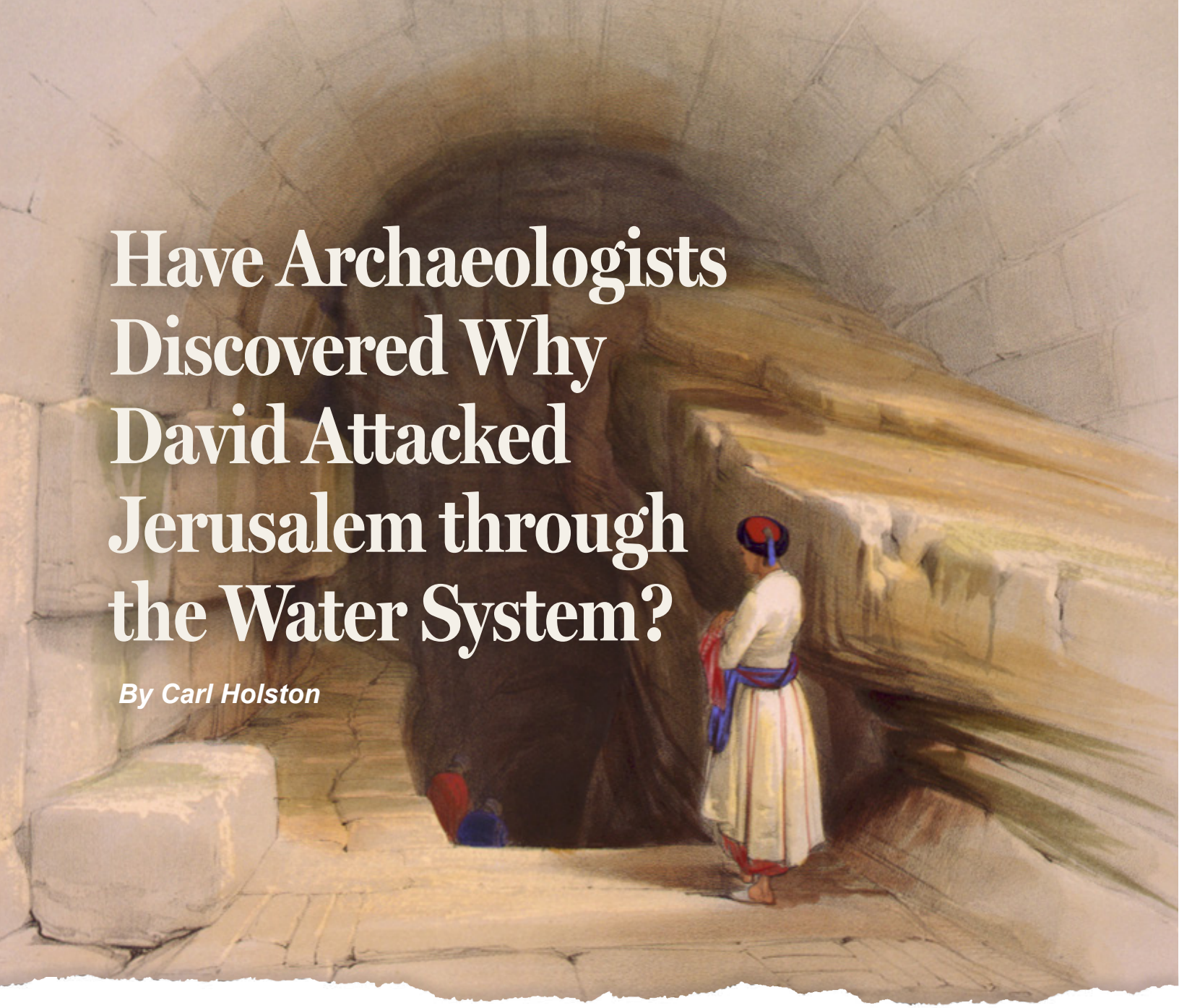


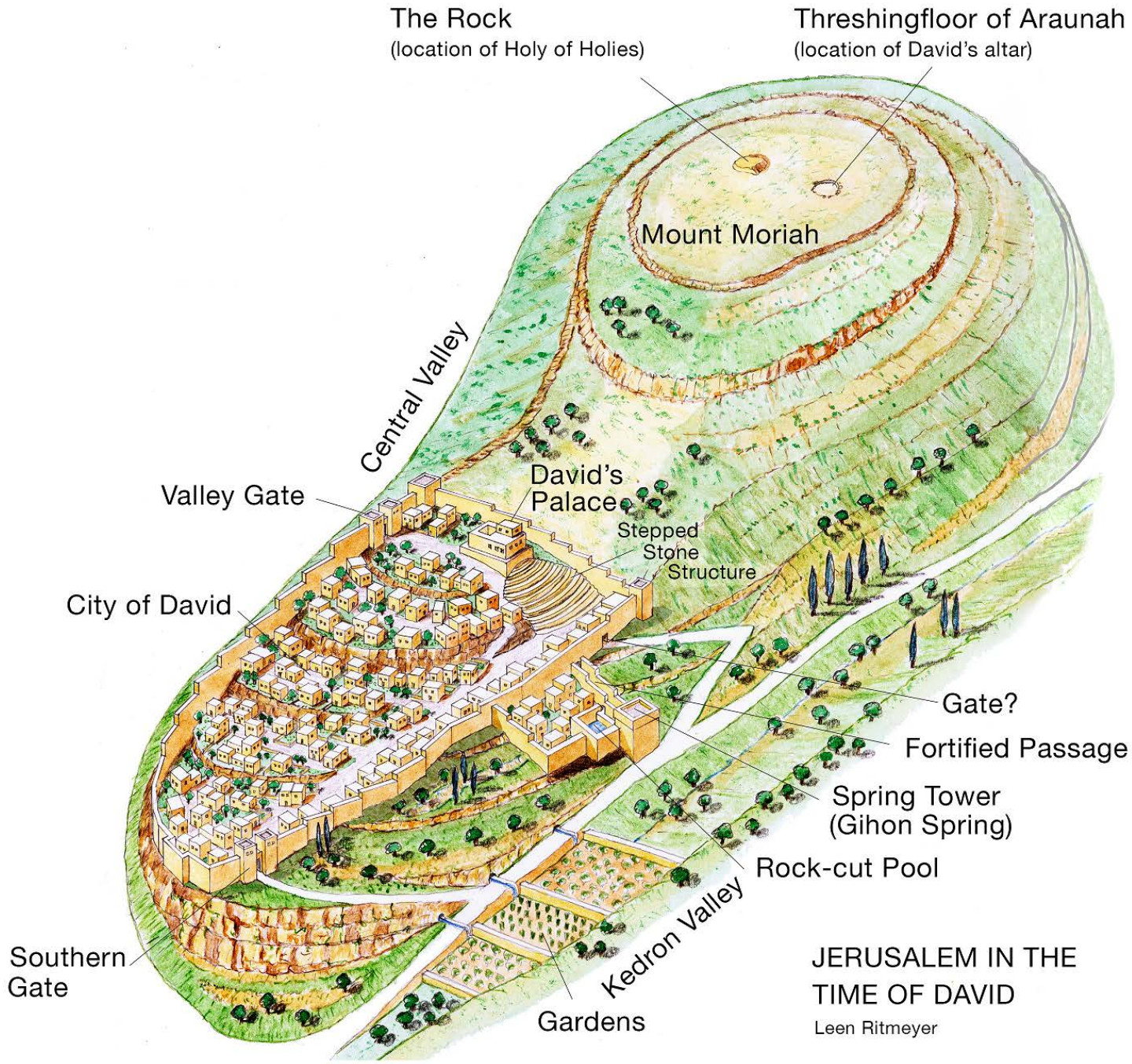
Have Archaeologists Discovered Why David Attacked Jerusalem through the Water System?

