



# Diggin' the Holy City

## Mount Zion Excavation Reveals Tale of Many Civilizations

By James Hathaway

Jerusalem, rich in culture, history and historical conflict, is the spiritual capital of the Western world. Since 2007, a large, complex archaeological excavation has been conducted there under the direction of UNC Charlotte, the only non-Israeli university currently authorized to be digging in the holy city. Like Jerusalem, it is an archaeological investigation perhaps unlike any other.

The site is located at the city's Mount Zion, near the Zion Gate and under the Old City Wall. It is a project envisioned and directed by UNC Charlotte Visiting Professor of History Shimon Gibson, a widely respected archaeologist on the Middle East, and Professor of Religious Studies James Tabor, an authority on the area's religious history.

The dig has about 80 volunteer participants who work two-week shifts for a month during

the summer. Most years, 15 to 20 UNC Charlotte students participate through an education-abroad program, though the project has become so popular in recent years that it is now drawing participants from around the world, with a mixture of ages and backgrounds, from students to retirees.

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before dawn, meeting at 5 a.m. to trudge through the narrow streets of the ancient city to the site. They pass through Zion Gate; its stones are still pockmarked by bullet holes from when the Arabs and Israelis battled for control of the city in the 1967 Six-Day War.

It's a place that resonates with all kinds of history. Within a stone's throw of the dig is

the traditional tomb of David, hero of the Bible and the city's great king, and the room where Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Last Supper before the passion and crucifixion. Also close are the ruins of Byzantine emperor Justinian's great Nea Ekklesia church as well as a modern apartment rented by David Koresh before he went to Texas to tragically lead the Branch Davidian sect.

"In Jerusalem, you can still touch stones that Jesus certainly walked upon and some of the structures and wall he knew," Tabor mused one morning on the walk this summer. "Of course, most of these are now buried several meters beneath the streets," he noted, pointing to a section of the Roman-era city wall that had been excavated below the roadway.

With so much big history all around, it is easy to see why an opportunity to dig down into the ground and touch it — to uncover original stones and artifacts once built and touched by people involved in major historical

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Photo by Rachel Ward

The mikveh, a Jewish ceremonial bathing pool, is attached to a bathroom used for pre-cleansing.

Pictured is one of multiple dig teams composed of staff and volunteers from the Charlotte community and around the world. Far left is Levine Scholar alum and current graduate student Kevin Caldwell. Center front (black shirt) is UNC Charlotte College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Dean Nancy Gutierrez.





Here is the 2015 Mount Zion excavation site as seen from Jerusalem's city wall.

events — can be irresistible, and why so many volunteers gladly put up with the dust, the heat and the hard, hard work.

The diggers come down the hillside from Zion Gate every morning as the sun first starts peeking golden over the spires on the Mount of Olives and the excavation gates are unlocked. They walk with a kind of spring in their step that has nothing to do with the strong Turkish coffee they have been drinking. These folks include UNC Charlotte students and alumni, professional archaeologists and retirees, donors and successful business people, dig novices and archaeology veterans. Everyone is enthusiastic because the dig is an adventure they are sharing.

### TANTALIZING HISTORICAL AREA

At the project's start, no one really knew what the excavation would find. When Gibson and Tabor received a license to excavate from the Israeli Antiquities Authority in 2000, they began to get an inkling of the potential. But full-scale operations did not begin until 2007 because of

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political tensions and unrest in the city.

Information about the area was sketchy but tantalizing. The site was a vacant strip of land that a renowned Israeli historian and archaeologist named Magen Broshi had probed in the 1970s as part of a large series of digs to survey what might lie buried just beyond the city's 16th-century Turkish walls. Broshi's findings were unpublicized, but Gibson had observed the excavations as a child and remembered that some ruins of buildings had been partially uncovered.

Though the site's contents were unknown, Gibson and Tabor suspected the site might contain something important. "It may look like a vacant out-of-the-way spot in our time, but Jerusalem and its walls have shifted around over the millennia," noted Tabor. "Back in the time of

Herod, this was at the center of things."

Through the ages, many important buildings had been close by. The palace of the Jewish high priest Caiaphas (or of Annas, his father-in-law) was reported to be there in the time of Jesus. Byzantine emperor Justinian's huge cathedral, Nea Ekklesia, was on the hillside above in the sixth century, and a massive Ayyubid Tower, built by Saladin's nephew, was there in the 13th century.

