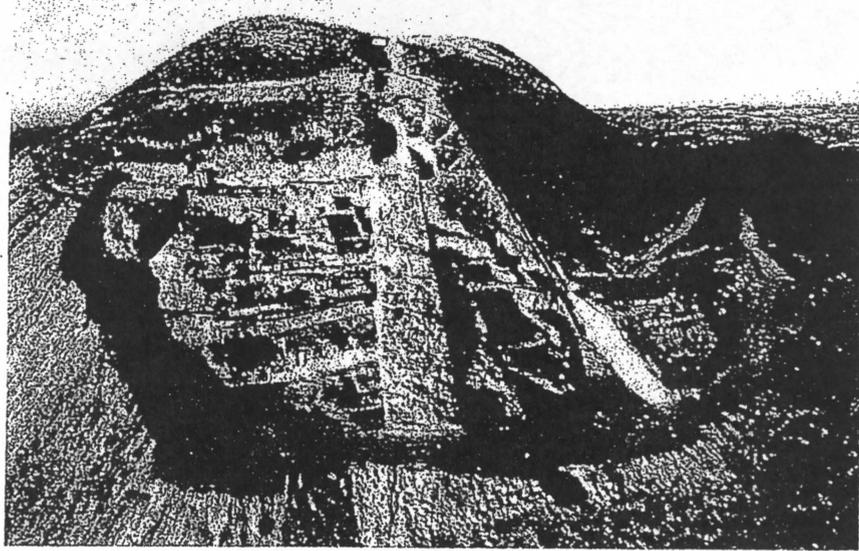
BETHLEHEM

BETHLEHEM IS A PLACE OF:

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| ANTIQUITY | Bethlehem dates back to 1400 B.C. |
| ROYALTY | It is known as the City of David who was born here. |
| PROPHECY | In 700 B.C. Micah prophesied concerning the birthplace of Jesus. |
| HISTORY | It boasts the oldest church of Christendom. |
| FERTILITY | The "house of bread" is situated among orchards and fertile fields. |
| DEITY | The miracle of the incarnation took place here: God became man. |
| IGNOMINY | Innocent infants were slaughtered here by the monster Herod. |
| OBSCURITY | Despite its significant location in history, Bethlehem remains an obscure town. |
| TRANQUILITY | Even today the sacred sites here exude calmness and peace. |



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MONUMENTAL DISCOVERY

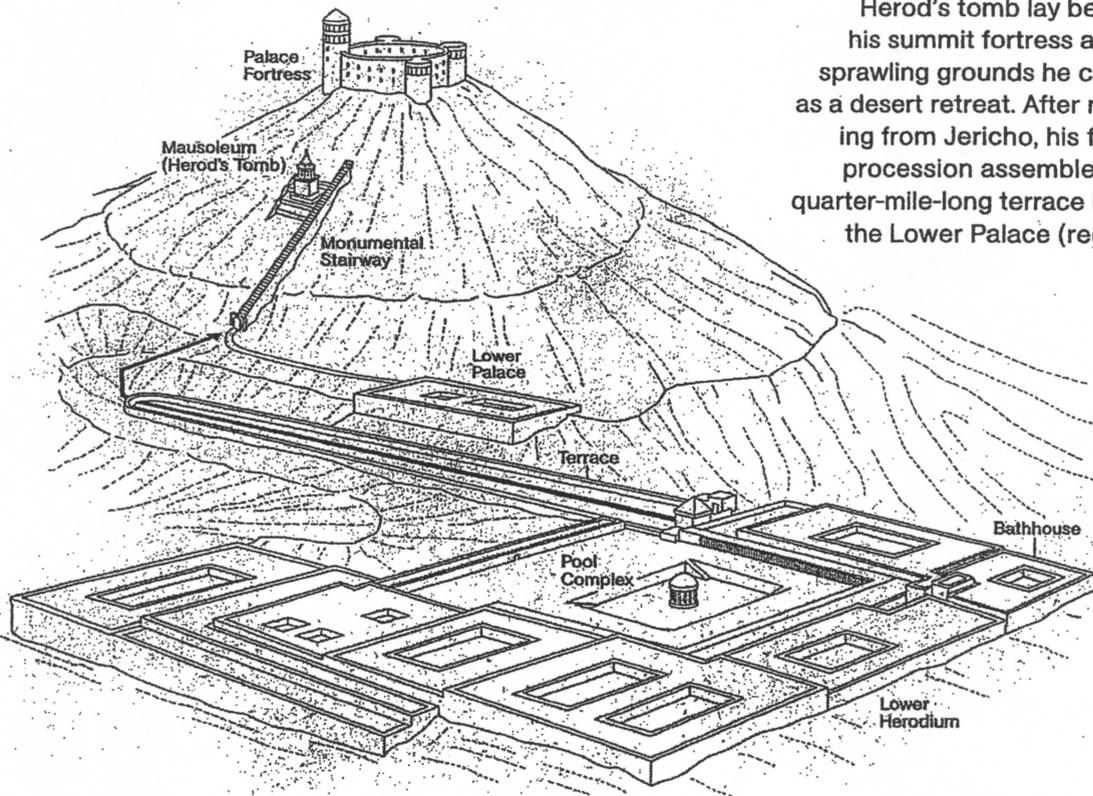
Finding Herod's grave was an epic labor for Israeli archaeologist Ehud Netzer.

