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Did the Kingdom of David Exist? New Wall Found in Southern Israel Reignites Debate

A new find – a fortified wall in Lachish – proves the Kingdom of Israel and Judah was already vast in the 10th century, says the archaeologist who located it. But skeptics disagree

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The site of the excavation at Tel Lachish, April 22, 2019. Credit: Emil Aladjem

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immemorial. The question on archaeologists' minds was whether the ancient settlement, excavated numerous times in the last 80 years, was a fortified city in the time of King Rehoboam. Now new discoveries indicate that it may have been exactly that, and may support the biblical narrative. But not everyone is buying it.

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The earliest-known mention of Lachish is in the Amarna letters, a series of diplomatic exchanges on clay tablets from the 14th century B.C.E. – the Bronze Age, according to archaeologists, or the Canaanite period, going by the Bible. The letters were found accidentally by an Egyptian field worker in the 19th century. They had been sent from the land of Israel to the Egyptian king at the time, and indicate that Lachish was a large, powerful city in the Shefela, the Judean foothills and plain.



A map of Tel Lachish

However, Lachish would be destroyed in the 12th century B.C.E., only to make an appearance again in the books of Chronicles. There it is described as one of the cities fortified by King Rehoboam, who ruled Judah in roughly the 10th century B.C.E., around 400 years after the Amarna letters:

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“And Rehoboam dwelt in Jerusalem, and built cities for defence in Judah: He built even Beth-lehem, and Etam, and Tekoa, and Beth-zur, and Soco, and Adullam, and Gath, and Mareshah, and Ziph, and Adoraim, and Lachish, and Azekah, and Zorah, and Aijalon, and Hebron, which are in Judah and in Benjamin, fortified cities.” 2 Chronicles 11:5-10.

In all the excavations of Lachish, there were no signs of a fortified city during Rehoboam's day – until now. Speaking at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's archaeology conference two weeks ago, Prof. Yossi Garfinkel, head of the university's Institute of Archaeology, described the discovery of a previously unknown wall. Based on carbon dating of olive pits found there, the wall dates exactly to Rehoboam's time.

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 established around the year 920 B.C.E.," Garfinkel says.



The recently uncovered wall at Tel Lachish, which was dated to the late 10th century B.C.E. Credit: אמיל אלגם

This discovery heralds the return of the raging argument over the link between biblical texts and finds in the field. The key battle in Israeli archaeological circles has narrowed in recent years to whether the United Monarchy of Israel and Judah ruled by David and Solomon from Jerusalem in the 10th century B.C.E. really existed, and if so, what it was like.

Traditionalists claim the biblical descriptions of a powerful kingdom in the Judean hills do exist. Critics (the minimalist school) point at "unbridgeable" gaps between the biblical texts and actual archaeological finds.

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A pivotal question is what the towns in Shefelat Yehuda were really like 3,000 years ago. This is believed that the small kingdom ruled from Jerusalem would have expanded into this area first.

Lachish is a two-day walk from Jerusalem. If was fortified in the late 10th century B.C.E., that could attest that a United Monarchy under David and Solomon was already growing when that century began. Critics say that the Kingdom of Judah only began to expand and wield influence in the 9th century B.C.E.

The rise of Rehoboam

"During the Late Bronze Age, Lachish was a very large, grand Canaanite city. Then in the 12th century B.C.E., it was destroyed, and stood waste for 200 or 250 years," says Garfinkel. "The big question for research in the city is what happened in Layer 5 [that corresponds to the early period] of the Iron Age: Is that a fortified city, or a village? If it was a city, when was it built? Some say, in the time of David and Solomon, in the early 10th century. Others think it was only built in the late 9th century."

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He began searching for a wall that would be typical of fortifications – thick and strong. “We looked in three places, and ultimately, in the northern section, we found a wall between Layer 6 and Layer 4. Later the excavators reached a floor that stretches to the wall, which could be dated using olive pits found beneath the floors. Samples of the pits were sent to the particle accelerator at Oxford, which ruled that the wall had been built around 920 B.C.E., which was exactly the rule of Rehoboam, son of Solomon and grandson of David.”

Garfinkel is used to being in the eye of the storm. He is the one who excavated [Khirbet Qeiyafa](#), a small fort in the Elah Valley in Judah on the border of Philistia which was dated to the 10th century B.C.E., the days of [King David](#).

That fort proves, says Garfinkel, that the minimalists are wrong: In the days of David, the kingdom was more than a hilltop village. David’s kingdom stretched at least as far as Elah Valley, he argues. However, [not everyone agrees](#).

Once done digging in Qeiyafa, Garfinkel turned his attention to Lachish. He believes that the discovery of the wall and its dating now enable us to create a precise timeline of the Jerusalemite kingdom’s development.

Garfinkel says there is one aspect which the minimalist and maximalists (those who believe the biblical version of events) agree on, but he does not: That the kingdom arose suddenly. He believes it had to have happened over time. “I say it was a gradual process, and now I can see it,” he asserts.

