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How Archaeology Affirmed the Historic Stature of a Biblical King

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Once, the House of David seemed like a folk tale. Now, the rocks testify to its historic significance.



Image: illustration by Tim Peacock

The Bible describes David as a man after God’s heart and a king who reigned for 40 years, firmly establishing the “city of David” and an Israelite kingdom that he passed to his son Solomon (1 Sam. 13:14; 1 Kings 2:10–12).

In archaeologists’ minds, the record is not so clear. Some experts, looking at the evidence from excavations across modern-day Israel, have argued that the Bible greatly exaggerated David’s historical significance. Some have gone so far as to suggest David was a myth, a heroic fiction, and a nationalist folk tale.

“We obviously have in David a figure built substantially of romance, legend and literary elaboration,” [wrote](#) British scholar Philip R. Davies. Danish scholar Niels Peter Lemche [claimed](#) “it is rather likely” that “the tales about him are as historical as the legends are about King Arthur.”

But after decades of debate, new discoveries are affirming David’s historic stature. The expanded evidentiary record – from monumental inscriptions to the remnants of ancient construction – supports the biblical account.

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“We now have a completely different picture than we did 50 years ago,” said Michael Hasel, professor of Near Eastern studies and archaeology at Southern Adventist University, pointing to the mounting pile of archaeological evidence.

The first breakthrough came in 1993 with the discovery of the [Tel Dan Stele](#) near the Syrian border. An inscription on a stone slab, written by an Aramean king celebrating a military victory, names the defeated kingdom the “House of David.” The stele dates to about 140 years after David’s death, making David the earliest biblical person named in the archaeological record and, by the standards of the field, an established historical person.

Part of the challenge with establishing extrascriptural evidence for David is that he sits on a historical fault line.

“He’s right on the cusp of where the Bible doesn’t have a lot of external sources to affirm persons and events and the period where we do have sources,” said Kyle Keimer, adjunct professor at Jerusalem University College and coeditor of the textbook *The Ancient Israelite World*. The Tel Dan Stele, however, firmly placed David on the “sourced” side.

A few years after the discovery, though, a fierce academic fight broke out in Israel over whether David really had an empire. Was the kingdom, the House of David, a real political and military force? Israel Finkelstein, a highly regarded Israeli archaeologist, said *No, not really*. In a landmark [paper](#), he claimed David was not a significant monarch, but maybe a kind of warrior-chief. The kingdom known as the House of David happened later—and was really only a vassal state of the Omride kingdom in northern Israel.

“Someone for whom the Bible represents the word of God views what I have to say with complete shock,” Finkelstein later [told](#) *The New Yorker*. “The description is of a glorious kingdom, a huge empire, authors in the king’s court, a huge army, military conquests—and then someone like me comes along and says, ‘Wait a minute. They were nothing but hillbillies.’”

It wasn’t just commitment to the Bible that prompted scholarly objections to Finkelstein’s “low chronology” argument, though. His interpretation of evidence—and claims based on lack of evidence—raised a lot of questions. He also seemed to be making broad assumptions about what a 10th-century B.C. empire would look like.

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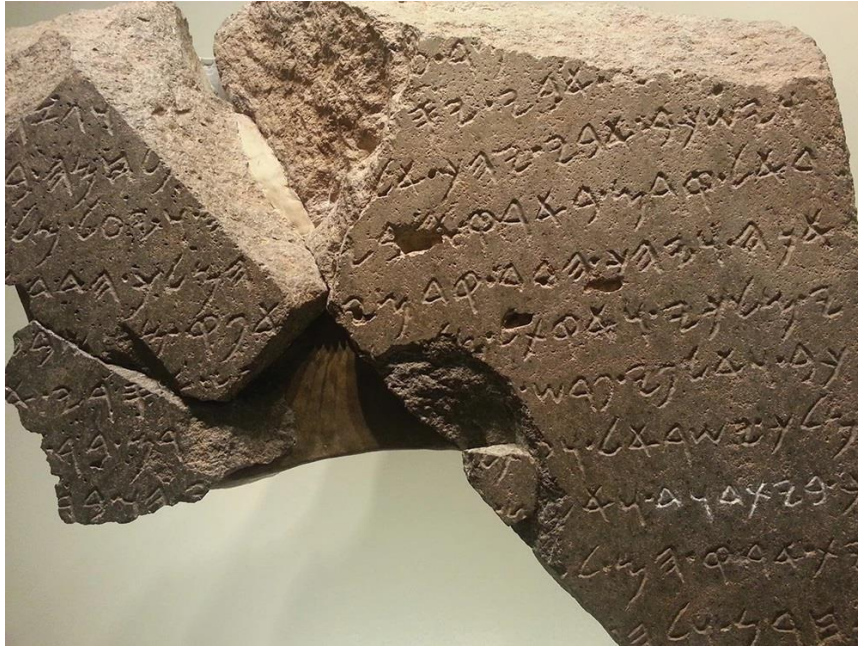


Image: Wikimedia Commons

A monument known as the Tel Dan Stele boasts of defeating “the House of David.”