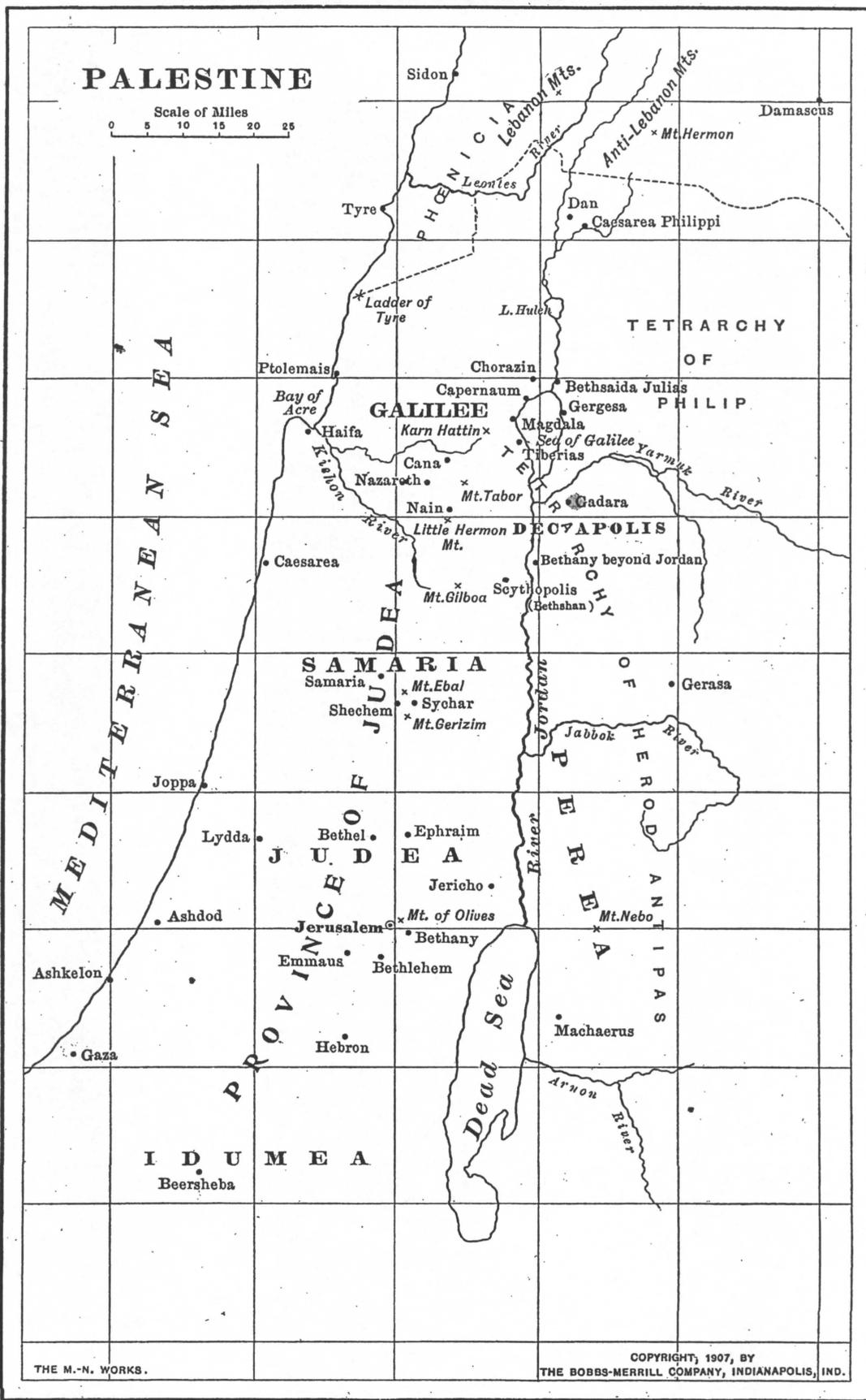
He had long thought the king was buried in the palace complex at the foot of Herodium's man-made hill, eight miles south of Jerusalem. But in 2007 Netzer's team located a tomb in a dramatic setting halfway up the 300-foot-tall mound (above).