By Carl Holston

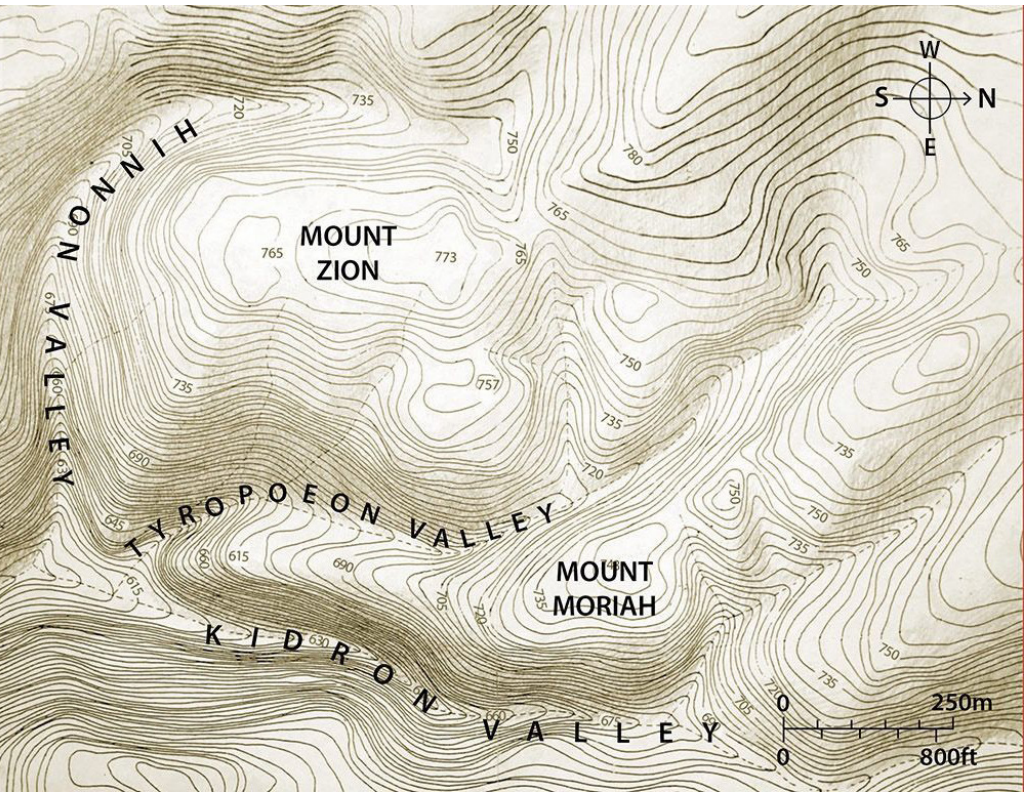
The city of Jerusalem is nestled in the midst of a unique topography of hills and valleys. Before it was called the City of David, the original settlement here was the Canaanite city of Jebus (also called Salem), which was built on a steep and narrow ridge between the Tyropoeon Valley to the west and the Kidron Valley to the east. To the north, Jebus sloped to a higher elevation and was connected with Mount Moriah. At first glance, one would think that in times of war, an attacker could have ignored the prohibitively steep walls of Jebus on the east, south, and west and made the relatively short march down from the higher elevation of Mount Moriah and into the lower city. However, such was not the case, as Jebus was never captured until David accomplished the feat several hundred years after the arrival of the Hebrews under Joshua.

In fact, it is recorded in 2 Samuel 5:6 that when David moved to capture the highly fortified city of Jebus, the residents taunted him by saying that the city's defenses were so robust that the blind and the lame could withstand his attack. That assessment was apparently correct, so David famously devised an alternate plan, penetrating the defenses by secretly entering the city through the water shaft.

So this begs the question, what prohibited the otherwise logical attack from the north? There must have been some kind of fortification that was so formidable that David didn't even consider launching a direct attack against the city walls from this direction. Why? A variety of archaeologists have been trying to answer this question for around 150 years. Perhaps the answer has been found.



