

Antiquities Authority attempts to solve mystery of Tomb of the Maccabees

In an effort to solve one of Jewish history's greatest mysteries, the Israel Antiquities Authority recently sought to find the long lost Tomb of the Maccabees, believed to be located near Modi'in, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Considering such a search to be of the highest national and scientific importance, the authority recruited volunteers to aid them to finally solve the riddle surrounding the final resting place of the renowned ancient Jewish warriors.

According to historical sources, the Maccabees – Matityahu the Hasmonean and his five sons, from the ancient city of Modi'in – led the uprising against Greek rule and were responsible for cleansing the impurity from the Second Temple.



“The aim of the archaeological excavation was to determine if there is any substance to the legends and stories that have sprung up around the Horbat Ha-Gardi site, located a short distance from the city of Modi'in, and whose name is associated with the Tomb of the Maccabees,” said IAA spokeswoman Yoli Shwartz on Monday.

The Tomb of the Maccabees was described in two ancient books by

Josephus Flavius as a tall, impressive structure, surrounded by columns, built of fine stones, and covered with pyramid-like roofs, overlooking the sea.

The proximity of the Horbat Ha-Gardi site to the Arab village of Al-Midya, and the similarity of the name of the village and that of ancient Modi'in, first attracted archaeologists and scholars to it 150 years ago, said Shwartz.

“Some of them documented the site in their writings and drawings, and some even succeeded in carrying out excavations there,” she said. The latter, Shwartz noted, revealed an imposing mausoleum borne atop enormous pillars that supported huge stone slabs, above which was likely a second story.

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“Magnificent burial vaults were discovered at the bottom of the structure,” she added.

“The excitement was intense, and the first researchers even issued a written pronouncement stating: ‘Indeed, there is no room for doubt. I found the Tomb of the Maccabees, and the tunnel I exposed held the ashes of Matityahu... The ruins of the tomb correspond perfectly to the Tomb of the Maccabees as described in the historical sources.’”



Shwartz said the enthusiasm of those early explorers was initially dampened by a French archaeologist named Charles Clermont-Ganneau, whose excavations at the site revealed mosaics adorned with a cross in the floors of the burial vaults.

The discovery led him to believe it was Christian in nature.

However, Clermont-Ganneau added an important caveat: “It is possible that this structure was built by the Christians, so as to commemorate the burial place of the Holy Maccabees, since they were exalted saints in the eyes of Christianity. It is quite possible that in the future unequivocal evidence will be found indicating the site is the place where the Maccabees were buried.”

Nonetheless, following the publication of Clermont-Ganneau’s encouraging report, the site was abandoned and has remained deserted.

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On Monday, Amit Re'em and Dan Shachar, the excavation directors on behalf of the IAA, issued a statement rekindling hope that the tomb at the site may indeed be for the Maccabees.

“There is no doubt that the structure that was uncovered is unusual,” they said.

“The descriptions from 150 years ago were revealed right here in front of our eyes, and we discovered the magnificent burial vaults, enormous pillars that apparently supported a second story, a forecourt that led to the tomb, and other associated buildings.”

To their disappointment, they added that the building analyzed by their predecessors had been robbed, and its stones taken to construct settlements in the vicinity, precluding them from drawing a formal conclusion.

“The archaeological evidence currently at hand is still insufficient to establish that this is the burial place of the Maccabees,” they said.

“If what we uncovered is not the Tomb of the Maccabees itself, then there is a high probability that this is the site that early Christianity identified as the royal funerary enclosure, and therefore, perhaps, erected the structure.”

Still, the archaeologists said they have not given up hope.

“One cannot rule out the assumptions of the past, but an excavation and a lot of hard work are still required in order to confirm that assumption unequivocally,” they said. “The riddle remains unsolved – the search for the elusive Tomb of the Maccabees continues.”

To enlist the public in their ongoing search, the IAA is holding an open event for children and adults based on the Tomb of the Maccabees at the excavation site during Succot from September 29-30, between 10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

The event is being coordinated with the Jewish National Fund and the Hevel Modi'in Local Council.