

Link to First Temple found

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Archeologists overseeing contested Islamic infrastructure work on Jerusalem's Temple Mount have stumbled upon a sealed archeological level dating back to the First Temple period, the Israel Antiquities Authority announced Sunday.

The find marks the first time that archeological remains dating back to the First Temple period have been found on the contested holy site, the state-run archeological body said.

No archeological excavations have ever been carried out on the Temple Mount, which is Judaism's holiest and Islam's third-holiest site, due to opposition from religious leaders.

The sealed archeological level, dated from the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE, was exposed at the end of August in the area close to the southeastern corner of the raised platform surrounding the Dome of the Rock, and includes fragments of ceramic tableware and animal bone.

"The layer is a closed, sealed archeological layer that has been untouched since as early as the eighth century BCE," said Yuval Baruch, the Jerusalem District archeologist for the Israel Antiquities Authority.

But independent Israeli archeologists from the nonpartisan Committee Against the Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount, who have repeatedly lambasted the Antiquities Authority for allowing Islamic officials to carry out the infrastructure work this summer, downplayed the findings.

The archeologists said the maintenance work, which was carried out with a tractor, had left a 100-meter-long and roughly 1-1.5-meter-deep trench and had badly damaged antiquities at the site.

"The Antiquities Authority is standing behind the barbaric Islamic destruction of antiquities on the Temple Mount, and then presents the results of the destruction to show just how important the finds are," said Hebrew University archeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar, a leading Temple Mount expert. "This is a smoke screen for the destruction of antiquities."

According to decades-old regulations in place at the Temple Mount, Israel maintains overall security control at the site, while the Wakf, or Islamic Trust, is charged with day-to-day administration of the ancient compound, which is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute over control of Jerusalem.

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