

Underground in Jerusalem, a rare look at an ancient tomb

January 25 2019, by Mike Smith



Talks are ongoing between France, which owns the site known as the Tomb of the Kings, and Israel to reopen it

Flashlight beams pierce the darkness and reveal an archaeological gem in underground Jerusalem few have had the chance to glimpse in recent

years.

The elaborate, 2,000-year-old tomb's stone shelves once held sarcophagi, and its steps are hewn from rock connecting its chambers.

It serves as a remarkable example of a Roman-era tomb—considered among the largest in the region—but it remains closed for now and largely forgotten in a corner of east Jerusalem.

Talks are ongoing between France, which owns the site known as the Tomb of the Kings, and Israel to reopen it, and AFP was recently given an exclusive tour.

"We are talking about probably the most important, fascinating and large monument in Jerusalem outside the Old City," said Yuval Baruch, Jerusalem regional archaeologist for the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The tomb has been closed since 2010 due to renovations costing around a million euros (\$1.1 million).

But its unique status, Jewish veneration of the burial site and its location in the disputed city have added to complications in reopening it.

Archaeological sites in east Jerusalem are often freighted with religious significance and questions linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Tomb of the Kings is no exception, though with international involvement since France owns it.



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Israel occupied mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community.

It sees the entire city as its capital, while the Palestinians view the eastern sector as the capital of their future state.

France wants guarantees

Groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews have gathered at the tomb's gate to press

for its reopening so that they can pray there. They describe it as a holy burial site of ancient ancestors.

"All we ask is to enter, make a prayer and leave," said Natanel Snir, who was part of a group of around 12 ultra-Orthodox Jews who briefly gathered outside the gate Thursday.

There has also been a challenge at Israel's rabbinical court—which rules on matters related to Jewish law and holy sites—over access to the tomb and France's ownership.

A concert at the site organised with a Palestinian group around a decade ago also led to criticism.

The court case has been abandoned for now at the request of Israel's [foreign ministry](#), but there are discussions about whether to resume it, said Rachel Shakargy of the Israeli rabbinical courts.

Before reopening the site, France wants guarantees it will not face legal challenges and is asking for commitments on how visits will be managed.



Groups of ultra-Orthodox Jews, who regard the tomb as a burial site for ancient ancestors, have pressed for its reopening so that they can pray there

French officials declined to comment, while Israel's foreign ministry said negotiations are continuing, without elaborating.

Both states are concerned it could become more of a religious than archaeological site after its reopening.

In the meantime, an iron gate leading to ancient steps, ritual baths and the expansive tomb further below remains locked.

Queen's tomb?

Both the history of the site and how France came to own it are complex.

An excavation in the 1860s, when the Ottoman Empire ruled the region, is thought to be the first modern archaeological dig in the Holy Land, said Jean-Baptiste Humbert, a French archaeologist who has carried out excavations at the tomb.

Felicien de Saulcy of France took on the project in 1863 and sought to confirm it was the tomb of biblical figures King David and Solomon, giving rise to the site's name.

That theory has been ruled out, but the name has endured.

Several sarcophagi were found inside and are now in the Louvre museum in Paris, including one with an Aramaic inscription.



The tomb got its name as it was mistakenly believed to be the final resting place of Solomon and King David

According to the most commonly accepted theory, it refers to Queen Helena of Adiabene, in today's Iraqi Kurdistan, and she may have built the tomb for her dynasty.

She is thought to have converted to Judaism and her remains may well have been buried there.

Whether or not that is the case, the site is also believed to have been reused over the years.

After de Saulcy's excavation, the tomb was purchased by the Pereire brothers, a Jewish banking family in Paris that would later hand the property over to France.

'Much too big'

The site is set around 700 metres (yards) from Jerusalem's Old City.

Stone stairs lead down to two ritual baths and a courtyard in front of the tomb itself, with the remains of an ancient frieze above its entry.

The underground tomb spreads over some 250 square metres, slightly smaller than a doubles tennis court.

For Humbert, the site's grandeur and other factors mean it could not have been built for Helena's dynasty.



It is now thought the tomb may have been built by Queen Helena of Adiabene

He theorises it could have been built by Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great.

"It is a tomb much too big for her," he said.

No matter why it was built, it captured visitors' imaginations before fading from public consciousness.

There are pictures of German Kaiser Wilhelm II visiting in 1898.

For Baruch, the site should be open—and the artefacts at the Louvre returned.

"In my perspective, it must stay or exist as a archaeological cultural site, and of course if you want as an individual to go there and to pray, you can do it," he said.

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Citation: Underground in Jerusalem, a rare look at an ancient tomb (2019, January 25) retrieved 27 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2019-01-underground-jerusalem-rare-ancient-tomb.html>

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