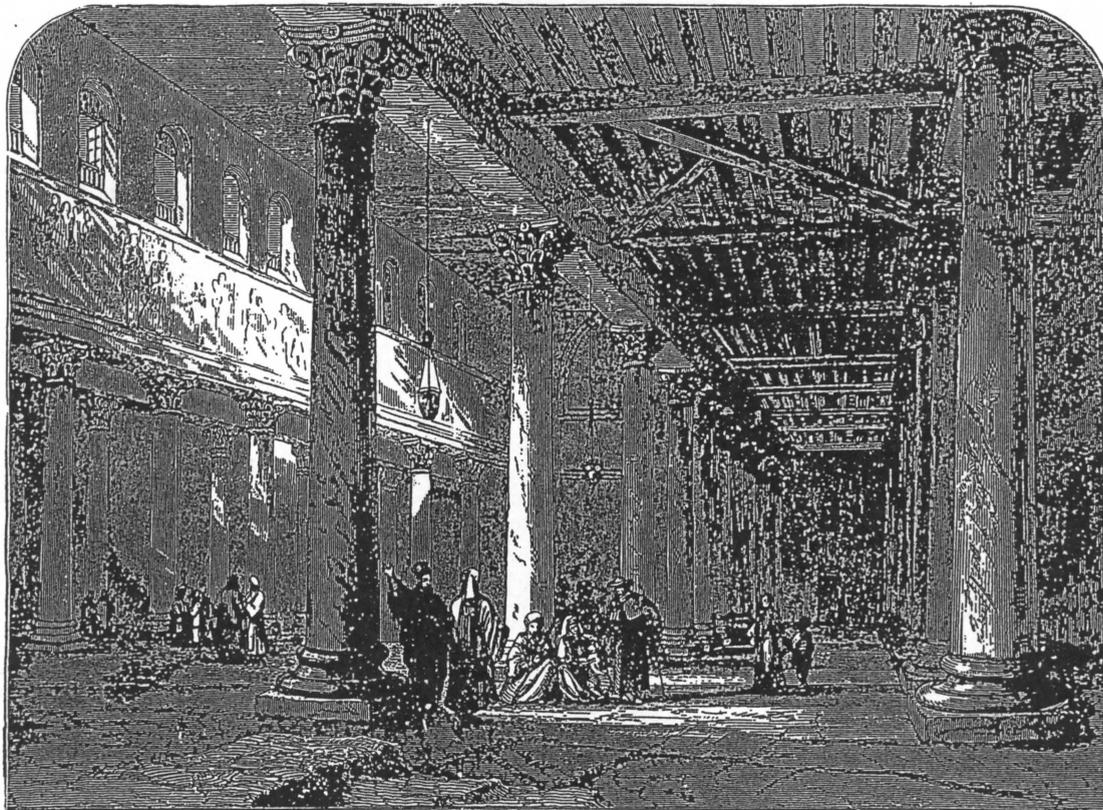
Intact stone blocks mark lower courses of the hillside mausoleum (right).

