

Ancient Roman Theater Exposed Under Jerusalem's Western Wall

Bible and archaeology news

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The Old City of Jerusalem is a layer cake of architecture, hidden passageways, and lost features of past civilizations—a result of more than 3,000 years of constant occupation and reconstruction. Underneath the ancient cobbles of the Old City are roads, sewers, and entire buildings that have not seen the light of day in centuries or millennia. Excavators have been exploring this archaeologically rich city for over 150 years.

In the midst of a conference on the recent archaeology in and around Jerusalem, an Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) excavation underneath Wilson's Arch of Jerusalem's Western Wall uncovered a Roman-era theater more than 1,700 years old. The goal of the dig was to investigate the archaeological context of the arch and confirm whether the structure dates to the time of King Herod the Great, the Judean king who ruled between 37 and 4 B.C.E. In their second year of excavation, the team expected to find a Second Temple period road but instead discovered the dramatic Roman theater adjacent to the famous Western Wall.

An ancient Roman theater, called an *odeon*, has been unearthed in Jerusalem's Old City.

[Photo](#): Olivier Fitoussi.

The team first came down upon a curious circular structure that was slowly revealed to be a small stage with seating for about 200 individuals, complete with an orchestral section. The construction is similar in design to contemporary Roman theaters found in cities like Caesarea, Beit She'an, and Beit Guvrin, but much smaller in size. IAA archaeologist Tehillah Lieberman said to NBC News that the theater “has the same structure, the same semicircular stepped building. It's just a lot smaller.” The small size and its presence under a roofed space led excavation directors Dr. Joe Uziel, Dr. Avi Solomon, and Lieberman to conclude that this structure is a Roman odeon or bouleuterion.

Roman theaters of this size would have been used for a variety of purposes, from council meetings and other public gatherings to acoustic stage performances of drama and music.

However, the IAA team does not believe the theater was ever put to use. Results of the excavation revealed that some of the stairs were left unhewn, meaning the staircases had not yet been fully cut. Lieberman postulates that that Bar-Kokhba Revolt (132–136 C.E.) halted production on the theater, and construction was never again taken up before the structure was built over and sealed.

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“Construction of the building may have been started, but abandoned when the revolt broke out. Additional evidence of unfinished buildings from this period has been uncovered in the past in the excavations of the Eastern Cardo in the Western Wall Plaza,” said the archeologists in an IAA press release.

Israel Hasson, director-general of the IAA, added in the press release that the IAA is “working toward advancing a national project to unveil ancient Jerusalem.” The excavations under Wilson's Arch are an integral part of that endeavor. Hasson continued, “I hope that these finds will help push forward the general plan, so that we each get to see and be awed by Jerusalem's glorious past.”

The ancient Roman theater was uncovered underneath Wilson's Arch, next to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. [Photo](#): Yaniv Berman courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

As reported by Haaretz, the excavations also uncovered a sewer system, which the IAA theorizes may connect the Western Wall with the Siloam Pool and Jerusalem's tunnel system. Furthermore, eight previous layers, or courses, of the Western Wall were unearthed during the excavation.

Of the new discoveries, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the rabbi of the Western Wall, said to Haaretz, “These stones are soaked in history. We are not here to uncover stones; we are here to uncover [our] roots. Time after time the amazing archaeological findings allow our generation to actually touch the ancient history of our people and Jewish heritage and its deep connection to Jerusalem.”

The IAA hopes that one day the Roman theater will be open for the public to see and to experience a new aspect of the storied history of Jerusalem. In the meantime, many more of Jerusalem's treasures remain shrouded and buried. More Roman-era constructions have yet to be discovered, including the basilica, the famed bathhouse, and the larger theater forum mentioned by ancient Jewish historian Josephus. Only further excavation in the ancient city will reveal the thousands of years of history buried beneath the streets.

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