This illustration captures the relatively gentle slope of the land from the top of Mount Moriah down to the city of Jebus (later, the City of David) and shows the military vulnerability of the northern wall in comparison to the very formidable defensive walls that surrounded the other parts of the city. The illustration was drawn prior to the discovery of the trench currently being uncovered underneath the modern-day Givati Parking Lot and shows the general layout of Jerusalem at the time of King David. The current excavation team hopes to find conclusive evidence that the defensive moat dates back to the time of the city of Jebus. Drawing by Leen Ritmeyer.



Map created by FreeBibleimages (https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/jerusalem-jesus/), based on an original by Balage Balogh / www.ArchaeologyIllustrated.com. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. This topographic map, oriented with north to the right, reveals the hills and valleys of Jerusalem. The city of Jebus was located on the southern end of the ridge between the Tyropoeon and Kidron Valleys, with the steep incline of the slopes on the east, south, and west making the city easy to defend on those sides. However, the city was vulnerable to the north, as the ridge slopes gently to the summit of Mount Moriah. The current excavation north of the city has revealed a trench that cuts across the slope, which would have separated the lower city from Mount Moriah.

Dr. Yiftach Shalev from the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) and Professor Yuval Gadot of the Department of Archeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures at Tel Aviv University have recently announced that they believe the answer to this question is that the residents dug a massive trench across the top of the ridge as a kind of a "cheat" to separate Jebus from the crest of the ridge that overlooked the town.[1] And the term "massive" is not an exaggeration.

Shalev and Gadot have been working in the area of the Givati Parking Lot in the City of David National Park in Jerusalem and have uncovered a trench that is estimated to measure 98 feet (30 m) wide, 30 feet (9 m) deep, and 230 feet (70 m) long running east to west across the entire width of the ridge between the Tyropoeon and Kidron Valleys.[2] One commentator has said that, "Cut into the hill's natural bedrock, the ditch would have required the quarrying of nearly half a million cubic feet of stone," and that "the moat would have drastically altered the natural terrain" of the ridge.[3] Shalev has commented that the markings and style of the trench do not support that this was a quarry, although he does not rule out that stone from this site may have been used for construction elsewhere.[4]

As a Live Science news article reports, "The steep, perpendicular sides of the moat would have made it 'impassable' to intruders, according to a statement from the Israel Antiquities Authority."[5] Thus, the moat would have remedied Jebus's only significant vulnerability by obstructing any assaults from the north.

Ironically, the moat was nearly identified by British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon back in the 1960s. Shalev and Gadot went back through Kenyon's excavation reports from the time and learned that one of the sites she was excavating was a small and narrow area to the east of the Givati site, but that she didn't fully understand what she had found there. Kenyon had dismissed the structure as a natural valley, but Shalev and Gadot deduced that it was actually a continuation of the moat.[6] From Kenyon's notes, it became apparent that the Givati findings should be merged with Kenyon's findings to determine the full length of the trench.[7] In trying to dig down to bedrock, the Givati excavation found a layer of material that has been dated to the late ninth century BC (late Iron IIA / early Iron IIB). That would make the trench at least that old, but Shalev hesitates to suggest an earlier date without the physical evidence to definitively prove it. He estimates that there are still several more meters to go before reaching bedrock and believes that he may yet find the definitive measures to prove that the construction is of Jebusite origin.[8]

Following his conquest of Jerusalem, David began the process of reshaping the city's topography when he paid Araunah the Jebusite 50 shekels of silver in order to build an altar on Mount Moriah (2 Sm 24:18–25). David's son Solomon subsequently undertook monumental construction on the northern hill when he built the temple and other structures associated with worship there. The Bible also mentions in 1 Kings 11:27 that "Solomon built the Millo, and closed up the breach of the city of David his father."

This trench apparently remained an open area and served as a dividing point between the monumental acropolis on Mount Moriah and a more domestic area to the south until it was filled in during the late second century BC and eventually forgotten.[9]

Gadot has stated that excavations in the area will continue and that he hopes that further efforts will lead to a better understanding of the topography at the top of the ridge, including the Ophel and the Millo, which still tend to be unclear.[10]