

A Roman Legion
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The
discovery
of an illegal
cache of
ancient tiles
and bricks
sheds light
on a sad
chapter
in our
history

REFLECTION of ION

By Lawrence H. Schiffman

When

detectives from the serious crimes unit of the Israel Police came across some covered crates in the trunk of a car in Beit Hanina, an Arab neighborhood in northeast Yerushalayim, they never expected that they had made an archaeological discovery.

But when they opened the crates, they found a large number of 2,000-year-old tiles and bricks stamped with the emblem of the Roman Tenth Legion. Investigators from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) suggested that they might have been part of the heating plant of a bathhouse used by Roman soldiers. The owner of the car admitted that the illegally excavated items had come from a site somewhere near Chevron. Of course, the plan was to sell these antiquities on the black market.

Amir Ganor, head of the IAA Department of Theft Prevention, whose job it is to fight illegal excavations and recover the finds, lamented the fact that “for filthy lucre, people [would] deface the floor of a 2,000-year-old public building and tear up a piece of history.”

But what were these tiles and bricks doing in a bathhouse in Chevron? Sadly, the Roman Tenth Legion was intimately connected with the tragedies that befell the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael at the hands of the Roman Empire.

Legio X Fretensis, as it was known in Latin, was founded in 41 BCE by Octa-

vian, later known as Augustus Caesar. Its name, meaning the “Tenth Legion of the Strait,” probably referred to crossing the Strait of Messina, between Sicily and Italy, during one of its operations. The Tenth Legion fought in a series of battles that culminated in 31 BCE at the Battle of

Actium in west central Greece, where Octavian defeated Mark Antony and gained control of the Roman Empire. Before long, the legion was sent to Syria, where the Iranian kingdom of Parthia was pressing against the Roman Empire’s eastern border.



Archaeologists conducting excavations at the Roman Fort of Apsaros in Georgia found evidence of the Legio X Fretensis

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After a few short assignments, the legion members soon found themselves fighting the Jewish rebels in the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE. The Romans had initially conquered Eretz Yisrael as a result of the internal battle between the two brothers Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus II over who would succeed Queen Salome Alexandra (Shelomtzion, widow of Yannai Hamelech, Alexander Jannaeus) when she died in 67 BCE.

The two sons fought for control, and each eventually appealed to the Roman General Pompey, who was then in Syria, for support. Pompey decided to invade Judea and install the weaker of the brothers, Hyrcanus II, as the *kohen gadol* and to entrust him with the internal affairs of the Jewish people.

But the Romans eventually appointed Herod (Hordos) as a client king in 40 BCE. After Herod's death in 4 BCE, the Romans left his son Archeleus in power over Judea, leading to widespread protests and unrest. When Rome finally deposed Archeleus in 6 CE, the Tenth Legion was brought to Eretz Yisra-



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Tile of the Tenth Legion

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el, along with other Roman forces, to help put down the incipient revolt.

The Romans appointed a series of procurators who ruled from Caesarea, backed by Roman troops. Several inscriptions indicate that the Tenth Legion helped repair the aqueduct that supplied Caesarea with running water. These procurators were both rapacious and inconsiderate towards the Jews and their observance of Torah and *mitzvos*.

In 66 CE, the situation came to a head as a result of a pogrom in Caesarea in which, according to Josephus, some 20,000 Jews were killed by their pagan neighbors. This precipitated widespread violence throughout the country and led to Jewish rebels' initial attacks on Roman forces. It immediately became clear that two legions would be needed in Judea to suppress the revolt, and one of these, Legio X Fretensis, was summoned in full force.

Its role was central to the suppression of the Jewish revolt and to the *Churban Beis Hamikdash*. This legion participated in the conquest of Migdol (Magdala) in the Galil, a fishing village known in Greek as Tarichaea (where two ancient *shul* have recently been excavated). From there, they went north into the Golan Heights and took Gamla.

