

J E R U S A L E M I N F L A M E S

The Burnt House Captures a Moment in Time

By Nahman Avigad

WE CAME UPON IT SUDDENLY, in the very first year of our excavations. At that time we had not yet excavated a single house that had witnessed the catastrophe of 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. We were still emotionally unprepared for the impressions and associations raised by the prospect before us. In subsequent years, after several other burnt houses had been discovered, our emotions became somewhat blunted to the sight of such stark violence. But not only was this Burnt House the first such discovery, its preservation of traces of destruction and fire and the quantity of objects found in it were never exceeded. In January 1970, after heaps of rubble and refuse had been cleared away, we removed a rather thick layer of fill and refuse containing nothing ancient. Then stone walls suddenly began sprouting out of the earth. We saw immediately that these were the walls of rooms. As a first step in stratigraphic excavation, we dug a trench the breadth of one of the rooms, in order to determine the sequence of the layers. At a depth of about a meter, we encountered a floor of beaten earth. Already, the sides of the trench were providing a clear and impressive cross section, which we were able to read like an open book.

The upper layer contained fallen building stones that had changed color as the result of a fire. The layer be-

neath was a mixture of earth, ashes, soot and charred wood; at the bottom of the cross section, overlying the floor, were pottery fragments and parts of scorched stone vessels. The plastered walls were also black with soot. The picture was clear to any trained eye. There was only one phase of occupation, and its composition was unambiguous: the building had been destroyed by fire, and the walls and ceiling had collapsed along with the burning beams, sealing over the various objects in the rooms. When did this occur? The pottery indicated that it was sometime in the first century A.D.

Was the destruction of this building, so close to the Temple Mount, connected with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.? We seemed to have before us a unique picture of a house sacked by the Roman legions. The household effects were buried and left just as they had been, undisturbed by later activities.

In the excavation diary I wrote: "On the same day (13 January 1970) I was somewhat excited." But after the

Caught in the fire when the Romans attacked, a young woman who was in the kitchen of the Burnt House sank to the floor and was reaching for a step near the doorway when she died. The fire had spread so fast, perhaps fed by oil used in this kitchen, that she could not escape and was buried by falling debris.





initial excitement came moments of doubt. My initial impression might merely have been wishful thinking, and the facts might not lend themselves to such far-reaching conclusions. My chief assistant at the time, Ami Mazar, was away, and Roni Reich, the area supervisor, was as carried away as I was. I therefore invited several of my fellow Jerusalem archaeologists to visit the site, each one separately, to see their reactions to the cross section. All of them arrived at the same conclusion as ours.

Systematic excavation of the entire area only served to increase our tension as well as our expectations. The salient question was whether the same phenomenon would be found in the other rooms as well. As we cleared each room, an identical picture emerged. First we would come across stone debris from the collapsed walls, which filled the rooms. The dressed blocks were of the soft, local *nari* limestone, which had been baked to various colors by the great heat of the fire. Some had become lime-white, while others were gray, red, and yellow, and mostly very crumbly. Among the debris filling the rooms were a mixture of ash and soot and large quantities of charred wood.

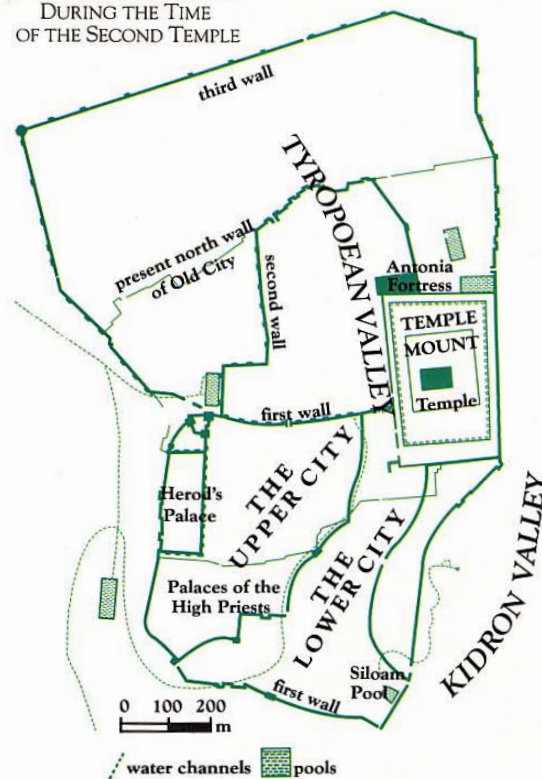
Soot reigned over all, clinging to everything. It covered the plastered walls. Even the faces of our workmen turned black. There was no doubt that the fire had rampaged here, apparently fed by some highly flammable material contained in the rooms. It may well have been some oil, which would account for the abundance of soot. The traces were so vivid that one could almost feel the heat and smell the fire.