HERODIUM

Herod's tomb lay between his summit fortress and the sprawling grounds he created as a desert retreat. After marching from Jericho, his funeral procession assembled on a quarter-mile-long terrace beside the Lower Palace (red line).



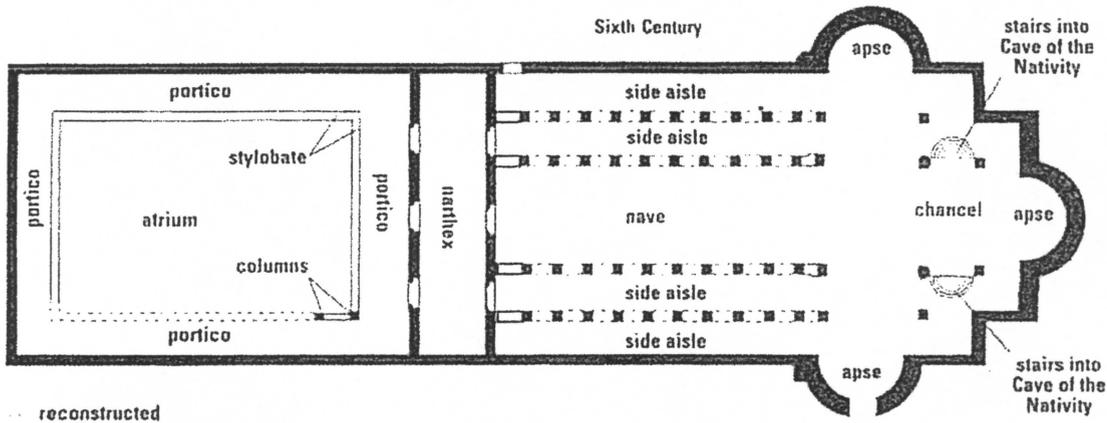
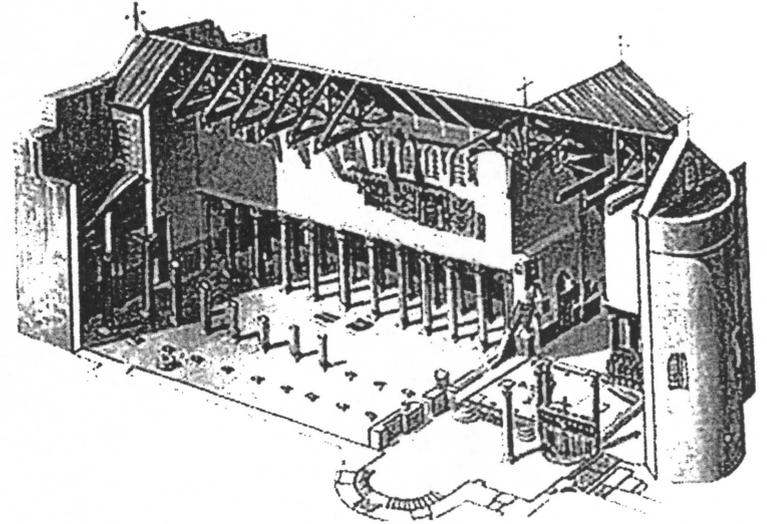




INTERIOR OF THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY.



CAVE OF THE NATIVITY.