In 68 CE, after some time at Beit She'an (Scythopolis), the Tenth Legion destroyed



Inscription of the eighth cohort of the Tenth Legion (photo by Ferrell Jenkins)

a series of sites in the Judean Desert, including Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls would be discovered. It seems likely that many of the scrolls were hidden in caves as a result of the approaching Roman onslaught, although some caves had served as libraries for the sectarians who inhabited the site.

By 70 CE, the Romans had crushed the entire revolt except in Yerushalayim. Camping on Har Hazeisim, the Tenth Legion was extremely effective in the use of

various war machines that were able to propel large stones from a considerable distance, doing serious damage to the city's walls. Some five months later, by Tishah B'Av, after a horrible siege and with Jews fighting each other inside the city and even on the Har Habayis, the city had fallen and the *Beis Hamikdash* lay in ruins.

Some rebel fortresses, however, still remained to be conquered. In 71 CE, the Tenth Legion took the fortress of Herodium, originally built by King Herod as one of his palaces, and then crossed the Jordan River to capture Machaerus, an ancient Maccabean fortress that had been held by the Jewish rebels.

In 72 CE, the Tenth Legion proceeded to Masada, originally built by the *Chashmona'im* but greatly expanded by Herod. When demands for surrender were refused by the Jewish fighters, the Roman commander built a complex set of siege works that still exist, including a wall to block the rebels' escape from the fortress, a series of camps all around it, and the famous ramp that would enable the Romans to ascend. Scholars have identified two of the surrounding Roman camps as those occupied by the Tenth Legion. The sol-

The Tenth Legion had such an industrial area very close to what is now Binyanei Haumah, the convention center right across from the Central Bus Station in Yerushalayim.

diers of the Tenth would have been among the Romans who ascended the mountain, only to find that its Jewish defenders had taken their own lives.

After the revolt, the legion camped in Yerushalayim. Scholars disagree about the exact location of their camp, but it seems likely that it was southwest of the Har Habayis. One view sees it as being virtually adjacent, but other scholars see it as occupying the southwestern hill, somewhat further away from the Har Habayis itself. This would have been possible because so much of the city had been leveled. The Tenth Legion stayed in Yerushalayim to maintain the peace and as a symbol of Roman domination. Before long, a second legion was also assigned to the country.

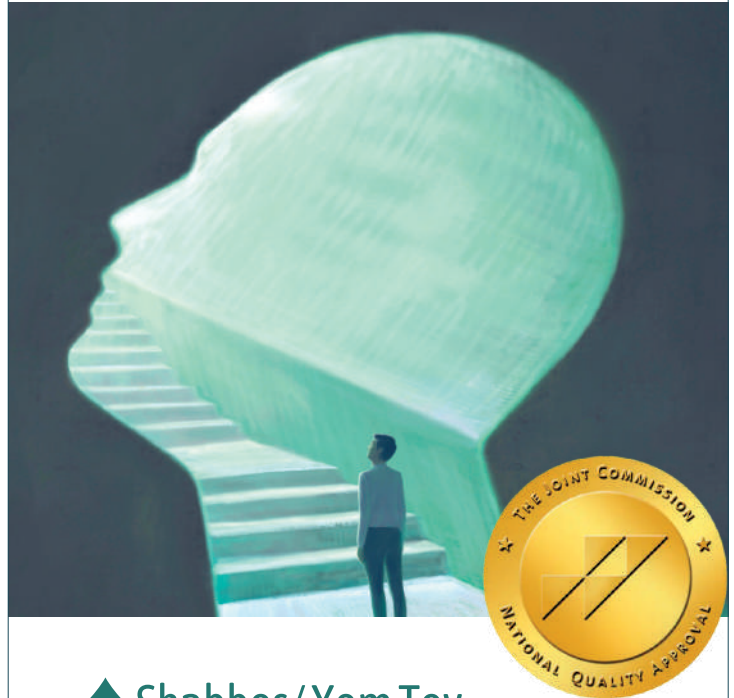
Once the Tenth Legion arrived in Yerushalayim, like all Roman legions, it had to construct a permanent camp. These camps were always built in a very particular shape and with an organized system that included temples, barracks, bath-houses, bakeries and other facilities for food preparation. Such a setup therefore required factories for the production of bricks and tiles, as well as pottery vessels that would be needed by thousands of soldiers.

