

Biblical Period Temple Discovered at Archaeological Excavation in Turkey

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Paved courtyard and stepped entrance to the Temple, with carved column base.
(Photograph by James Osborne)

The University of Toronto's Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP) excavations at Tell Tayinat, on the Plain of Antioch in southeastern Turkey, have uncovered the remarkably well-preserved remains of a monumental temple, part of a sacred precinct on the citadel of Kunulua, royal city of the Iron Age Kingdom of Palastin. The temple appears to have been constructed during the time of King Solomon, in the 10th/9th Century BCE. The arrangement of the newly discovered temple recalls the Temple of El, Lord of the Covenant (*Ba'al-berith*) at Shechem (described in the Book of Judges, Chapter 9, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible).

THE TEMPLE

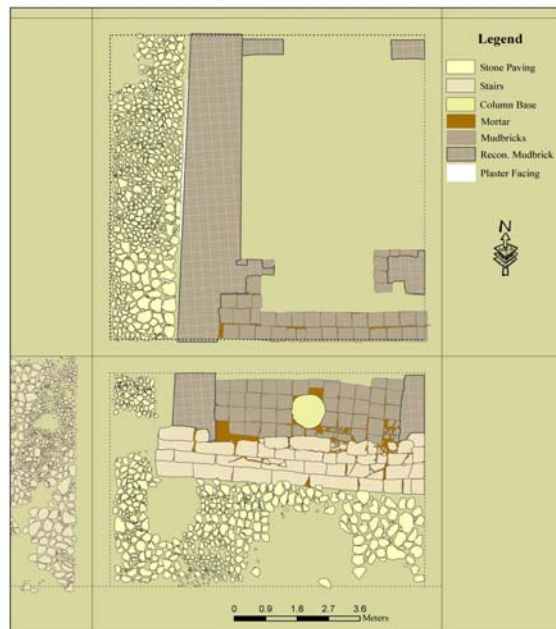
The temple was approached from the south via a stone-paved staircase. A small basalt column rested on the western edge of the staircase, just in front of the southern end of the building's western wall. The building's eastern wall remains unexcavated to the east. The staircase led to a porch with an ornately carved basalt column base set into the floor. The lowest register of the carved column base was largely hidden from view, suggesting that an earlier surface, or phase, to the building may still lie below.

The porch was separated from an internal room to the north by two brick piers. A thick layer of burnt brick, apparently collapse, covered much of the floor between the two piers. This material, in turn, sealed three heavily charred wooden beams, at least one of which appeared to have been set into clay brick material. It was not clear whether these beams represented roof or wall collapse, or were part of a threshold for the doorway.

The doorway provided entrance to a central room. Its floor was badly burned, but appeared to have had a plastered surface, which was preserved only in patches. The collapse above the floor contained burnt brick debris, but was largely devoid of pottery or organic remains. However, the room did produce a substantial quantity of bronze metal, including riveted pieces and several carved ivory fragments. Though heavily burned, and damaged, these remains suggest the room had been equipped with furniture or wall fixings. The room also produced fragments of gold and silver foil, and the carved eye inlay from a human figure.

A second set of piers, framed in the north section of the excavated area, indicated the existence of an inner room, perhaps the cella, or 'holy of holies', of the temple, in the unexcavated area to the north. The temple was surrounded on its west and south sides by flagstone pavement, part of an extended open courtyard, or plaza. The exterior face of the building's west wall was decorated with a bright white painted plaster.

Tell Tayinat 2008: Field II Early Iron II Temple



Plan of the Temple, with porticoed south entrance.
(Created by Stephen Batiuk)

CONTEXT

- Tell Tayinat forms a large, low-lying mound at the northern bend of the Orontes River, strategically situated at the junction between the Anatolian highlands to the north and the lowland steppes of Syria and the Levant to the east and south.
- Excavations at the site by the University of Chicago in the 1930's revealed a long settlement history dating to the Early Bronze (ca. 3200-2000 BCE) and Iron Ages (1200-600 BCE). Ancient historical sources from the later era indicate that Tayinat was the site of Kunulua, royal city of the powerful Kingdom of Palastin, which controlled much of the North Orontes Valley and Western Syria during this period.
- Tayinat was destroyed by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III in 738 BCE. Biblical scholars have long speculated that the reference to Calneh in Isaiah's oracle against Assyria alludes to Tiglath-pileser's devastation of Kunulua (ie, Tayinat).
- In 2002, the University of Toronto resumed investigations at Tell Tayinat, following a 60-year hiatus. Two preliminary seasons were devoted to a surface survey and production of a topographic base map of the site. These initial investigations also helped to locate the old excavation areas, and to identify new areas for renewed excavations. Full-scale excavations commenced in 2004, and they have continued on an annual basis every year since.



Aerial photograph of Tayinat, with Orontes River in the background.
(Photograph by Murat Akar)

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- The Tayinat temple provides new contextual evidence for understanding the architecture of the Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem, and other ancient Near Eastern cult centers, as well as the ritual activities that took place within their sacred precincts.
- The early Iron Age settlement at Tayinat exhibits strong cultural ties to the Aegean world, the traditional homeland of the Sea Peoples famously depicted at Medinet Habu, the mortuary complex of Ramesses III in Egypt. The land of *Palastin*, meanwhile, appears to have linguistic, and possibly historical, ties to the *Peleset*, one of the Sea Peoples recorded at Medinet Habu, and almost certainly the forebears of the biblical Philistines.
- The remainder of the temple, including its holy of holies, will be the focus of excavations during the upcoming 2009 season.



TAP excavations on the Tayinat Citadel.
(Photograph by Tim Harrison)