reconstructed

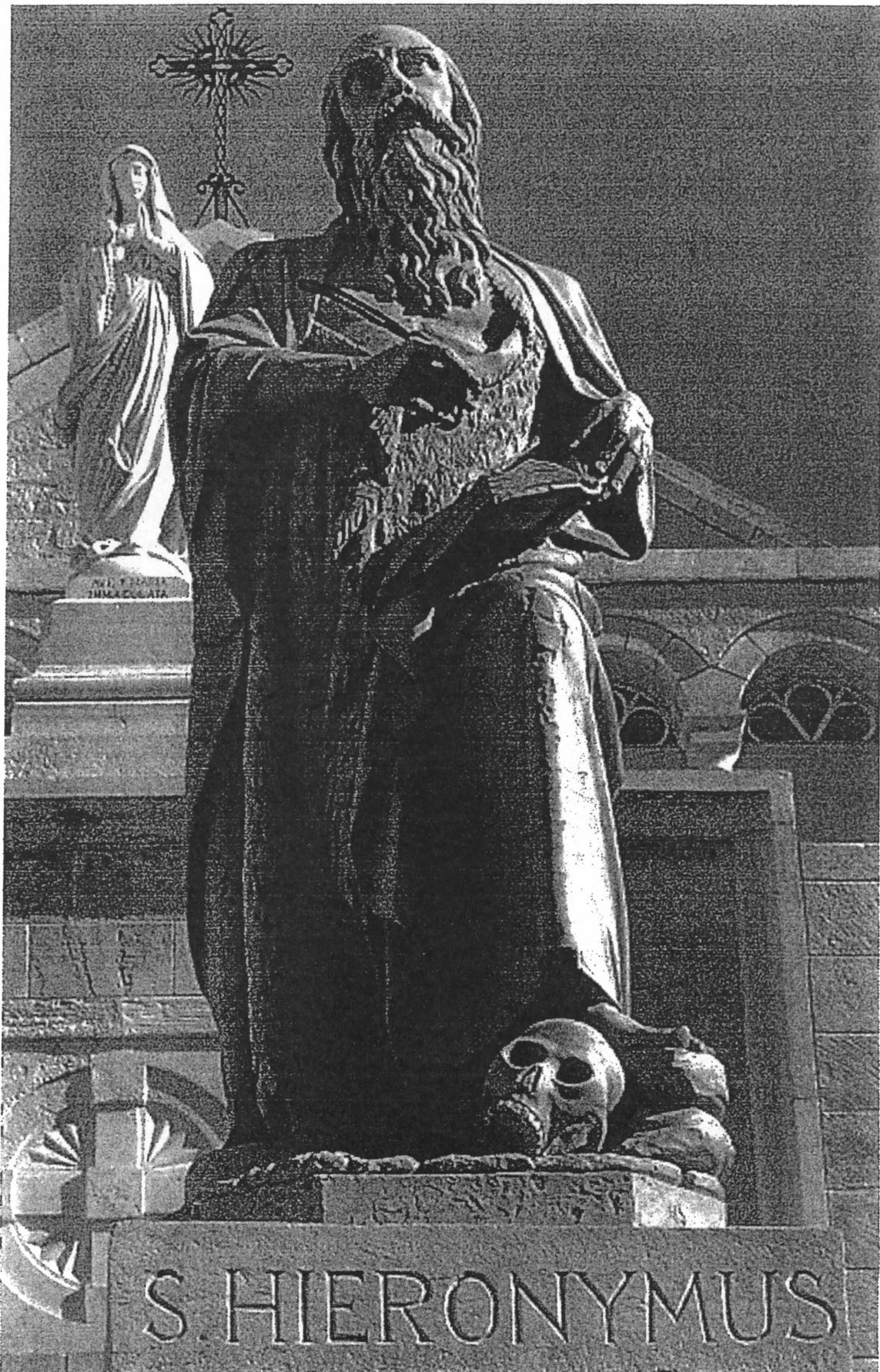
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Imb Betlehem ist es als ain berg am andern
 und ligt nach darby ain dorff und vor vber ortz
 ain ston dorff und waer da yore ain lutz ston
 war es kunte dem die lutz und zimlag hoch.

Betlehem



Do vnser frow machet und sprach den lobsang, a *Magnificat*
animus mea domini, da ist ablas. **T** Item oben im tempel
 huss ist vor ziten ain lutz gewesen, die zerbrochen ist yeghul
 Vff der hoffstat hat Zacharias den psalm und lobsang gemacht
Benedictus domini deus israel, *quia visum est et factum*
 ab



The Church Father Jerome moved from Italy to Bethlehem and out of love for the Savior took up residence in the Cave of the Nativity. He learned Hebrew and translated the Bible into Latin. An impressive statue graces the courtyard of the Church of St. Catherine.