When we reached the floor level, objects began appearing, scattered about or in heaps: pottery, stone vessels, broken glass, iron nails, and the like. The known types of pottery gave us a general dating in the first century A.D. for the destruction of the building. But the many coins strewn over the floor—partly from the Roman Procurators of Judea and mostly from the First Jewish Revolt against

Looking toward the Temple Mount, excavators pause in their work of uncovering a building in Jerusalem's Upper City.

During Second Temple times, a priest would stand at the pinnacle of the southwest corner of the Temple Mount, the wall angle in front of the silver dome, and blow the shofar, or ram's horn, to herald the Sabbath and important festivals. But on August 28, 70 A.D., the Jews of the Upper City who looked toward the Temple Mount saw not the trumpeter but their Temple in flames. Perhaps the sight gave them courage because, according to Josephus, they held out against the Roman assault for nearly a month after the destruction of the Temple. Finally, on September 20, the Romans overran the city, slaughtering the inhabitants and putting the entire city to the torch.

LOCATION OF
JERUSALEM'S UPPER CITY
DURING THE TIME
OF THE SECOND TEMPLE



Rome—permitted a more precise dating. The coins of the revolt bear the legends "Year Two/The Freedom of Zion," "Year Three/The Freedom of Zion," and "Year Four/Of the Redemption of Zion." The latest, from the fourth year of the revolt, date to 69 A.D.

It was now quite clear that this building was burnt by the Romans in 70 A.D., during the destruction of Jerusalem. For the first time in the history of excavations in the city, vivid and clear archaeological evidence of the burning of the city had come to light. We refrained from publicizing this fact immediately, in order to keep from being disturbed by visitors. But word of the discovery soon spread and people began thronging to the site to see the finds on the spot.

The already considerable excitement upon seeing the scorched objects being recovered from the ashes increased with the discovery of a spear leaning against the corner of a room. Beyond the image of the destruction, each of us pictured in his mind the scene so vividly described by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus: the Roman soldiers spreading out over the Upper City, looting and setting the houses alight as they slaughtered all in their path. The owner of this house, or one of its inhabitants, had



managed to place his spear so it would be readily accessible, but he never got to use it.

Something amazing occurred in the hearts of all who witnessed the progress of excavations here. The burning of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem—fateful events in the history of the Jewish People—suddenly took on a new and horrible significance. Persons who had previously regarded this catastrophe as stirring but abstract and remote, having occurred two millennia ago, were so visibly moved by the sight that they occasionally would beg permission to take a fistful of soil or a bit of charred wood “in memory of the destruction.” Others volunteered to take part in uncovering the remains, regarding such labor as sacred. The latent sentiment released—by people normally quite composed and immune to showing their emotions—was unbelievable.

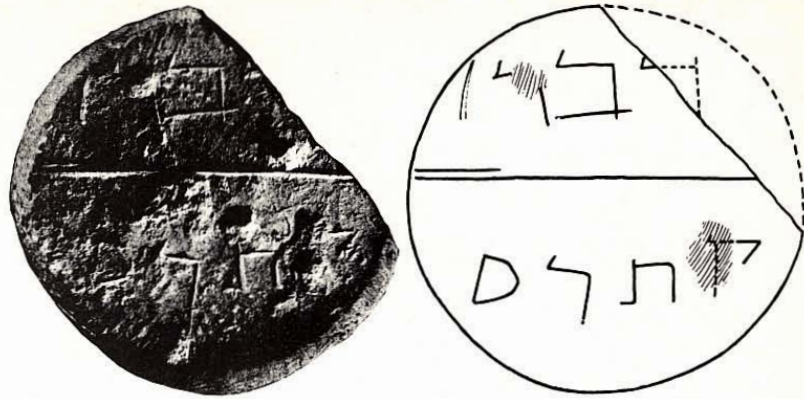
The series of rooms uncovered was from the basement level of a large house whose continuation lies under a new dwelling on the north, so it could not be excavated. On the west, the building is abutted by an earth fill and building remains from the Israelite period. This is a good example of how a house from the days of the Second Temple was built over a site from the First Temple period.

The plan of the Burnt House (p. 72), as far as it could be recovered, included a small courtyard paved with stones (1), three medium-sized rooms (2, 3, 4), a small room (5) that was the only one not burnt and that contained no finds, a small kitchen (6), and a small, stepped ritual bath (7). The walls of the rooms were generally preserved to the height of about one meter; they were coated with a thin white lime plaster, while the floors were of beaten earth. The ovens sunk into the floors of these rooms are evidence that these were not dwelling quarters but probably a workshop. Although a variety of small objects were scattered in disarray throughout the rooms, the outstanding feature in each room was a heap of broken objects, including stone vessels, stone tables, and pottery. Before the building collapsed, the violent hand of man had cast unwanted belongings into heaps on the floor—seeing this, we recalled Josephus’s description of the Roman soldiers looting the houses after the city had been conquered.

