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JERUSALEM (RNS)—Israeli archaeologists who have been inspecting maintenance work done by Muslims on the Temple Mount have discovered what they believe are artifacts dating back to the time of the first Jewish temple.

Archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority said workers from the Wakf Islamic Trust had uncovered “an apparently sealed archaeological level dated to the first temple period” near the Dome of the Rock, the third-holiest site in Islam.

Finds included fragments of ceramic tableware and animal bones. The finds are dated from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C.

The discovery marks the first time Israeli archaeologists have been able to examine Temple Mount artifacts still in the ground. The Wakf, which maintains the mount, has for several decades denied excavation requests by international archaeologists.

In an ongoing project, archaeologists and volunteers have been salvaging

thousands of Temple Mount artifacts found in tons of debris removed—illegally, Israelis say—by the Wakf during renovations on a mosque in 1999. Archaeologists strive to discover artifacts in their original position in the ground in order to gain valuable context.

The first temple, built by King Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. The second temple was finished around 516 B.C, expanded by King Herod beginning in 20 B.C. and destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Israeli archaeologists said the characteristics and location of the finds may aid scholars in reconstructing the dimensions and boundaries of the Temple Mount during the first temple period.

Finds include fragments of bowls, the base of a juglet used for ladling oil, the handle of a small juglet and the rim of a storage jar. The bowl shards were decorated with wheel burnishing lines characteristic of the first temple period.

Gabriel Barkay, director of the Temple Mount Sifting Project, called the Temple Mount “the most delicate and important and sensitive site in this country; and not counting the destructive acts of the Wakf, it’s hardly been excavated.”