

A Fortress Unearthed

The Beis Hamikdash was rededicated, but the battle continued

The excavation of a destroyed fortress that belonged to the Seleucid military forces—the *Yevanim* of Chanukah—brings the battle to life after more than 2,000 years. The Israel Antiquities Authority recently announced the excavation, saying the Seleucids likely used this fortress to defend the Hellenistic city Maresha against the *Chashmonaim*.

Chanukah celebrates the rededication of the *Beis Hamikdash* by Yehudah Hamaccabi in 164 BCE, but that was by no means the end of the story—or the fighting. Soon



Early archaeological work at the site of the fortress. Credit: Emil Aljam/Israel Antiquities Authority

One of Yochanan's major campaigns involved the area called Idumea, which was essentially the northern Negev.

after the apparent victory of the Maccabees, the Seleucid forces convinced elements of the Jewish population to accept a promise of religious freedom in return for amnesty. This led to the expulsion of Yehudah and his soldiers from Yerushalayim, though they fought valiantly in the hills.

In 160 BCE, Yehudah was killed in battle, and his brother Yonasan succeeded him. By 152 BCE, Yonasan had played two competing Seleucid pretenders against one another and received recognition as *kohen gadol* and ruler; he was accepted by both the Syrians and the Jews. This was the beginning of the Chashmonean Empire.

Yonasan was assassinated by another Syrian pretender and was succeeded in 143 BCE by his brother Shimon, who dislodged the symbolic Seleucid force from its fortress in Yerushalayim, achieving true independence. Shimon was assassinated in 134 BCE by his own son-in-law, but his son, Yochanan Kohen Gadol (John Hyrcanus), succeeded him and ruled until 104 BCE, when he died a natural death.

Throughout the years of rule by Yonasan, Shimon and Yochanan, the Chashmonean rulers continuously worked to expand the territory of Judea along the seacoast, to the north, and to the south. Their goal was to create a geographically and economically viable state that included all the areas historically occupied by Jews. One of Yochanan's major campaigns involved the area called Idumea,



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The discovered fortress
Credit: Vladik Lifshitz/Israel Antiquities Authority

which was essentially the northern Negev. The name "Idumea" is related to "Edom"; descendants of the ancient Edomites migrated westward from Transjordan and occupied the northern Negev, which was part of the Seleucid Syrian Empire even after the rise of the *Chashmonaim*.

It was on a high hill overlooking the city of Maresha in northern Idumea that the remains of the fortress were discovered. The 15 x 15-meter (50 x 50-foot) building was clearly designed as a fortress, as can be seen from its architectural features and parallels with other Hellenistic-period fortresses. The external walls are at least three meters (almost ten feet) wide and built of very large stones, intended to withstand battering rams and large stone projectiles. The outer walls were protected by a sloping surface



Saar Ganor, director of the excavations at the fortress, sifting for artifacts

constructed to prevent the walls of the fortress from being scaled and penetrated by enemies. The building was at least two stories high, probably about five meters (16 feet).

Seven rooms were identified inside it. As was typical in ancient fortresses, numerous openings connected the rooms so that defenders could move from side to side, depending on the direction from which the enemy attacked. (A similar fortress was excavated at Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.)

Ultimately, the fortress could not hold out. Yochanan launched a series of invasions against the Seleucid Empire, taking advantage of periods of weakness. He was even able to stop paying tribute to the Seleucids. According to Josephus, Yo-



Above: A weapon found at the site.
Below: Pottery discovered in the fortress.
Credit: Davida Dagan-Eisenberg and Saar Ganor/Israel Antiquities Authority

A thick layer of ash and burnt lumber is evidence that the fort's roofing, flooring and contents were burned by the Chashmonean soldiers who overran it.

chanan subdued various parts of Samaria and then turned south, conquering cities in Idumea, including Maresha in 112 BCE.

The excavators theorize that at this point, facing overwhelming numbers of Jewish troops, the garrison stationed in the fort abandoned it. This would explain the paucity of armaments—swords and stone projectiles—found there, as well as the absence of human bones. A thick layer of ash and burned lumber is evidence that the fort's roofing, flooring and contents were burned by the Chashmonean soldiers who overran it.

The Mishnah (*Maaser Sheini* 5:15; *Sotah* 9:10) tells us of Yochanan's early commitment to *halachah*, and the Tosefta (*Sotah* 13:5) even attributes to him a quasi-prophetic vision. However, we are told (*Berachos* 29a) that in the latter part of his reign, Yochanan became a Tzeduki (Sadducean).

Yonasan had expelled the Tzedukim from the governing council because of their role in bringing about Hellenization in the period leading up to the Maccabean Revolt. It appears that they reentered the council at that time. The *Chashmonaim*, who had risen up in defense of Torah and Jewish tradition, were now sliding toward Hellenization. This eventually brought the Chashmonean Empire to a close with the Roman conquest of Judea in 63 BCE.

The newly discovered fortress is just a small piece of evidence of the details of *Bayis Sheini* history found in rabbinic sources. ●

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