

Mystery continues on Jerusalem's 'Temple Tablet'

The dispute continues over the supposed discovery of the first inscription directly tied to one of the ancient kings in the Bible.

If authentic and truly thousands of years old, the words on the so-called "Temple Tablet" would undergird Israel's present-day claim to Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

This would also buttress traditional Jewish and Christian belief in the reliability of Old Testament history, against liberal scholars who treat the accounts of King Solomon and his Temple as fiction.

This is "the most important and exciting archaeological discovery," according to one interested party, the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful Movement, which wants to reconstruct Jerusalem's Temple. But some leading scholars say the business is a hoax.

The tablet is a slab of dark sandstone, the size of a legal

pad, inscribed with 15 lines in ancient Hebrew. The message echoes biblical accounts (2 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 24) about Temple repairs under King Jehoash (or Joash). By conventional reckoning, the Temple was completed 2,962 years ago and Joash reigned several generations afterward.

The discovery was reported in the Israeli press in January. To sort through the confusion that has continued since then, the current issue of Biblical Archaeology Review provides a typically informative assessment by its editor, Hershel Shanks.

There's considerable mystery, since the lawyer representing the tablet's owner won't say who he is, how he got it or exactly where and

how it was found. Press reports say some Arabs obtained it in a valley near the

Temple Mount (or Noble Sanctuary, the name used by the holy site's Muslim administrators).

The unknown origin makes verification more difficult and adds to suspicions of possible forgery.

What's at stake, Shanks says, is not just this tablet but how specialists make decisions

about any ancient artifact.

If this inscription is authentic, he writes, that will impugn the detective ability of epigraphers (inscription experts) and philologists (language experts). If it's a hoax, that will undercut confidence in work by geologists.



RICHARD OSTLING

► OSTLING, E-6

► OSTLING

Continued from E-5

In 2001, the tablet was shown to Joseph Naveh, a specialist in ancient writings at Israel's Hebrew University. He concluded it was probably a forgery, and later became even more dubious. The tablet was then submitted to the Geological Survey of Israel, where experts Michael Dvorchik, Shimon Ilani and Amnon Rosenfeld pronounced it authentic.

Since then, textual experts have split. Frank Moore Cross of Harvard University, Kyle McCarter of Johns Hopkins University and Robert Deutsch of Israel's Haifa University are among the nay-sayers who think technical mistakes in spelling and letter shapes indicate forgery.

Other text specialists are undecided. One problem is that there's little written material from that era for comparison.

On the opposite side, the geologists report electron microscope examination showed the surface film (patina) formed naturally and indicates an ancient inscription. The patina in a crack is said to reinforce this conclusion. Nor was there evidence of glues or other artificial substances to apply patina.

In addition, fine particles of carbon were discovered in the patina that allowed carbon-14 tests to fix a date of 400 B.C. to 200 B.C. at 95 percent certainty. There were also microscopic globules of pure gold. In one theory, the carbon and gold could have come from the burning of the Temple during the Babylonian conquest (586 B.C.).

Shanks raises circumstantial points: If the owner knew the tablet was fake he would never have taken it to an expert like Naveh, so any fraud must lie elsewhere. How could a forger plant those ancient bits of carbon or fake the patina so cleverly that expert geologists would be misled?