

Discovery indicates Jewish rebels captured Roman weapons

September 11, 2023

JERUSALEM (RNS)—Fifty years ago, Israeli archaeologists discovered an ancient Hebrew inscription on a stalactite in a remote cave in the desert east of Jerusalem, where the land begins to slope down toward the Dead Sea.

In June, hoping to find additional inscriptions not visible to the naked eye, three researchers—an archaeologist, a geologist and a photographer trained in multi-spectral photography—returned to the cave.



Archaeologists work in a cave above the Dead Sea in eastern Israel in August. (Photo by Oriya Amichai, Israel Antiquities Authority)

While exploring a new level of the cave, one of the researchers discovered the iron head of a Roman javelin, known as a “pilum,” in a hidden narrow crevice.

The trio immediately contacted the Israel Antiquities Authority, which has been conducting a systematic search of Judean desert caves for the past six years. The agency aims to preserve any remnants of Dead Sea scrolls or other ancient artifacts in the archaeology-rich region, keeping them out of the hands of looters and off the black market.

Soon after discovering the javelin, the archaeologists discovered a cache of four 1,900-year-old swords, all of them remarkably well-preserved. Even more remarkable were the swords' wood and leather accessories, which the desert's arid climate had prevented from decaying.

Three of the swords were identified as Roman *spatha* swords, with 2-foot-long blades, and a shorter weapon, a ring-pommel sword, with an 18-inch-long blade.

The weapons were most likely left in the cave by Jewish rebels involved in the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132 to 136 A.D., the Jews' final attempt to force the Romans out of the ancient land of Israel after nearly two centuries of occupation. During the revolt, bands of Jewish fighters and refugees lived in the caves that dot the forbidding Judean landscape.

The uprising failed, and the Romans expelled most of the surviving Jews and changed the territory's name from "Judaea" to "Syria Palaestina."

The swords may represent a small victory amid this defeat.

"It appears that the weapons were hidden by the Judean rebels, after they were seized from the Roman army as booty," the Israel Antiquities Authority said in a public statement.

For the archaeologists, the discovery is a major triumph.

"Finding a single sword is rare—so four? It's a dream! We rubbed our eyes in disbelief," the researchers wrote.

‘Maybe the best preserved’ Roman swords ever found



Israel Antiquities Authority researchers examine one of the swords recently discovered near the Dead Sea. (Photo by Emil Aladjem, Israel Antiquities Authority)

The swords were discovered in what is today the En Gedi Nature Reserve, about 100 miles from Jerusalem, according to Eitan Klein, who co-directed the Israel Antiquities Authority’s sweeping excavation of the cave after the first weapon was discovered.

Klein said the swords “are maybe the best preserved” Roman swords ever discovered anywhere in the world.

“Usually, you find only the blade without the handle. Here you have the entire sword, with equipment,” he said.

The Judean Desert has yielded thousands of ancient artifacts thanks to its extremely hot and dry climate, which enables organic materials to be preserved for thousands of years. About 90 percent of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the Judean Desert after the Second World War were written on vellum, made from processed animal hides.

“We can assume there were many more such scrolls in Jerusalem,” Klein said, but the city’s much higher humidity would have destroyed them.

When the researchers examined the swords, they knew from their design that they had been manufactured by Roman armorers during the second century A.D.

“We believe that the people who hid the swords in the cave were not Roman soldiers,” Klein said. “It is very difficult to access the cave. So, the strong probability is that they were hidden by the Jewish rebels who fought against the Romans. We already knew that caves in very close proximity to this cave were used during the Bar Kokhba revolt.”

A Bar Kokhba-era coin found in the cave added further evidence.

Three of the swords were discovered inside their wooden scabbards. The site also contained leather strips and wooden and metal bits belonging to the weapons.

Now relocated to the Israel Antiquities Authority’s climate-controlled facility, researchers are carrying out Carbon-14 testing on the weapons’ organic materials to better determine their age, as well as investigating the exact type and source of the metal, wood and leather.

They also are hoping DNA testing will reveal something about the ancient people who handled—or were impaled by—the weapons.

“We should know more, perhaps in the coming days and weeks,” Klein said.