

History

Matt Beynon Rees

When I was a little boy in Wales, my great-uncle Dai used to get drunk at Christmas and tell us about his WWI exploits. Dai fought with the Imperial Camel Corps as it battled through Palestine. Cutting the Turkish supply lines before the British made their final push on Jerusalem, Dai was shot in the buttock. When he was well into a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label, he used to drop his pants and show the scar. This gave me an early fascination with the Middle East.

There's sure to be some part of the Holy Land's history that has touched your life already – even if not quite as viscerally as the naked backside of a 90-year-old war veteran. Whether it's singing Christmas carols about events in Bethlehem 2000 years ago; marvelling at the beautiful Dome of the Rock your Muslim ancestors built in the 7th century; praying with your father in a synagogue, facing towards the Temple destroyed by the Romans; or shaking your head as you watch the news of an unfolding intifada on TV – in some way, the story of Israel and Palestine is part of your history. But the accepted accounts are constantly being revised by new historians and archaeologists who must grapple with the national and religious myths inscribed on almost every weathered chunk of local limestone.

ANCIENT TIMES

In the Holy Land, ancient history is often determined by your view of contemporary politics. Some years ago, I visited the chief Muslim cleric in Jerusalem, Sheikh Ikrema Sabri, whose position carries the title mufti. The mufti told me that 'there's not one single stone in Jerusalem that proves the Jews were here' before Islam (a charge repeated by Palestinian negotiators at Camp David in 2000, to the consternation of US president Bill Clinton). Of course, Israelis have no problem finding stones that prove the mufti wrong. Archaeology involves a lot more opinion than you might think, but it's rather more intelligent guesswork than the politically motivated mythmaking that muddies the waters even at the negotiating table.

Ancient Palestine was somewhat more physically hospitable than today's desert landscape. Between 10,000 and 8000 BC (a little later than in nearby Mesopotamia) locals switched from hunting to production of grain and domestication of animals. They didn't quite 'make the deserts bloom', as 20th-century Zionists proclaimed to have done, but the ancients did share something in common with today's residents: they fought a lot of wars. The first to conquer the land were Egyptian pharaohs, who controlled the Palestinian coastal plain when, around 1800 BC, Abraham led his nomadic tribe from Mesopotamia to what are now the Judean hills. Abraham fought a war over wells against indigenous tribes. His descendants were forced to move on to Egypt because of drought and crop failure, but in about 1250 BC Moses led them back. Battles with the Philistines and Canaanites pushed the Israelites to abandon their loose tribal system and unify under King Saul.

In 1006 BC, the Philistines defeated Saul at Mt Gilboa. Saul committed suicide on the battlefield, and the Israelites were divided into two kingdoms. Israel was roughly the north of today's West Bank, while further south King David (r 1004–965 BC) ruled over Judah and conquered Salem (today's Jerusalem). David named the city Zion, from the Hebrew

Matt Beynon Rees has covered the Middle East as a journalist for over a decade. He was *Time* magazine's Jerusalem bureau chief and is the author of a series of Palestinian detective novels. For more biographical information, see p447.

There's no archaeological evidence for much of the biblical story, but enough of the story matches the few fragments of evidence that its account can be taken seriously. For example, physical evidence of the military expeditions of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, backs the story in the Book of Kings.

The first nonbiblical mention of Israel is on the Egyptian Museum's Israel Stela, which is carved with the victory hymn of Pharaoh Merneptah from 1230 BC: 'Plundered is Canaan, Carried is Ashkelon, Israel is laid waste.'

The best practical guide to the ancient origins of local sites is *The Holy Land* (Oxford Archaeological Guides) by Father Jerome Murphy O'Connor, a professor at the Ecole Biblique in Jerusalem.

Israel's elite commando unit, Sayeret Matkal, takes its motto from the writings of Josephus Flavius: 'No great ventures without great risks.'

ziya, meaning 'parched desert'. At that time, Jerusalem was much smaller than today's Old City and stood downhill from its present southern edge. Later, Jerusalem moved up the hill, across, then down, then back up and across again, until the 16th century when it finally occupied the footprint of the current Old City (see p95). The city didn't expand much beyond there until the late 19th century and its growth – like many other things hereabouts – exploded in the last half-century.

Myth and history truly intersect on the large flat rock now contained beneath Jerusalem's golden Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount (p100). Originally an altar to Baal or some other pagan deity, the rock was known to Jews as the Stone of Foundation, the place where the universe began and Adam was born of dust. It's also said to be where Abraham bound his son Isaac in preparation to sacrifice him, as a sign of his obedience to God. David's son, Solomon, built the First Temple here to be the centre of the Jewish faith (as opposed to the Second Temple, which was constructed on the same site, was largely the work of King Herod the Great and was later destroyed by the Romans; see opposite). Scholars believe the rock may have been the altar of Solomon's and Herod's Temples, because of a series of holes bored in it that might have provided drainage for water or sacrificial blood. It may also have been the Holy of Holies in the Temple, where only the High Priest ventured and where the Tablets of the Law given to Moses were kept.

After Solomon's reign (965–928 BC), the Jews entered a period of division and periodic subjugation. In the 8th century, Sargon II of Assyria (r 722–705 BC) captured Israel and forced Judah to pay a tribute. He also defeated the Egyptians at Rapihu, now Rafah in the Gaza Strip.

There's a recent theory among archaeologists called the 'low chronology' school of biblical history, which suggests that it's only around this point – about 150 years after David – that Israel and Judah developed into anything more than rough collections of farming tribes. It's a popular theory among scientists, though many dispute it because traditionally David and Solomon were seen as rulers of broad kingdoms. If 'low chronology' theory is correct, then the Israelites got it together as a state only just in time to be subjugated.

And not for the last time. In 586 BC the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and exiled the people of Judah to what's now Iraq. Fifty years later the Persian King Cyrus defeated Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to Palestine. At that point it seemed to the Jews that their troubles were over.

REVOLTS & ROMANS

When Alexander the Great died in 323 BC, Ptolemy, one of his generals, claimed Egypt as his own, founding a line of which Cleopatra would be the last. He also took the Holy Land, but in 200 BC the Seleucids, another dynasty descended from one of Alexander's generals, captured it. The Seleucids displaced the Temple priests in Jerusalem and set about paganising the Jews. This 'Hellenistic' period – for the Greek origin of the Seleucids and the Olympian cults they promoted – is a key moment in the shaping of Jewish nationhood and is seen by many Israelis as a prototype for their recent military struggles. In 167 BC a Seleucid official arrived in the village of Modi'in, near what's now Ben-Gurion airport, and ordered the construction of a pagan altar and a sacrifice. The local priest, Mattityahu, refused to comply. He killed the Seleucid official and a Jew who was about to make the sacrifice, then fled to the hills with his sons. One son, Judah Maccabee, became military leader of a revolt that restored Jewish control to an area almost the size of David's and Solo-