

Prof's temple excavation uncovers rare ancient altar inscription

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RIVERSIDE, Calif. -- They found it back in 2010, a cylinder-shaped stone object partially immersed in the earth of an early temple site in Jordan. Washed with water, its mysteries would shed light on an epic biblical battle and reveal a very rare discovery -- the possible earliest known written mention of the name 'Hebrews.'

A close-up photo of ancient Moabite script scratched into the surface of a cylindrical, pedestal-like alter found at a temple excavation site in Jordan. (Photo: courtesy of Dr. Christopher Rollston)

The dig site square showing the altar as it was found.

The 2010 dig team at the Ataruz temple site in Jordan with Dr. Chang-ho Ji, center, back row, and La Sierra student Jun-hyung Park, front row, left, who discovered the alter inscription after washing the artifact. (Photo: courtesy Chang-ho Ji)

La Sierra student Jun-hyung Park, center, with local dig team members at the Ataruz excavation in Jordan in 2010.

La Sierra University professor and archaeologist Chang-ho Ji along with several La Sierra students found the pedestal-like cylindrical altar in the ruins of a 3,000-year-old Iron Age temple at Khirbut Ataruz which Ji discovered in 2000. Ten years later the temple grabbed international media attention as the largest such structure in the Levant. The temple ruins produced hundreds of artifacts, including the carved pedestal alter that is nearly 20 inches high and more than seven inches in diameter and which bears two inscriptions in Moabite language and early Moabite script.

The scratched writing appears horizontally and vertically on the stone and refers to a battle waged and won by Moabite King Mesha in revolt against a king of Israel. The inscriptions substantiate accounts of battles inscribed on the famous Mesha Stele, a three-foot-tall stone tablet dating to 840 BCE when it was commissioned by King Mesha. It is on display in the Louvre Museum in Paris.

The day it was uncovered at Ataruz, Ji asked the student supervisor of the dig site square, Jun-hyung Park, to take the stone cylinder to the crew's apartments in Madaba and wash it with water. Park brought the cleaned artifact back to Ji and said, " 'professor, there's some sort of scratch on the stone.' Immediately I could see it was ancient writing," recalled the archaeologist.

Two years later, noted George Washington University Northwest Semitic languages associate professor and epigraphist Christopher Rollston arrived in Amman to see the artifact for himself, intrigued by photos Ji sent him. "As soon as I saw the inscription, I knew that it was very important, but also quite difficult," Rollston said.

Rollston and his team, which included Johns Hopkins University doctoral student Adam Bean, determined after a lengthy and detailed analysis that the scratched writing from the late 9th century or early 8th century may include the earliest written form of the word 'Hebrews' and confirms that King Mesha overran Ataruz, one of several major cities Mesha claims to have captured in the Mesha Stele inscription.

The Mesha Stele states that the country of Moab had fallen under the hegemony of the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Omri of Israel who reigned 876-869 BCE. Omri is also mentioned in the Bible in 1 Kings 16:16-30 and in Neo-Assyrian inscriptions, Rollston stated. Then, according to Mesha's own words in the Mesha Stele, Moab rebelled against Israel and gained its independence along with territory which had been taken from Moab during the reign of Omri and his successors.

"Since there are a fairly small number of inscriptions in Moabite, this inscription is extraordinarily important. Moreover, because it connects with both the Mesha Stele, also found in Jordan, and the Bible, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of this inscription," Rollston said. "The Ataruz Inscriptions are the earliest evidence we have so far for a distinctive Moabite script." The commissioned Mesha Stele was written in Moabite but with ancient Hebrew script.

Rollston and his team worked between 200 and 300 hours analyzing the inscription and writing a scientific article about their findings. The lexicon work, which involves considering various lexical options and attempting to ascertain the best possible readings proved the most laborious, he said.

Scientific journal *Levant* published the findings last July and the discovery was announced by news media around the Middle East and within the archaeological community. "When one combines the biblical material in Kings, the Mesha Stele and the Ataruz Inscriptions, a fairly full picture comes to life, one in which one can stitch together the biblical and inscriptional evidence and know a great deal about geopolitics in the ancient Levantine world of the late 9th and early 8th centuries," Rollston said in an article by *The Times of Israel*.

The inscriptions were written by two different scribes in different times, during an age when Moabite language and writing was being developed, said Chang. The temple at Ataruz is the first archaeological site to confirm the battles described on the Mesha Stele, "and especially this inscription. It was a huge surprise," said Chang who conducted carbon-dating and other archaeological analysis of the inscribed cylinder.

For Chang, the discovery and interpretation of the cylinder alter inscription is a key career highlight, and for the university, another significant moment as a top national contributor to the biblical archaeology field through its Center for Near Eastern Archaeology. "This is a fantastic discovery and La Sierra University is making a great contribution," he said. "As an archaeologist, this is something that is once in a life time."