

Garden of Eden: Paradise lost -- and found

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This is an aerial view of the Ramat Rachel archaeological dig. Credit: AFTAU

Ancient gardens are the stuff of legend, from the Garden of Eden to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. Now researchers at Tel Aviv University, in collaboration with Heidelberg University in Germany, have uncovered an ancient royal garden at the site of Ramat Rachel near Jerusalem, and are leading the first full-scale excavation of this type of archaeological site anywhere in the pre-Hellenistic Levant.

According to Prof. Oded Lipschits and graduate student Boaz Gross of Tel Aviv University's Department of Archaeology, this dig is an unparalleled look into the structure and function of ancient gardens. "We have uncovered a very rare find," says Prof. Lipschits, who believes that this excavation will lead to invaluable archaeological knowledge about ancient royal gardens in the Middle East.

The discovery, which dates back to the 7th century B.C.E., was recently reported in *Quadmoniot*, the journal of the Israel Exploration Society, and another paper on the dig is forthcoming in *Near Eastern Archaeology*.

Flower power in the ancient world

According to Gross, such gardens were once the ultimate symbol of power. It makes an obvious statement of status, he explains, to have a massive and lush green space surrounding one's palace, especially when the surrounding area is bare, as it would have been in the [dry climate](#) of the Judean Hills only two miles from the Old City of Jerusalem. In fact, he says, the [garden](#) would have been the most prominent feature of Ramat Rachel, visible from the west, north and south.

One of the dig's most important aspects is water management. In ancient times, control over water indicated political strength, says Gross. A main feature of the Ramat Rachel gardens is its intricate [irrigation system](#), the likes of which have never been seen before outside of Mesopotamia. Features include open channels and closed tunnels, stone carved gutters and the framework for elaborate waterfalls.

In similar Assyrian gardens, trees and plants would have been brought in from all over the empire, explains Prof. Lipschits, who says that this type of garden, also in the Babylonian or Persian kingdoms, would have also served a spiritual function as a place of peace, tranquillity and connection to nature.

A global village?

Preliminary results show that while Ramat Rachel was built by the Judeans, the people of the ancient kingdom of Judah, it was

commissioned by foreign powers. These results may reveal information about a wide variety of empires that ruled in Israel at one time. This site, says Gross, was in use from the 7th to the 4th century B.C.E., a time period which saw many wars and exchanges of power with the garden evolving under each civilization.

Researchers are excited about what more this unique dig will be able to tell them. There has never been anything like it, explains Gross, who says that the TAU team will be pioneering a method for excavating gardens. "Proper excavation will provide an essential tool to future researchers," he says. "We are carefully deciphering what we have in front of us. There are no parallels to it."

The team hopes to delve deeper into the history of the garden with a close analysis of soil and other findings to determine what kind of plant life would have grown there, and which, if any, animals called the garden home.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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