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J'lem Dig turns up gold coins from end of Second Temple period

By Ofri Ilani

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In ancient times, the inhabitants of the Land of Israel and its environs would raise pigeons in underground caves. Called "columbariums," the caves had small niches, in which the birds laid their eggs. Over the years many columbariums have been unearthed at ancient sites around the country, particularly at those containing finds from the Second Temple period. A few days ago, archaeologists made a most surprising find at the bottom of such a columbarium, at a site at Kibbutz Ramat Rachel near Jerusalem - a hoard of coins from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.).

Late in July, archaeologists from Tel Aviv University identified, beneath the floor of the columbarium, a ceramic cooking pot from the 1st century C.E. that held 15 large gold coins. "It's very special to find a hoard like this, and it's very exciting," related the director of the excavations at the site, Dr. Oded Lipschits, of TAU. "We discovered the hoard with a metal detector, and then we went down into the niche and found this small cooking pot inside it."

What was a pot holding coins doing at the bottom of a cave used for raising pigeons? According to Lipschits the pot was covered up in a way that indicates that it had been concealed in a hurry. "We know that coins like these were brought to the Temple," he says. "Possibly after the Temple was destroyed there was no place to bring the coins, and since the columbarium was no longer in use, they buried the coins here. This arouses sad thoughts as we approach Tisha B'Av," he added, referring to the Hebrew date (the ninth of Av) that traditionally marks the destruction of both the First and Second Temples.

The hoard from the Second Temple period (535 B.C.E-70 C.E.) is just one of the many finds that have been uncovered during the fourth season of excavations at Ramat Rachel, a dig that is under the joint

aegis of Tel Aviv University and Germany's Heidelberg University. During a week and half of digging, another, larger hoard, from the Byzantine period - from the 4th or 5th century C.E. - was also discovered. This latter find consisted of 380 coins, with an additional 70 coins found scattered nearby. It was found on the stone floor of a structure, above a cistern. Finds from the Abbasid (Muslim) period were also excavated.

Lipschits says that one of the aims of the current dig is to clarify the purpose of this structure. "The accepted claim is that it is a palace of the kings of Judea, but I'm dubious of that. The palace lacks any Judean characteristics, and there is no reason that a royal palace would have been built here, when the City of David is not far away."

Lipschits believes that the palace was built during the period of the Assyrian subjugation. "This entire complex is, in my opinion, an administrative center for the occupying regime, a place where agricultural produce was collected, for delivery as a tax to the Assyrians."

During the period of the return to Zion (beginning 539 B.C.E.), the Assyrian regime was replaced by a Persian one, but the administrative center continued to operate. Many seal impressions from this period have been found, bearing the name "Pahwat Yahud," the name of the country under this regime. The Ramat Rachel excavation is the main accumulation in the country of impressions of this sort, and Lipschits sees this as further proof that the site was an administrative center.

About 120 students are participating in the dig at Ramat Rachel, from many countries including Germany, Australia, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Norway, Britain, Canada, the United States and Israel. Despite the heat, says Lipschits, they don't complain. "Many of the volunteers on the dig are Christians and for them, finding coins from the time of Jesus is more than just a scientific discovery," he says.