

# Archaeological discovery in Jordan valley: Enormous 'foot-shaped' enclosures

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"The 'foot' structures that we found in the Jordan valley are the first sites that the People of Israel built upon entering Canaan and they testify to the biblical concept of ownership of the land with the foot," said archaeologist Prof. Adam Zertal of the University of Haifa, who headed the excavating team that exposed five compounds in the shape of an enormous "foot", that it were likely to have been used at that time to mark ownership of territory.

On the eve of the Passover holiday, researchers from the University of Haifa reveal an exceptional and exciting archaeological discovery that dates back to the time of the People of Israel's settlement in the country: For the first time, enclosed sites identified with the biblical sites termed in Hebrew "gilgal", which were used for assemblies, preparation for battle, and rituals, have been revealed in the Jordan valley. The researchers, headed by Prof. Adam Zertal, exposed five such structures, each in the shape of an enormous "[foot](#)", which they suppose functioned during that period to mark ownership on the territory. "I am an archaeologist and only deal with the scientific findings, so I do not go into the additional meanings of the discovery, if there are any," Prof. Zertal said.

The Hebrew word "gilgal" (a camp or stone-structure), is mentioned thirty-nine times in the Bible. The stone enclosures were located in the Jordan valley and the hill country west of it. To this day, no archaeological site has been proposed to be identified with the gilgal. Between the years 1990 and 2008, during the Manasseh Hill-Country

Survey that covers Samaria and the Jordan Valley, five such enclosures were found and excavated, all designed in the shape of a human foot. All of these sites were established at the outset of the Iron Age I (the 13th-12th centuries BCE). Based on their size and shape, it is clear that they were used for human assembly and not for animals.

Two of the sites (in Bedhat esh-Sha'ab and Yafit 3) were excavated in the years 2002-2005, under the directorship of Dr. Ben-Yosef and the guidance of Adam Zertal. The findings, mostly of clay vessels and animal bones, date their foundation to the end of the 13th century BCE, and one of them endured up to the 9th or 8th century BCE without architectonic adjustment.

In at least two cases, paved circuits, some two meters wide, were found around the structures. These were probably used to encircle the sites in a ceremony. "Ceremonial encirclement of an area in procession is an important element in the ancient Near East," Prof. Zertal says, adding that the origins of the Hebrew term "hag" (festival) in Semitic languages is from the verb "hug", which means "encircle". Thus, this discovery can also shed new light on the religious processions and the meaning of the Hebrew word for festival, "hag".

Prof. Zertal emphasized that the "foot" held much significance as a symbol of ownership of territory, control over an enemy, connection between people and land, and presence of the Deity. Some of these concepts are mentioned in ancient Egyptian literature. The Bible also has a wealth of references to the importance of the "foot" as a symbol: of ownership over Canaan, the bond between the People of Israel and their land, the link between the People and God's promise to inherit the land, defeating the enemy 'underfoot', and the Temple imaged as a foot.

"The discovery of these 'foot' structures opens an entirely new system of linguistic and historical perceptions," Prof. Zertal emphasizes. He

explains that the meaning of the biblical Hebrew word for "foot" - "regel" - is also a "festival", "holiday", and ascending to see the face of God. As such, the source of the Hebrew term "aliya la-regel", literally translated as "ascending to the foot" (and now known in English as a pilgrimage), is attributed to the "foot" sites in the Jordan valley. "Now, following these discoveries, the meanings of the terms become clear. Identifying the 'foot' enclosures as ancient Israeli ceremonial sites leads us to a series of new possibilities to explain the beginnings of Israel, of the People of Israel's festivals and holidays," he stated.

According to Prof. Zertal, the "foot" constructions were used for ceremonial assemblies during Iron Age I (and probably after). When the religious center was moved to Jerusalem and settled there, the command of "aliya la-regel" (pilgrimage) became associated with Jerusalem. The source of the term, however, is in the sites that have now been discovered in the Jordan valley and the Altar on Mt. Ebal. "The biblical text testifies to the antiquity of these compounds in Israel's ceremonies, and the 'foot' structures were built by an organized community that had a central leadership," Prof. Zertal stated. He stressed that there is a direct connection between the biblical ideology, which identifies ownership over the new land with the foot and hence with the shape of the constructions.

Source: University of Haifa

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