First updated progress report on the Temple Mount sifting project

The following account is not a scientific report. It is intended to present an update on the project and of materials found, prior to thorough examination.

We started the project in November 2004. About 70 truckloads of earth that had been removed from the Temple Mount and dumped in the Kidron Valley were transferred to Emek Zurim National Park, located on the western slopes of Mount Scopus. Using a mechanical sifter, the rubble was first separated into heaps consisting of particles of differing sizes (figs. 1-2).

The piles with the finest materials, 4-14 mm in diameter, have been our richest source of coins and other small finds. The piles with particles larger than 10 cm are almost entirely made up of stones. Unfortunately, only a very small percentage of these stones can be identified as ancient architectural remnants. The Wakf agents had removed any easily identifiable architectural objects from the rubble, before dumping the remains in the Kidron. In spite of this, there have been some interesting finds (see below). Most of our work has been focused on sifting and examining the piles with particles ranging in size from 14 to 40 mm. In this material we have found large amounts of potsherds, glass and other assorted archaeological remnants.

The initial mechanical sifting left large quantities of soil bound to the materials we wanted to examine. This dirt hides details and completely encrusts and disguises smaller objects. In order to remove the unwanted dirt, we developed a system of wet sifting. A large plastic “greenhouse” was erected and inside we set up a row of sifting stations. Rubble from the piles is poured into buckets, water is added to the dirt to soften it and the wet mixture is spilled into screens, which are supported by metal stands. High-pressure water hoses are used to wash away the dirt, exposing the items for examination and sorting (fig. 3-4).

We have found the rubble to contain a large amount of pottery and these shards will be sorted and examined in the future. The pottery constitutes a good representation of various periods, starting from the time of the First Temple and up until modern times (fig. 5). Mixed with the rubble, we have found a great deal of modern metal and glass artifacts. We also found large quantities of animal bones that in all likelihood are from meat eaten on the Temple Mount, possibly, remnants of sacrifices. We have also found great numbers of mosaic tesserae and even a few prehistoric flint implements.

Our primary intent is to collect all of the man-made relics so that we will be able to conduct a more intensive study based on quantitative analyses later on. Through these studies, we may learn more about the activity on the Temple Mount during the different periods, and the characteristics of each period. Another plan is to sort the bones, identify the various animal species and date some of them by Carbon-14 analysis. It would be most interesting to see if pig bones, should they be identified, could be associated with the Crusader, Byzantine or Hellenistic periods.

The work crew consists primarily of volunteer groups from schools. They generally work for a few hours or a full day. So far, 30 such groups have helped us. In addition, there are individual volunteers.
To date, we have examined only about 15 percent of the rubble and an enormous amount of work has yet to be completed. The financing available for the project should be enough to fund another month. We hope, however, to raise additional funds and keep the project going until the summer of 2005.

The following is a partial listing of some of the more interesting items recovered till now:

During the first days of work, our finds seemed to be symbolic in nature. The first coin recovered was from the period of the First Revolt against the Romans that preceded the destruction of the Second Temple. It bore the phrase “For the Freedom of Zion” (fig. 6). The find was particularly meaningful, inasmuch as it was rubble from the Temple Mount, which was one of the focal points of the fights. A few days later, on the eve of Chanuka, we found the “pinched style” spout of a Hasmonaean lamp (fig. 7). Several weeks later, on the Tenth of Teveth (one of the fast days commemorating events that lead to the destruction of the First Temple), we found a crusader arrowhead. Though this turned out to be from a later period than First Temple Period, subsequently we have recovered additional arrowheads from earlier periods as well (figs. 8).

Our most unexpected find was a large segment of a marble pillar’s shaft, one meter tall and 60 cm. in diameter (fig. 9). The marble was streaked with purple veins and white spots. We were particularly surprised that a relic of these dimensions managed to escape the pre-sorting carried out by the Wakf.\(^1\) There is another segment of a column shaft with a similar texture lying in a heap of various marble column shafts near the southern wall of the Temple Mount. Both fragments seem to be from the same pillar (fig. 10). Our assumption has been that the rubble dumped by the Wakf originated in the northern or eastern area of the Temple Mount and was moved during the Middle Ages to serve as filling near “Solomon’s Stables”. We are not certain of this column’s age. Marble was not imported to Israel before the Late Roman Period so it is not likely that it was in use during the Second Temple Period. The greatest likelihood is that it dates either to the Late Roman or the Byzantine Period. It is worth noting that, even though history books state that during the Byzantine period, the Temple Mount served as a garbage dump, we have evidence, both from architectural artifacts as well as pottery and other finds that indicate otherwise. It appears that the site served various other functions and history books will need to be corrected.

The first inscription we found was chiseled writing on a jar fragment from the First Temple Period (7th century BCE). One can see the ancient Hebrew characters “Heh” “Ayin” or “Koff” (fig. 11).

