

The Zeitah Excavations

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Affiliated with

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Tel Zayit: An Overview

An hour's drive southwest of Jerusalem, Tel Zayit (Arabic Zeitah, meaning "olive tree") lies in Israel's fertile Beth Guvrin Valley roughly halfway between the major Judahite city of Lachish and the Philistine city at Tel es-Safi (biblical Gath). Tel Zayit belonged to the Libnah district of biblical Judah (Joshua 15:42), and its ancient identification may be associated with Libnah itself. The site's acropolis and lower settlement cover about eight acres—a manageable size for exposing through excavation the maximum amount of occupational debris buried there.

The borderland site of Tel Zayit lies at the crossroads of four major ancient roadways connecting Egypt and the plain of Philistia with Jerusalem and the highlands of Judah. Because of its unique and strategic location, it makes for an ideal site to study life in an ancient town that saw frequent opportunities for contact between people of diverse cultures.

Artifacts recovered from Tel Zayit reveal that it was occupied from the Middle Bronze Age to the biblical period and on through to Ottoman times. Over the centuries, Zeitah's inhabitants undoubtedly traded goods with traveling merchants from all over the ancient Near East, faced the devastating Assyrian assault under Sennacherib in 701 BCE, and watched anxiously for the signal fires of Lachish and Azekah during the Babylonian invasion of 587/86 BCE.

Under the sponsorship of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, The Zeitah Excavations launched the archaeological investigation of this strategically located biblical town in 1999.

Tel Zayit was featured in a PBS NOVA special television presentation, "The Bible's Buried Secrets," that aired on November 18, 2008.

The Zeitah website at www.zeitah.net contains detailed information on all aspects of the excavation's program, including options for gaining academic credit for participation as a volunteer excavator, a downloadable volunteer application, travel tips, and a gallery of photographs. Volunteers need no previous excavation experience, but they must be 18 years of age or older and in excellent health.



The steep eastern slope of Tel Zayit, with additional excavated areas on top of the tell, shows remains of continuous occupation from about 1800 BCE to the late ninth century BCE.



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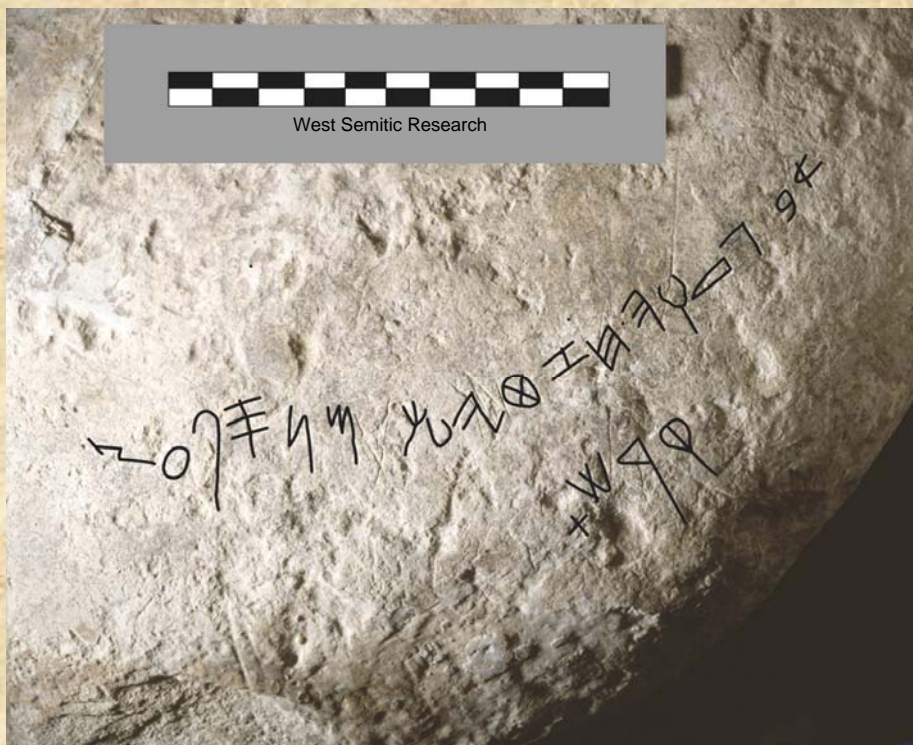
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The Tel Zayit Abecedarary

On the final day of the 2005 season, The Zeitah Excavations made a dramatic discovery: a twenty-two-letter inscription bearing the oldest known securely datable example of the complete linear alphabet. The letters represent a transitional script that developed from earlier Phoenician traditions and anticipated the distinctive features of the mature Hebrew national script.

All successive alphabets (including non-Semitic ones, such as Greek and Latin) derive from the forms seen here.

The importance of this discovery lies not only in its archaic alphabetic text, called an “abecedarary,” but also in the stone’s firmly datable archaeological context (tenth century BCE)—an extremely rare occurrence among the few extant inscriptions of this nature.

An overlay of the twenty-two-letter Tel Zayit abecedarary shows the tenth-century BCE forms that were incised into the stone itself.

Season’s Preview 2011

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In 2009, the Zeitah team located burned debris from the destruction of Tel Zayit during the Assyrian military campaign of Sennacherib through the Shephelah in 701 BCE—the time of King Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 18–20 and Isaiah 36–37). Work during the 2011 Season will focus on Square K20, located on the tell’s western summit. Our goal will be to penetrate the previously exposed Hellenistic and Roman deposits in order to reach levels that we can associate with the Assyrian destruction identified in other areas of the site. The results of this work will enhance our understanding of the history of both the site and the region during the Iron Age IIB period.

During each excavation season, the Zeitah team resides at nearby Kibbutz Galon, located in one of the most beautiful regions of Israel—the foothills of biblical Judah.



The Tel Zayit abecedarary was inscribed with an extremely fine, probably iron point into a limestone boulder (shown above in situ). The boulder was later incorporated into the wall of a building, with the inscribed side facing the interior of a stone-paved room.



A bowl-shaped hollow ground into the opposite side of the 38-pound boulder bearing the Tel Zayit Inscription added another intriguing element to the stone’s significance for the 2005 team.

