

# 2,000-year-old fortress unearthed in Jerusalem after century-long search

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**Acra fortification, built by Hanukkah villain Antiochus IV Epiphanes, maintained Seleucid Greek control over Temple until its conquest by Hasmoneans in 141 BCE**



In what archaeologists are describing as “a solution to one of the great archaeological riddles in the history of Jerusalem,” researchers with the Israel Antiquities Authority announced Tuesday that they have found the remnants of a fortress used by the Seleucid Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes in his siege of Jerusalem in 168 BCE.

A section of fortification was discovered under the Givati parking lot in the City of David south of the Old City walls and the Temple Mount. The fortification is believed to have been part of a system of defenses known as the Acra fortress, built by Antiochus as he sought to quell a Jewish priestly rebellion centered on the Temple.

Antiochus is remembered in the Jewish tradition as the villain of the Hanukkah holiday who sought to ban Jewish religious rites, sparking the Maccabean revolt.

The Acra fortress was used by his Seleucids to oversee the Temple and maintain control over Jerusalem. The fortress was manned by Hellenized Jews, who many scholars believe were then engaged in a full-fledged civil war with traditionalist Jews represented by the Maccabees. Mercenaries paid by Antiochus rounded out the force.



*Lead sling stones and bronze arrowheads stamped with the symbol of the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, evidence of the attempts to conquer the Acra citadel in Jerusalem's City of David in Maccabean days. (Clara Amit/courtesy the Israel Antiquities Authority)*

The site will be opened to the public by the Hanukkah holiday, which this year begins the evening of December 6, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced.

The discovery of the Acra's foundations ends over a century of intense speculation over its location, the archaeologists said Tuesday. The fortress is mentioned in the Book of Maccabees I and II, and by the Roman-era Jewish historian Josephus.

The archaeological record from the period of Seleucid Greek control of Jerusalem is scant, a fact that contributed to the difficulty in resolving the longstanding mystery.



*Remains of the Acra citadel and tower in the City of David in Jerusalem. (Assaf Peretz/courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority)*



But in recent months, researchers digging at the site slowly unearthed a massive wall, the base of a tower “with impressive proportions,” 20 meters (66 feet) long and fully four meters (13 feet) wide, the IAI said. The wall’s outer base was coated with a layer of dust, stones and plaster, a slippery slope deliberately added to the wall to make it difficult for attackers to scale it.

The dig, which has been ongoing for the past 10 years, also uncovered lead sling stones, bronze arrowheads and stones shot by a ballista, an ancient catapult. The ballista stones were stamped with the image of a pitchfork, the symbol of Antiochus’s reign. Coins found at the spot were dated from the reign of aforementioned Antiochus IV Epiphanes to the reign of Antiochus VII Sidetes, who died in 129 BCE.

The finds were “silent remnants of the battles that took place there in the days of the Hasmoneans,” the priestly family that led the Maccabean rebellion, the archaeologists said.



*Lead sling stones and bronze arrowheads stamped with the symbol of the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, evidence of the attempts to conquer the Acra citadel in Jerusalem’s City of David in Maccabean days. (Clara Amit/courtesy the Israel Antiquities Authority)*

The Acra fortress remained a symbolic and strategic foothold of Seleucid power in Jerusalem until it was finally conquered by Simon Maccabeus in 141 BCE, after a long siege during which the Hasmonean king essentially starved out the Greek defenders.

“This sensational discovery allows us for the first time to reconstruct the layout of settlement and the actual look of the city on the eve of the Hasmonean revolt,” the excavation’s directors Dr. Doron Ben-Ami, Yana Tchekhanovets and Salome Cohen were quoted as saying.

“The new archaeological finds testify to the establishment of a properly fortified stronghold constructed on the high bedrock cliff overlooking the steep slopes of the City of David hill,” they said. “This stronghold controlled all means of approach to the Temple, and cut the Temple off from the southern parts of the city. The many coins dating from the reign of Antiochus IV [Epiphanes] to that of Antiochus VII [Sidetes] and the large number of wine jars (amphorae) that were imported from the

Aegean region to Jerusalem and were found at the site bear witness to the citadel's age, as well as to the non-Jewish identity of its inhabitants.”



*Archaeologists work near remains of the Acra citadel and tower in the City of David in Jerusalem. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)*

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