A series of excavations has revealed that the Tenth Legion had such an industrial area very close to what is now Binyanei Haumah, the convention center right across from the Central Bus Station in Yerushalayim. This is most likely where the bricks and roof tiles discovered in the thief's car were manufactured. The production facilities operated from around the time of the first revolt (66-73 CE) through that of the second (132-135 CE) and beyond. Some of the pottery that was produced was extremely fancy, imitating the styles of other Roman provinces. In addition, a complex bathhouse, a bakery and even a stamp indicating first-class bread were found south of the Har Habayis, indicating that Roman soldiers occupied this area at some point.



Dozens of ancient bricks manufactured by the Tenth Legion discovered by police in the trunk of a car in Jerusalem

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Bricks found in the trunk of a car in East Jerusalem apparently came from a bathhouse used by the Tenth Legion.



Partial stone bearing an inscription of the Tenth Legion reused in the wall of the Old City near the Jaffa Gate. (Photo by Tom Powers.)

Apparently, some members of the Tenth Legion were involved in a campaign against the Parthians undertaken by the Roman Emperor Trajan in 114-117 CE. On the way to the Parthian frontier, some legionnaires billeted at a fortress known as Apsaros, located in present-day Gonio, Georgia. News stories recently reported that Polish-led excavations of this Roman fort revealed a number of Syrian and Judean coins from this period. (Curiously, the scholarly publication of this data is from 2021, but it has only recently become known.) These coins had apparently been brought by the legionnaires, and in some cases they were countermarked (that is, overstruck) with the symbol of the Tenth Legion. It seems that the Parthian campaign brought large numbers of soldiers to this fortress, and because of insufficient local currency, they readapted these Syrian and Judean coins to fill the gap.

This same legion played a great role in defeating the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE). From letters and military dispatches written by Bar Kochba and his agents, which were discovered in caves in the Judean Desert, we see that his real name was Bar Kosiba and that, as the Gemara states, he was called Bar Kochba, "Son of a Star," because of the interpretation of *Bamid-*

bar 24:17 as prophesying the coming of Moshiach (see Rambam, *Hilchos Melachim* 11:3). We now have definitive evidence that the decision of the Roman Emperor Hadrian to build a Roman city and a temple on the Har Habayis and its surroundings, to be known as Aelia Capitolina, was a major cause of the revolt.

As the revolt spread, Bar Kochba's soldiers initially gained control of most of Eretz Yehudah (Judea) and the Galil. The Tenth Legion played a major part in the defeat of the rebels and the return of the country to Roman control. They defeated the last of the rebels at the stronghold of Beitar on Tishah B'Av (Mishnah, *Taanis* 4:6). It is known that the Tenth Legion sustained very serious casualties during this war. It seems that with the construction of this new Roman city, the legion remained fully encamped in the southwest of the city, and there is some evidence that its training area was north of today's Damascus Gate, then an open field.

But that is not the end of this legion's involvement in Eretz Yisrael. The Tenth Legion stayed in Yerushalayim until close to the Christianization of the Roman Empire in 325 CE. It was then transferred to Aila (Eilat). In about the year 400 CE, we lose track of it. Its days of fame were closely

linked to the conflict with the Jews in Eretz Yisrael, and it served as an instrument of the Roman destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*, bringing horrible tragedy upon the Jewish people.

So why would anyone deface the floor of a 2,000-year-old public building and tear up a piece of history? Perhaps because these bricks and tiles, especially if complete and with a legion's imprint, sell for \$300 to almost \$1,000 each. Police recovered dozens of them, according to reports. But we certainly agree with IAA Director Eli Escosido, who noted, "If archaeologists had found the bricks at the site itself, we would have been able to...place another point on the history map of the country. Now we are left to try to find out, through investigative operations, from where the bricks were dismantled and looted."

And so the discovery of the Legio X Fretensis, which destroyed Yerushalayim and the *Beis Hamikdash* and brutally put down two Jewish rebellions against the Roman Empire, continues. ●

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