Further, the site was on a fairly steep slope immediately below the once destroyed and later rebuilt city wall, which meant that a lot of detritus was likely to have fallen (or been pushed) from above, burying abandoned buildings during periods of destruction or construction. Unlike most places in the old city, original structures



here might have been buried and preserved while historical change occurred above them.

When UNC Charlotte began full-scale digs in 2007, excavators found a complex of ruins more extensive than anyone had dared believe would be there, representing a variety of historical periods — first-century Herodian Roman, sixth-century Byzantine and later Islamic times. The investigators also found an archaeological situation of astounding complexity.

Gibson notes that the oldest houses in the area

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Excavation staffer Pamela Cass recovered this Roman-era coin with a hand-held metal detector. The site has yielded coins from all layers — Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Crusader and Ottoman — as well as broken ceramics and artifacts such as a carved stone ceremonial cup.

were first-century homes abruptly abandoned when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70 because of a Jewish revolt. "The ruined field of first-century houses in our area remained there intact up until the beginning of the Byzantine period (early fourth century)," Gibson said. "When the Byzantine inhabitants built there, they leveled things off a bit, but they used the same plan of the older houses, building their walls on top of the older walls."

Sixth-century Byzantine emperor Justinian contributed another layer of preservation when he completed the construction of Nea Ekklesia up the hillside from the site. Construction involved excavation of enormous underground reservoirs, and workers dumped excavation fill downhill, burying the more recent Byzantine construction.

"The area got submerged," Gibson said. "The early Byzantine reconstruction of these two-story, early Roman houses then got buried under rubble and soil fills. Then they established new buildings above it. That's why we found an unusually well-preserved set of stratigraphic levels."

The situation is even more complex than that because the area is a hillside. Some first-century structures appear to be at a higher level than some structures that are clearly Byzantine and built centuries later. "In many places, reverse stratigraphy is going on," Gibson noted. "There is a hodgepodge of levels." The site is a puzzle of historical levels, reflecting not only a complex history but complex topography and changes to the landscape.

### EXAMINING EACH SHOVELFUL

Buried in it all is an amazing cultural story that must be sifted out and carefully analyzed, yard by yard. Doing this is an amazing amount of hot, dusty work. Volunteer staffers carefully excavate everything by hand, examining each shovelful for artifacts. They put rocks and soil in buckets to be carried out of the holes by hand to "ballots," fabric bags that hold about a ton of material apiece.

"We measure our diggers by how many ballots they remove," Tabor said. "It's usually about 30 a day." If anything significant is found, the digging slows and the ground is excavated centimeter by centimeter. Every 10 centimeters or so, digging stops, workers take pictures and samples for analysis and run metal detectors across the spot to locate small artifacts that might be hiding in the soil.

In a section excavated this summer by a

team under the supervision of UNC Charlotte Levine Scholar alum Kevin Caldwell (known affectionately to his older crew as "Rat Boss"), the work was particularly slow and careful. The first layers of Caldwell's area were mainly fill but soon the soil transitioned to discrete, undisturbed layers, which might have been missed if digging had not been extremely careful. A few more centimeters down, the diggers uncovered fish bones, clamshells and fish hooks. Lots of them.

The significant find may support theories other archaeologists have made about the area. A bit after Saladin liberated the city from the Crusaders in the 12th century, there may have been a gate in this section of the city wall, archaeologists think, and perhaps a fish market outside the gate — hence the bones, hooks and clamshells, all of which would have come with imported fish. The site also has yielded some large stones that may be remnants of this fabled gate.

In layers below the fish items, the excavators have found evidence of Crusaders — diverse artifacts, pig bones (a dead giveaway the inhabitants were not Muslim), a glass earring, distinctive medieval horseshoe nails from northern France and some other odd little bits of metal. Site field director Rafi Lewis identified several of metal pieces as tongues of belt buckles.

"These are classic conflict artifacts," Lewis noted. "When people fight, they grapple with each other and pull on sword belts and the belt metal snaps off." The tiny rusted pieces may be an archaeological record of a famous battle between the occupying Crusaders and the army of Saladin.

Going down by centimeters, the site is packed with physical evidence of Jerusalem's robust history. "We have found material on this site from every historical period from the Herodian Roman through the Byzantine, from the Umayyads through the Crusaders, from the Ayyubids through the Ottomans," Gibson noted. Though there are not plans to dig deeper, the team has even found older material from the late Iron Age.

Gibson and Tabor predict at least two more seasons of digging at Mount Zion. With significant discoveries in the area in addition to their own, they hope the location will some day be turned into an archaeological park, a place where the site's unique features offer people a "walk through history." Stay tuned! ●

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