The first seal impression we found was from the Hellenistic Period. The impression is one that has been found before, showing a five-pointed star with the ancient Hebrew letters of “Jerusalem” (“ירושלים”) spaced between the points (fig. 12). About 30 such impressions have been found in Jerusalem on jar handles from the Hellenistic Period (3rd century, BCE). Apparently this was some kind of official stamp from a period about which very little is known.

We have accumulated numerous pottery oil lamps. The most common among them are “Herodian lamps” from the Second Temple Period. Another lamp we have encountered frequently is the “sandal” lamp, and is characteristic of the Late Byzantine

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1 It is worth mentioning that an investigation by the Israel Antiquities Authority in the area of the dump at the Kidron Valley found a number of architectural artifacts, the most important of which was the a gate jamb from the Second Temple Period.
Period (6–7th century, CE). These lamps are decorated with a Menorah (candelabra) pattern, whereas others identify it as a palm branch (fig. 13).

We have recovered about 100 ancient coins, among them several from the period of the Hasmonaean dynasty. Some of the Hasmonean coins bear an inscription “Yehonathan High Priest, friend of the Jews” (fig. 14). The obverse side shows the picture of a cornucopia with a pomegranate in the center. Other coins were minted by Alexander Jannaeus. One side has the design of an anchor and the other side a star.

We also found a gold coin minted by Napoleon III in 1858, minted a few years prior to the date non-Moslems were permitted to visit the Temple Mount (fig. 15).

Some additional finds:

- A bronze flower-shaped medallion that might have been a ceremonial object or an ornament for horses in the Assyrian armies (fig. 16).

- A fragment of a figurine from the First Temple Period (fig. 17).

- A fragment of an ostraca – a potsherd with an inked inscription, showing the letter “mem” in ancient Hebrew script (fig. 18).

- A Scytho-Iranian arrowhead, of the type used by Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylonian army that destroyed the First Temple in 586 BCE. Very few such arrowheads have been found in Jerusalem (fig. 19).

- A bronze arrowhead from the Hellenistic period. It is possibly a remnant left by the Seleucid forces that were stationed in the Akra fortress or by the soldiers of Shimon the Maccabee, who liberated the Temple Mount (fig. 20).

- A fragment of an alabaster cosmetic dish from the Post-Exilic or Persian Period. Additional alabaster vessels fragments have been found, most of them typical of the Second Temple Period, but one of them appears to date back to the Late Bronze Age (fig. 21).

- An ivory comb, apparently from the Second Temple Period. Similar combs have been found at Qumran (where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found) and it is probable that they were used in preparation for ritual purification in a mikveh (ritual bath), prior to entering the Temple courts (fig. 22).

- A tiny ceramic flask, apparently used for precious liquids, possibly perfumes. It is mould-made and is ornamented on both sides with human images: One side shows a helmeted soldier’s head and the other side shows a head with coiffed hair. At present, we do not know which period this most unique find stems from (fig. 23).

- A clay statuette of a goat’s head with remains of reddish tint. The texture of the figure’s back indicates that it was attached to another object. It appears that wood horns or horns made out of some other material were attached to the head. This item could be from the Roman Period but requires further examination (fig. 24).
• We have numerous wall-mosaic tesserae from the Byzantine or Early Arabic Period. They are made of glass and some have a golden foil (fig. 25).

• A fragment of a zoomorphic statuette from the early Arab period (fig. 26).

• A silver signet ring with an Arabic inscription reading Abed Ahmad (fig. 27).

• A silver amulet with an image of Christopher and Jesus with the Jordan River in the background - possibly from the 16-17 cent (fig. 28).

• A bronze pendant engraved with Christian emblems. The front shows rays of light that represent divine abundance. Other symbols are a chalice, ears of grain and a lamb sitting on the book of Revelations with seven seals. On the center of the obverse is the Holy Grail with the Crown of Thorns around it; on the side register are a hammer and a forceps. At the bottom are what seem to be three nails (fig. 29).

Among our additional finds are many pieces of gold, bronze, silver and bone jewelry. Some of them are of great aesthetic value but only further study will enable us to date them.

**Summary**: A large number of varied items have been discovered until now. The work has strengthened our conviction that this project is of great importance. It is worth noting that no pottery find from the Temple Mount has ever been published. Our work emphasizes the historical importance of the Temple Mount and has begun to expose some of the secrets of this important site. Unfortunately, the material has been removed from its original location and was disarranged several times. This causes great difficulty when it comes to establishing the date of the finds.

This is the first time such a project has ever been carried out by archaeologists. The Temple Mount is an archaeological site that has been active for thousands of years. It has been a focal point for millions of people. A project of this sort, aimed at gathering information gaps regarding human activity at this unique and revered site can only be done in an apolitical archaeological project such as this one. Your kind support has enabled us to advance this important work.
Figure 18.

Figure 19.

Figure 20.

Figure 21.