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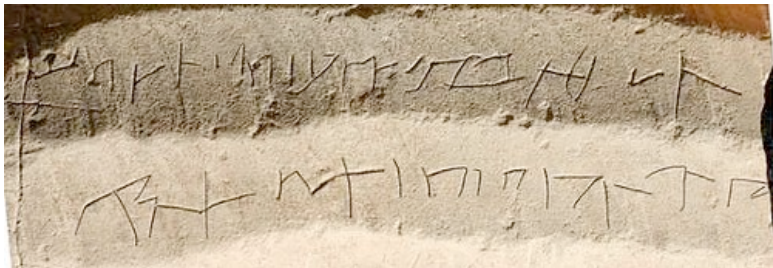
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2,000-year-old ritual cup found in Old City of Jerusalem

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James Tabor / University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Two lines of text on the limestone cup. The text isn't eroded but researchers have been unable to decipher it; the inscription is deliberately cryptic. They do know it contains the Hebrew word for God, YHWH or Yahweh.

The 10 lines of Aramaic or Hebrew script on the artifact is 'unprecedented,' an archaeologist says. Researchers are not yet able to decipher it.

By Thomas H. Maugh II
August 1, 2009

U.S. archaeologists have found an extremely rare 2,000-year-old limestone cup inscribed with 10 lines of Aramaic or Hebrew script near the Zion Gate of the Old City of Jerusalem.

Such ritual cups are common, especially in areas that were inhabited by priests, but usually they are unmarked or bear only a single line of text, such as a name, said archaeologist Shimon Gibson of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who led the dig along with James Tabor of the same school.

"To have 10 lines of text is unprecedented," he said in announcing the find Wednesday.

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FOR THE RECORD:

Ritual cup: An article in Saturday's Section A about a 2,000-year-old cup found in Jerusalem's Old City said that the Roman emperor Titus attacked the city in AD 70. Titus led the charge as general, but his father, Vespasian, was emperor then. —

Although the script itself is not eroded or otherwise degraded, he said, researchers are not yet able to decipher it because the text is in an informal cursive script and is apparently deliberately cryptic. They know it contains the Hebrew word for God, YHWH or Yahweh, indicating it was probably important to the priests who used it in rituals. Gibson expected it to take two to six months to understand its meaning.

The team has been digging in the Gan Sobev Homot Yerushalayim national park

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since June 14.

The site, overlooking the Kidron and Hinnom valleys and the Mount of Olives, had not been excavated since the 1970s, when Israeli archaeologist Magen Broshi found a monumental Arabic inscription from the 13th century.

The new dig has produced a sequence of building remains dating from the founding of the Temple -- the center of ancient Judaism -- by King Solomon in 970 BC through the Early Islamic Period, which ended with the destruction of the Old City by Crusaders in AD 1099.

From the Second Temple Period, from 573 BC to AD 70, a housing complex with a mikvah or purification pool with a remarkably well-preserved vaulted ceiling was found. Inside the house were three bread ovens dating to AD 70, the year the Roman emperor Titus and his troops sacked the city.

This area was believed to be a priestly habitat, confirmed by the discovery of 10 murex snail shells used to produce the ox-blood-red argaman dye used on priestly garments.

On the level immediately above this, the researchers found the remains of a fire pit made by someone who stayed on the site shortly after its destruction.

They also found a large arched building with a mosaic floor from the Byzantine Period (AD 135 to 638) that was preserved to a height of about 10 feet. They believe it is part of the building complex or a street associated with the nearby Church of St. Mary.

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