Two fairly recent archeological discoveries relate to the Savior's birthplace. A clay seal was found in the excavations of Jerusalem with the name Bethlehem, dating back about 2700 years to the Israelite monarchy. The second discovery was made in a water tunnel near Bethlehem, where a capitol was found from some royal building dating back to the monarchy under David or Solomon.

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Ancient Bethlehem seal unearthed in Jerusalem

May 23rd, 2012 in Other Sciences / Archaeology & Fossils



[Enlarge](#)

In this photo made available, Wednesday, May 22, 2012 by Israel's Antiquities Authority, shows a detail of a seal bearing the name "Bethlehem" in ancient Hebrew script. The Israel Antiquities Authority says archeologists digging at a Jerusalem site have found the oldest artifact that bears the inscription of Bethlehem _ a 2,700 years old seal with the name of Jesus' traditional birthplace. The clay seal, or bulla, was found in a Jerusalem dig. The seal is 1.5 centimeters (0.59 inches) in diameter and was most likely used to stamp tax shipments said Eli Shukron, the authority's director of excavations. (AP Photo/Clara Amit, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)



Facsimile drawing of the 'Bethlehem' bulla (Pnina Arad)

In this photo made available, Wednesday, May 22, 2012 by Israel's Antiquities Authority, shows a detail of a seal bearing the name "Bethlehem" in ancient Hebrew script. The Israel Antiquities Authority says archeologists digging at a Jerusalem site have found the oldest artifact that bears the inscription of Bethlehem _ a 2,700 years old seal with the name of Jesus' traditional birthplace. The clay seal, or bulla, was found in a Jerusalem dig. The seal is 1.5 centimeters (0.59 inches) in diameter and was most likely used to stamp tax shipments said Eli Shukron, the authority's director of excavations. (AP Photo/Clara Amit, courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)

Israeli archaeologists have discovered a 2,700-year-old seal that bears the inscription "Bethlehem," the Israel Antiquities Authority announced Wednesday, in what experts believe to be the oldest artifact with the name of Jesus' traditional birthplace.

The tiny clay seal's existence and age provide vivid evidence that Bethlehem was not just the name

of a fabled biblical town, but also a bustling place of trade linked to the nearby city of Jerusalem, archaeologists said.

Eli Shukron, the authority's director of excavations, said the find was significant because it is the first time the name "Bethlehem" appears outside of a biblical text from that period.

Shukron said the seal, 1.5 centimeters (0.59 inches) in diameter, dates back to the period of the first biblical Jewish Temple, between the eighth and seventh century B.C., at a time when Jewish kings reigned over the ancient kingdom of Judah and 700 years before Jesus was born.

The seal was written in ancient Hebrew script from the same time. Pottery found nearby also dated back to the same period, he said.

Shmuel Achituv, an expert in ancient scripts at Israel's Ben-Gurion University who did not participate in the dig, said the discovery was the oldest reference to Bethlehem ever found outside of the Bible. Apart from the seal, the other mentions of Bethlehem, Achituv said, "are only in the Bible."

The stamp, also known as "fiscal bulla," was likely used to seal an administrative tax document, sent from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, the seat of Jewish power at the time.

It was found as archaeologists sifted through mounds of dirt they had dug up in an excavation outside Jerusalem's Old City walls.

Shukron said the first line most likely read "Beshava'at" — or "in the seventh" — most likely the year of the reign of a king. The second line, he said, has the crumbling letters of the word "Bethlehem." The third line carried one letter, a "ch" which Shukron said was the last letter of the Hebrew work for king, "melech."

Hebrew words often do not have vowels, which are understood from the context, making several interpretations of the same word plausible. Some of the letters are crumbled, or were wiped away. Three experts interviewed by the AP, one involved in the text and two independents, concurred the seal says Bethlehem.

There are only some 40 other existing seals of this kind from the first Jewish Temple period, said Achituv, making this a significant find, both because such seals are rare, and because this is the first to mention Bethlehem.

The dig itself has raised controversy.

It is being underwritten by an extreme-right wing Jewish organization that seeks to populate the crowded Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan with Jewish settlers, arguing that they have ancient links to the area. The dig is being undertaken in a national park in the area of Silwan, known to Jews as "the City of David."

