

Archaeologist finds first evidence of cult in Judah at time of King David

May 11 2012



The Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Prof. Yosef Garfinkel with a stone shrine model found at Khirbet Qeiyafa (Credit: Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

Prof. Yosef Garfinkel, the Yigal Yadin Professor of Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, announced today the discovery of objects that for the first time shed light on how a cult was organized in Judah at the time of King David. During recent archaeological excavations at Khirbet Qeiyafa, a fortified city in Judah adjacent to the Valley of Elah, Garfinkel and colleagues uncovered rich assemblages of pottery, stone and metal tools, and many art and cult objects. These include three large rooms that served as cultic shrines, which in their architecture and finds correspond to the biblical description of a cult at the time of King David.

This [discovery](#) is extraordinary as it is the first time that shrines from the

time of early biblical kings were uncovered. Because these shrines pre-date the construction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem by 30 to 40 years, they provide the first physical evidence of a cult in the time of King David, with significant implications for the fields of [archaeology](#), history, biblical and religion studies.

The expedition to Khirbet Qeiyafa has excavated the site for six weeks each summer since 2007, with co-director Saar Ganor of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The revolutionary results of five years of work are presented today in a new book, *Footsteps of King David in the Valley of Elah*, published by Yedioth Ahronoth.

Located approximately 30 km southwest of Jerusalem in the valley of Elah, Khirbet Qeiyafa was a border city of the Kingdom of Judah opposite the Philistine city of Gath. The city, which was dated by 10 radiometric measurements (¹⁴C) done at Oxford University on burned olive pits, existed for a short period of time between ca. 1020 to 980 BCE, and was violently destroyed.

The biblical tradition presents the people of Israel as conducting a cult different from all other nations of the ancient Near East by being monotheistic and an-iconic (banning human or animal figures). However, it is not clear when these practices were formulated, if indeed during the time of the monarchy (10-6th centuries BC), or only later, in the Persian or Hellenistic eras.

The absence of cultic images of humans or animals in the three shrines provides evidence that the inhabitants of the place practiced a different cult than that of the Canaanites or the Philistines, observing a ban on graven images.

The findings at Khirbet Qeiyafa also indicate that an elaborate architectural style had developed as early as the time of King David.

Such construction is typical of royal activities, thus indicating that state formation, the establishment of an elite, social level and urbanism in the region existed in the days of the early kings of Israel. These finds strengthen the historicity of the biblical tradition and its architectural description of the Palace and Temple of Solomon.

According to Prof. Garfinkel, “This is the first time that archaeologists uncovered a fortified city in Judah from the time of King David. Even in Jerusalem we do not have a clear fortified city from his period. Thus, various suggestions that completely deny the biblical tradition regarding King David and argue that he was a mythological figure, or just a leader of a small tribe, are now shown to be wrong.” Garfinkel continued, “Over the years, thousands of animal bones were found, including sheep, goats and cattle, but no pigs. Now we uncovered three cultic rooms, with various cultic paraphernalia, but not even one human or animal figurine was found. This suggests that the population of Khirbet Qeiyafa observed two biblical bans—on pork and on graven images—and thus practiced a different cult than that of the Canaanites or the Philistines.”

The three shrines are part of larger building complexes. In this respect they are different from Canaanite or Philistine cults, which were practiced in temples—separate buildings dedicated only to rituals. The biblical tradition described this phenomenon in the time of King David: “He brought the ark of God from a private house in Kyriat Yearim and put it in Jerusalem in a private house” (2 Samuel 6).

The cult objects include five standing stones (Massebot), two basalt altars, two pottery libation vessels and two portable shrines. No human or animal figurines were found, suggesting the people of Khirbet Qeiyafa observed the biblical ban on graven images.

Two portable shrines (or “shrine models”) were found, one made of pottery (ca. 20 cm high) and the other of stone (35 cm high). These are

boxes in the shape of temples, and could be closed by doors.

The clay shrine is decorated with an elaborate façade, including two guardian lions, two pillars, a main door, beams of the roof, folded textile and three birds standing on the roof. Two of these elements are described in Solomon's Temple: the two pillars (Yachin and Boaz) and the textile (Parochet).

The stone shrine is made of soft limestone and painted red. Its façade is decorated by two elements. The first are seven groups of roof-beams, three planks in each. This architectural element, the "triglyph," is known in Greek classical temples, like the Parthenon in Athens. Its appearance at Khirbet Qeiyafa is the earliest known example carved in stone, a landmark in world [architecture](#).

The second decorative element is the recessed door. This type of doors or windows is known in the architecture of temples, palaces and royal graves in the ancient Near East. This was a typical symbol of divinity and royalty at the time.

The stone model helps us to understand obscure technical terms in the description of Solomon's palace as described in 1 Kings 7, 1-6. The text uses the term "Slaot," which were mistakenly understood as pillars and can now be understood as triglyphs. The text also uses the term "Sequfim", which was usually understood as nine windows in the palace, and can now be understood as "triple recessed doorway."

Similar triglyphs and recessed doors can be found in the description of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 6, Verses 5, 31-33, and in the description of a temple by the prophet Ezekiel (41:6). These biblical texts are replete with obscure technical terms that have lost their original meaning over the millennia. Now, with the help of the stone model uncovered at Khirbet Qeiyafa, the biblical text is clarified. For the first time in history

we have actual objects from the time of David, which can be related to monuments described in the Bible.

Provided by Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Citation: Archaeologist finds first evidence of cult in Judah at time of King David (2012, May 11) retrieved 9 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2012-05-archaeologist-evidence-cult-judah-king.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--