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Garfinkel’s timeline begins with a political entity established by David in Hebron, where he ruled for seven years. David then set out to conquer Jerusalem. Having achieved that, he built the fort at Qeiyafa, a day’s walk from Jerusalem.

It would be at the next stage that David’s grandson would build the fort at Lachish, two days’ walk from Jerusalem.

Then, Rehoboam’s heirs living in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C.E. spread to a distance of three days’ walk from Jerusalem, to Arad and Be’er Sheva.

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accusing them of rushing to publish working hypotheses without seeing them through in order to get onto the tenure track.

Maybe it was Canaanite

Tel Aviv University's Prof. Nadav Na'aman, of the minimalist camp, is a lot less impressed by the wall discovered in Lachish. He suggests waiting for a peer-reviewed publication of the find and explains that even if fortifications found in Lachish do date to the 10th century B.C.E., that does not prove that a great Kingdom of Judah existed at the time.

Na'aman points out the list of Rehoboam's fortifications cited in the bible is incorrect. "Azeka was thoroughly excavated and wasn't even settled at that time. Nothing was found in Mareshah and Bethlehem. One could argue that regarding others [on the list], we don't know because they haven't been excavated yet," he says.

But most importantly, Na'aman rejects Garfinkel's interpretation of Qeiyafa, and therefore of Lachish as well.

"The assumption that by the end of the 10th century B.C.E., Lachish belonged to Judah relies on the interpretation of Qeiyafa," he argues. "I claim that Qeiyafa is a local Canaanite site and had nothing whatsoever to do with Judah and Jerusalem."

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He says that the thick wall at Lachish, like at Qeiyafa, reveals nothing about who actually built it. The credit may not belong to the kings of Judah in Jerusalem but to the Philistine king ruling from Gath, or maybe somebody else entirely.

Na'aman doesn't think that Judah is even the likeliest candidate: "In the 10th century B.C.E., Judah was still very peripheral, and very weak. It only began to gain strength in the 9th century B.C.E.," he says.

Meanwhile, the digging at Lachish has uncovered another important find: A clay four-horned altar. It dates to later than the wall, roughly the 8th or 7th century B.C.E., and is the oldest known altar of its kind found in Judah so far. What it attests is that the Jews of the Judah did not confine their worship rituals to the temple in Jerusalem.



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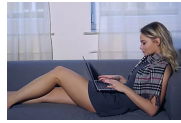
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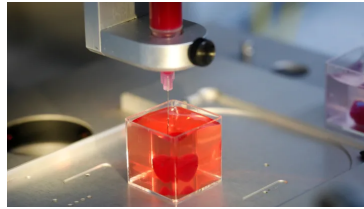
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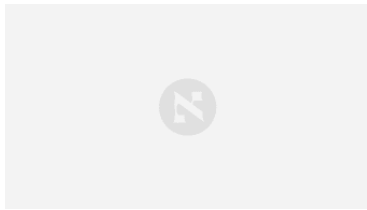
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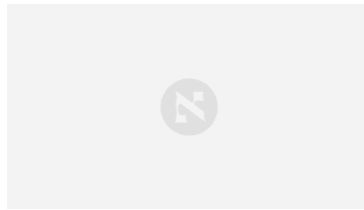
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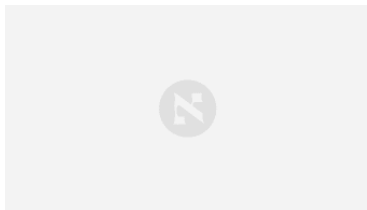
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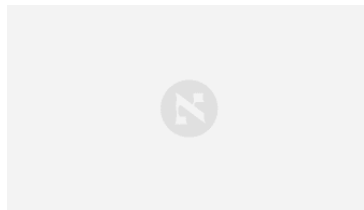
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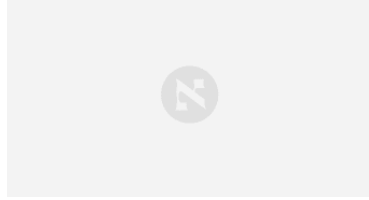
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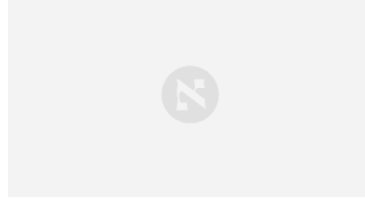
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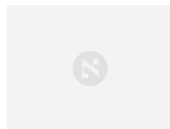
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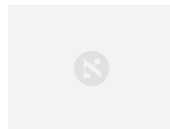
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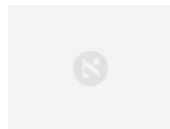
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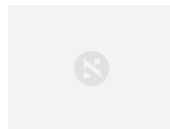
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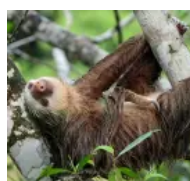
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