Shukron said the seal was found some months ago, but they needed time to confirm the identity of the artifact.

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"Ancient Bethlehem seal unearthed in Jerusalem." May 23rd, 2012. <http://phys.org/news/2012-05-ancient-bethlehem-unearthed-jerusalem.html>

Despite secrecy, interest builds around mysterious First Temple find outside Bethlehem

A 2,800-year-old pillar discovered by a tour guide under a Palestinian orchard points to major construction dating from Biblical times. So why isn't it being excavated?

BY MATTI FRIEDMAN | May 19, 2013, 4:33 pm |

A mysterious First Temple-era archaeological find under a Palestinian orchard near Bethlehem is increasingly gaining attention — despite attempts to keep it quiet.

In February, a tour guide leading a group through an underground tunnel in the rural West Bank, not far from Jerusalem, was surprised to stumble upon the remains of a unique carved pillar.

The pillar matched monumental construction from the 9th or 8th centuries BCE — the time of the First Temple in Jerusalem. That signaled the presence of an important and previously unknown structure from that period.

Buried under earth and rubble, the pillar was now two yards below the surface.

The guide, Binyamin Tropper, notified antiquities officials. He was surprised when they encouraged him to leave the subject and the site alone, said Tropper, who works at an educational field school at Kibbutz Kfar Etzion.

"They told me — we know about it, keep it quiet," he said.

The remains are in the politically charged West Bank, on the outskirts of an Arab village and on land privately owned by a Palestinian — all reasons the Israeli government might deem attempting an excavation there a major political headache to be avoided.

When it became clear that antiquities officials did not intend to excavate what he believed to be a potentially huge find, Tropper went to the Hebrew press, where several reports have appeared on inside pages in recent weeks.

Tropper has kept the location secret to avoid attracting the attention of antiquities thieves.

Early this month, several prominent Israeli archaeologists were brought to inspect the site. Among them was Yosef Garfinkel, an archaeology professor from Hebrew University.

There is no doubt the remains are those of monumental construction from the time of the First Temple, Garfinkel said.

The top of the pillar, known as a capital, is of a type known as proto-aeolic, he said. That style dates to around 2,800 years ago.

The pillar marks the entrance to a carved water tunnel reaching 250 yards underground, he said, complex construction that would almost certainly have been carried out by a central government. At the time, the area was ruled by Judean kings in nearby Jerusalem.

In its scale and workmanship, Garfinkel said, the tunnel evokes another grand water project of First Temple times — the Siloam Tunnel in Jerusalem, now underneath the modern-day Arab neighborhood of Silwan. That project is believed to have been undertaken by the biblical king

Hezekiah to channel water into the city ahead of an Assyrian siege in the 8th century BCE, according to an account in the biblical Book of Kings.

The existence of a large water tunnel at the new site suggests the presence nearby of a large farm or palace, Garfinkel said.

"The construction is first-rate," he said. "There is definitely something important there from biblical times, the 9th or 8th centuries BCE."

Archaeology in the Holy Land has long been caught up in modern-day politics. The Zionist movement always viewed unearthing remnants of the ancient past as a way of proving the depth of Jewish roots in the land. Palestinians, for their part, have increasingly taken to denying the existence of any ancient Jewish history and tend to condemn all archaeology conducted by Israel as an attempt to cement political control.

Palestinians would thus be unlikely to be sympathetic to the discovery of a new site of significance to Israel on land they claim for a future state.

Tropper, the guide, said he hoped interest from professional archaeologists would prod the government to conduct an excavation. The site could be a source of income for the Palestinian owners and the nearby village, he suggested.

The Israel Antiquities Authority has been careful in its public responses to reports of the new finding, but did not rule out an excavation.

"This is indeed an important find, which preliminary information dates to the time of the kings of Judah," the authority said in a statement Sunday.

"At the same time, it should be known that the subject is sensitive and requires treatment that is delicate and responsible. The Antiquities Authority, along with all other relevant authorities, has been dealing with this for some time in an attempt to bring about the complete excavation of the remains, and will continue its attempts to do so."

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