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ל'תשרי/תשס"ט

4th Progress Report on the Temple Mount Antiquities Salvage Operation

To date, tens of thousands of people and groups have joined in the effort to sift through the rubble and uncover the secrets of the Temple Mount. In the history of archaeological research there was never an excavation that has involved so many people. The project has taken on a life of its own and ceased to be a task for an elite group of archaeologists, rather, it has become the duty and privilege of the entire Jewish people. The educational impact of the sifting project is immeasurable.

With over 20,000 volunteers and visitors last year alone, we needed to upgrade the number of staff members and positions. We established a unique group of instructors and trained them to give the best guidance possible to every type of group. We installed new facilities at the site to suite the large groups, and improved the sifting methods.

Many of the volunteers were part of special educational programs organized and sponsored by the Ir-David Foundation. Among them were programs that brought 10,000 high-school students from all parts of Israeli society, and programs that brought Bar/Bat Mitzvah age children and their parents to the site in order to provide them a framework of joint effort to connect them to their heritage. In addition, many Birthright groups participated in the project. Many VIPs came with their families. Some were Israeli Knesset Members or US congressmen who were exposed to the story of the Antiquities destruction on the Temple Mount for the first time.

The latest discovery: As we were writing this report we found a rare silver half shekel coin, minted by the Temple authorities during the First Revolt, in 66/67 C.E. This type of coin was specially minted for contributions to the Temple in the end of the Second Temple Period (see Exodus 30:11-15).



Silver Half-Shekel coin. Obverse: A chalice from the Temple topped by the letter aleph, which means "First year". Around the perimeter is inscribed "Half a Shekel". Reverse: A stem with three pomegranates surrounded by the words "Holy Jerusalem".

In the last update we mentioned finding multi-colored stone slabs of various geometrical shapes. Since then we have found scores of these. According to parallel finds in other Herodian sites, we realized that they date to the Second Temple Period, and were used as part of the "opus sectile" technique of floor tiling during the early Roman period. Josephus wrote "The open court was from end to end variegated with paving of all manner of stones" (War V, V.2). This description is now finally understood thanks to our finds, and we can now reconstruct the pavement techniques and patterns of the Second Temple court floors!



A sample of flooring slabs found in the Sifting Project that were used to pave the Temple courts.

In addition to these, we continue to recover many special finds including:

- Two more Egyptian scarabs from the Middle and Late Bronze ages.
- More pieces of pottery from the First Temple period with chiseled markings on them.
- More fragments of figurines that were smashed during the end of the First Temple period, including a bottom part of a pillar shaped Astrate figurine.
- Another unique silver coin from the Persian period.
- Fragments of prestigious alabaster vessels from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods.
- A coin of Antiochus the IV Epiphanes (from the story of Chanukah). The coin preserved in a very rare perfect condition, and looks new.
- More fragments of mosaic floors from the Second Temple period.
- And many more objects that will be published in the future.

Research Progress

We began to process the large quantity of the finds, and it may take several years until we are able to publish the final data. We sampled soil from other sites in Jerusalem in order to create statistical control groups for comparative quantitative analysis to the data from the Temple Mount. We took debris from the City of David, the slopes of the Western Hill, the area near Zion gate, debris that originates from near the western city wall and debris that originates from near the Lions' gate.

We started analyzing the many bones we found, and came out with some initial very interesting results. Among them were fox bones. This made us recall the saying in the book of Lamentations (5: 18) that describes the Temple Mount after the Temple will be destroyed as follows:

“For the mountain of Zion, which is desolate, the foxes walk upon it”

The Talmud relates that Rabbi Akiva's fellow Rabbis were astonished when they saw him laugh as he saw foxes running amongst the destroyed Temple Mount. Why was he so happy? He responded that now that he saw this part of the prophecy being fulfilled, he was certain that Zecharia's prophecy about the return to Zion would also be fulfilled (Makkot 24b).

The Fox bones that we have found still need further analysis and we will try to date them using Carbon 14 tests. Only such tests will enable us to know if we have remnants of the foxes seen by Rabbi Akiba.