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Archaeologists find fragments linked to High Priest

Michele Chabin Religion News Service | Oct. 24, 2008

JERUSALEM -- Israeli archaeologists have discovered a fragment from an ancient sarcophagus cover that bears a carved inscription with the words "The Son of the High Priest" in Hebrew.

The High Priest was ancient Judaism's highest religious official and the only one entrusted with entering the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Jewish Temple that once housed the Ark of the Covenant, once a year.

The fragment, which was discovered in late September during a "rescue" excavation to recover artifacts prior to the construction of part of Israel's security barrier around northern Jerusalem, is only the second known archaeological reference to a High Priest, and the first discovered during an archaeological dig.

The first artifact was stolen from a site in Jerusalem and made its way to the black market before archaeologists were able to examine it in the field.

Naftali Aizik, the archaeologist who co-directed the dig for Israel's Unit of the Archaeological Staff Officer of the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria (West Bank), said the sarcophagus inscription "is unique because we were able to see it in context. It was found in ruins from the early Muslim period, during the seventh and eighth centuries. It must have been taken from its original site, presumably a burial cave, and used as a building stone."

Aizik said the sarcophagus appears to have belonged to the son of a High Priest who officiated at the Temple between A.D. 30 and 69-70.

"Unfortunately we didn't find the fragment with the priest's name, but even so, its discovery was very, very dramatic."

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