Keimer told CT the lack of monumental architecture dating to David’s rule turned out to be a straw man. It is easily knocked down by looking at what the Bible actually said about David’s kingdom, instead of using modern ideas about political power.

“The ancient world has its own cultural milieu,” Keimer said. “Allowing the text to speak for itself puts us in tune with the political and social details we have preserved there.”

In the era, monuments were only one way to express power. Kings also used relational and charismatic authority, showing their strength by getting people to obey them. Patrimonialism—the sort of power that might be exerted today by a mafia boss—doesn’t leave the same record, but that doesn’t mean it’s not powerful or not an empire.

The biblical accounts of King David don’t emphasize his construction projects. They do highlight his relationships, which are why his son Absalom mounted an almost-successful coup—by undermining his relational authority. Absalom didn’t erect a stele; he “stole the hearts of the people” (2 Sam. 15:6).

Keimer suggests that David’s kingdom might have stretched from Dan to Beersheba (24:2), while his influence could have been felt much farther away, even as far as Egypt or the Euphrates River. There would be less archaeological evidence of that kind of power.

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Erez Ben-Yosef, a professor at Tel Aviv University, has recently [argued](#) that there's an architectural bias in biblical archaeology. He suggests that many more people than previously realized still lived in tents 3,000 years ago.

"This is a society that is not building large cities," said Dan Pioske, a theology professor at University of St. Thomas. "We have to watch our assumptions about what capital cities or kingdoms looked like."

Archaeologists have also found more evidence from this period that Jerusalem was significant, even if it didn't have the monumental architecture to rival other kingdoms of that era. Pioske points to the Amarna Letters, a series of communications from various Canaanite cities to an Egyptian pharaoh, which describe Jerusalem as a city of some standing.

"If you add up all of the little pieces—which you have to do because Jerusalem is an inhabited city and it's not easy to do archaeology there—it's actually a pretty impressive site," he said. "We have lots of examples from antiquity where a small place has a large influence."

Archaeologists, however, have also found some monumental architecture near the Temple Mount. The late Eilat Mazar discovered the foundation walls of a large public building, which neatly corresponds with an account of a construction project mentioned in 2 Samuel 5:17. She was able to date it conclusively to the 10th century B.C. Mazar, who [died](#) in 2021, told CT she was not religious but was an effective archaeologist because she read the Bible as a historical document.

"This is Jerusalem, which we know best from the Bible," she [said](#), which "contains within it descriptions of genuine historical reality."

Outside of Jerusalem, archaeologists have found more evidence that points to the power and influence of the early Israelite kings. Hasel, from Southern Adventist University, excavated a site called Khirbet Qeiyafa with Israeli archaeologists Yosef Garfinkel and Saar Ganor. Qeiyafa overlooks the Valley of Elah, where David confronted Goliath.

The archaeologists discovered massive fortifications in their excavation, with walls built of several hundred thousand tons of stone.

"This wasn't somebody building a pen for their sheep at night," Hasel said. "It gives us new data for the debate."

There's no evidence that the structure was Canaanite or Philistine, so the best explanation is that it was built by the growing Israelite political power in the Judean hills.

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Hasel noted that in earlier years, arguments about David's empire were typically based on excavations in northern Israel. Now that more sites are being excavated in the foothills between the Judean highlands and the coast, archaeologists are discovering artifacts that Finkelstein said shouldn't exist.

Hasel believes the results from Qeiyafa and two other sites where his team has worked have solidly reestablished the traditional "high chronology" and established an archaeological record for the significance of David.

And it's good to have him back.

"If you don't have David, you don't have a lot of things," Hasel said. David is mentioned around 1,000 times in the Bible. He's credited as the author of 73 psalms. His history is tied with Jerusalem becoming Israel's capital and the site of the temple. And through the line of David, the Messiah is promised.

"Without David, that is all put into question," Hasel said. "He is a very significant figure not only for Israel but for the history of Christianity and Judaism. They all draw their identity back to that one person."

Archaeologists aren't done, either. They may well find more extrabiblical evidence of David's reign.

In 2017, the excavation of what appears to be a citadel in Tel Abel Beth Maacah, in northern Israel, turned up a glazed ceramic head, a "faience," two inches tall that some think could depict King David. More scholars think it's King Ahab or King Hazael of Aram-Damascus, but there's no way of knowing.



Image: Associated Press

The ceramic head of a king, left in ruins a century after David's reign.

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“All we can say for sure about the faience head is that it was found in a late-ninth-century context and represented an elite—military commander, governor, king, et cetera,” said Robert Mullins, professor of biblical and religious studies at Azusa Pacific University, who is codirecting the excavation. “I would never rule out David as a possibility since Abel was also a large city at that time ... maybe it originated in the 10th century but someone found the broken head on the ground and kept it as a souvenir.”

In 2022, a team of researchers used new technology to [read a stele](#) set up in modern-day Jordan by a Moabite king more than 800 years before Christ was born. The stone had been damaged, but these scholars were able to reconstruct the writing with a 3D rendering. It just has 34 lines, but on line 31 they saw the words *House of David*.

David’s political significance and the accuracy of the scriptural record were affirmed again, in testimony of stone.

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<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/july-august/excavate-archaeology-house-david-chronology-historical.html>

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