

# Archaeology

[Archeology](#) provides an invaluable link between Israel's past and present.

Due to [Israel](#)'s long and rich prehistoric and ancient history, and its small size, the country maintains the highest ratio of ancient sites per area in the world.

The Israel Antiquities Authority has counted more than 14,000 sites and some 6,000 archaeological excavations and surveys have been carried out in the area (including in the [Sinai Peninsula](#), the [Gaza Strip](#) and the [West Bank](#)). Thus, Israel is the most intensively excavated region in the world today. Some of the most important discoveries have been found in [Qirbet Qumran](#), [Hazor](#), [Megiddo](#), Rehov, [Bet Shean](#), [Caesarea](#), Banias, the [Negev](#), and [Tel Dan](#).

The thousands of uncovered sites not only provide an opportunity to study the rich history of Jewish civilization in the area they also shed light on the culture, society and daily life of Israel's many other inhabitants throughout the centuries.

## The Dead Sea Scrolls

The trove of scrolls now known as the [Dead Sea Scrolls](#), discovered in 1948 in the caves of Qumran near the western shore of the [Dead Sea](#), is widely considered the most important archaeological find ever made in Israel. The dry desert climate of the desert region meant that the parchments were amazingly well-preserved, and historians have been able to uncover their secrets. Over more than sixty years the scrolls have significantly enriched the fields of [archaeology](#), comparative theology, [Hebrew](#) and Aramaic studies, and early [Christian](#) history.

The scrolls, some found by bedouins and other by archaeologists in the 1950's, are now housed at the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. They contain Isaiah A, Isaiah B, the Habakkuk Commentary, the Thanksgiving Scroll, the Community Rule (or the Manual of Discipline), the War Rule (or the War of Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness), and the Genesis Apocryphon, the last being in Aramaic. Nearly a third of the documents that were found in the caves contain the books of the Old Testament, save for the [Book of Esther](#).

"The Dead Sea Scrolls represent a turning point in Jewish history," stresses Dr. Adolfo Roitman, curator of the Shrine of the Book. "They reveal the link between Biblical Israel and the Jewish culture of the Talmudic period."

"Not only are the scrolls the oldest known copy of the [Old Testament](#)," Dr. Magen Broshi, former curator of the museum, explains, "but they belonged to the [Essenes](#), a mysterious ascetic Jewish sect that existed about 2,000 years ago and is believed to have had a great influence on the early Christians."

## Western Wall Tunnels

The [Western Wall Tunnels](#) are a series of uncovered portions of biblical streets and tunnels in the area immediately surrounding the [Temple Mount](#) in Jerusalem. The project, which commenced in the aftermath of Israel's victory in the [Six-Day War](#), is still continuing today as more and more structures are uncovered every year.

The tunnels project is an important avenue for exposing information relating to numerous periods in the history of the city of Jerusalem, information which otherwise would be near-impossible to attain. The Temple Mount area is a site of utmost religious importance to Jews, Christians and Muslims, and artifacts uncovered through excavation in the tunnels have had great archaeological and historical importance.

Within the tunnels, which are open to tourists on guided tours, archaeologists have found [two-thousand year old ritual purity baths](#) as well as other Jewish artifacts that historians believe help prove the existence of the Jewish temple in the area.

## **Canaan**

[Ashkelon](#) is the oldest and largest seaport in ancient Canaan, one of the "five cities" of the [Philistines](#), north of Gaza and south of [Jaffa](#).

Archaeological excavations begun in 1985 have revealed accumulated rubble from successive Canaanite, Philistine, Phoenician, [Iranian](#), [Hellenistic](#), [Roman](#), [Byzantine](#), [Islamic](#), and [Crusader](#) occupation.

The ancient city of Hazor, the largest and richest archeological remain in Israel, is located in the upper [Galilee](#), north of the [Sea of Galilee](#). The fortified city was the largest Canaanite city of the 2nd millennium [B.C.E.](#) In the Bible, Hazor is described as *"the head of all those kingdoms"* (Joshua 11:10).

Hazor was totally destroyed by fire at the end of the Late Bronze Age (around 1200 B.C.E.). The conflagration is mentioned in the Bible, emphasizing the complete destruction of Hazor during the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites (Joshua 11:13): *"But as for the cities that stood still in their strength, Israel burned none of them, save Hazor only; that did Joshua burn. "*

## **Megiddo**

One of the largest city mounds in Israel (covering an area of about 15 acres) and rich in archeological finds, Megiddo is an important site for the study of the material culture of biblical times.

A total of 20 cities were built at Megiddo, one above the other, over the course of 5,000 years of continuous occupation; from the time of the first settlement at the end of the 6th millennium BCE to its abandonment in the 5th century BCE. The area was a site of great importance in the ancient world, as it guarded the western branch of a narrow pass and an ancient trade route which connected [Egypt](#) and [Assyria](#). Because of its strategic location at the crossroads of several major routes, Megiddo survived several major battles throughout history.

In 2005, the remains of a church were discovered that are believed to be from the third century, a time when Christians were still persecuted by the [Roman Empire](#). Among the finds is a large mosaic with a [Greek](#) inscription stating that the church is consecrated to [Jesus Christ](#). The mosaic is very well preserved and

features geometrical figures and images of fish, an early Christian symbol. It is speculated that this may be the oldest church in the Holy Land .

## Rehov

Rehov was the site of an important Bronze and [Iron Age](#) Canaanite city.

Tel Rehov, a large earthen city mound in the [Jordan Valley](#), is approximately five kilometres south of Bet She'an and three kilometres west of the Jordan River. The site represents one of the largest ancient city mounds in Israel. The Iron Age II levels of the site, in particular, have emerged as a vitally important component in the current debate regarding the chronology of the [United Monarchy of Israel](#). Important data has also been forthcoming regarding the Early Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age and medieval occupation of the site.

## Other Excavations

The excavation of the Roman city of Bet Shean was the largest single excavation undertaken in Israel since 1986. Significant finds have been uncovered from the ancient city, which was also inhabited during the Byzantine period and the early Arab period.

A large-scale excavation is being undertaken at Caesarea on the seacoast. Two of the largest constructions to have been unearthed are the Herodian port and amphitheatre.

At Banias, at the foot of [Mount Hermon](#), excavations are unearthing sections of the city built by Philip, the son of Herod. Another large excavation is taking place at Tel Maresha (Marissa) near [Beit Govrin](#) in the coastal plain. The findings will hopefully fill gaps in knowledge of the Hellenistic period.

In the Negev, the excavation at [Hatzeva](#) has led to the discovery of remnants of a defended settlement from the end of the First Temple period and of the Roman period, which have been identified with the biblical Tamar. An Edomite ritual site rich in cultic objects has also been unearthed.

Among recently unearthed inscriptions of importance are stelae from Tel Dan. These basalt shards carry remnants of Aramaic writing from the ninth century B.C.E. One inscription recalls the "King of Israel" and also "the House of David" as the name of the sovereign's house in [Judea](#). This is the first time that the name of David has come to light outside the Bible.