One fine day in January 1970, while we were still excavating the Burnt House, our registrar of finds, Sara Hofri,

At the ready, this spear was propped against a wall in the Burnt House where its owner could quickly grab it to defend himself against the invading Romans. But the Romans burned this house so quickly that the spear was never touched; instead it was buried in place by the fiery debris of collapsed walls and ceiling, preserving for 2,000 years this image of resistance and tragedy.

"Of Bar Kathros," proclaims the Hebrew inscription on this stone weight (left) found in the Burnt House. An artist's drawing of the weight (right) shows the partially broken letter dalet (the first letter, reading right to left) which means "of." Now archaeologists can give a name and even a family history to the owners of this workshop. The Bar Kathros family was infamous—as High Priests, they served as overlords of their fellow Jews during Roman rule and abused their power through nepotism and libel.



came running over from our expedition office with a stone weight in her hands, shouting: "Inscription"—a word that electrifies any archaeologist working on a dig. This weight, one of the many found in the Burnt House, had been washed and was then found to bear letters incised in thin lines. The inscription was not in the Greek script so often found on such weights but rather in Hebrew (to be more precise, in the "square" Aramaic script). Except for the first letter in the upper line, of which only the tip remains, and the first letter in the lower line, which was partly blurred, the inscription was intact and could clearly be read: "(of) Bar Kathros," or "(of) the son of Kathros."

Brief inscriptions of this sort, which lend a personal touch to the silent finds, are invaluable to the excavator. They bring bone-dry discoveries to life by adding the historical dimension of the material itself. This inscription opened up the possibility of identifying the owner of the house and ascertaining the sort of people who lived there. Did the name Bar Kathros fit into the picture of the period, the locale and the events being revealed before us through the archaeological discoveries? The "House of Kathros" is known as one of the families of High Priests who, in practical terms, ruled the Jews of Palestine in the days of the Roman procurators. They had taken over important offices in the Temple and abused their position there through nepotism and oppression. A folksong preserved in Talmudic literature relates the corruption of these priests:

Woe is me because of the House of Boethus,
 woe is me because of their slaves.
 Woe is me because of the House of Hanan,
 woe is me because of their incantation.
 Woe is me because of the House of Kathros,
 woe is me because of their pens.
 Woe is me because of the House of Ishmael, son of
 Phiabi,

woe is me because of their fists.

For they are the High Priests, and their sons are treasurers, and their sons-in-law are trustees, and their servants beat the people with staves."

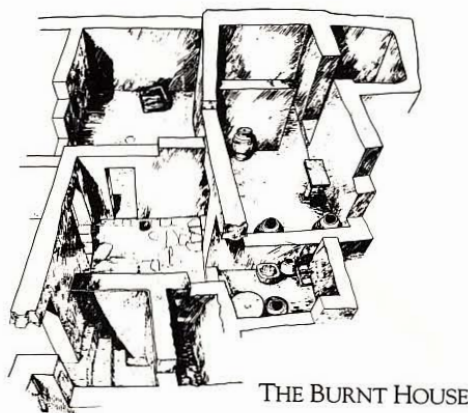
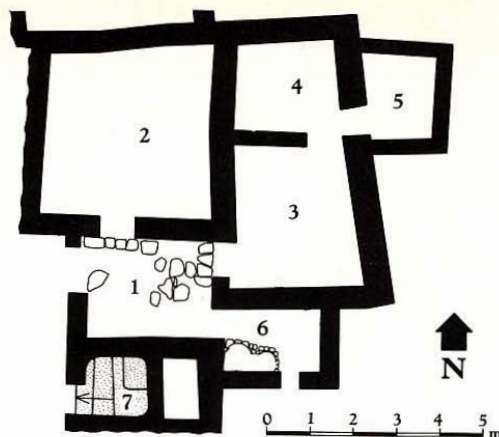
(Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 57, 1 = Tosefta, Minhag 13, 21)

This refrain gives vent to the groanings of a people under the oligarchic rule of a priesthood that used any means to further its own interests. Apparently, each of the priestly families mentioned here practiced its own form of oppression: the one through a sharp tongue, the next through a sharp pen, and most of them through simple brute force. The members of the "House of Kathros," who are accused of misusing the written word, were infamous for their libelous slander.

It can be assumed that our Bar Kathros was a scion of this same Kathros family. He lived in the same period, and his name—not a common one—was unknown outside that family. (The word *bar*, literally "son of," without a personal name before it, indicates that the name here is a family name rather than that of an actual father.) The house in which his inscription was found is situated opposite the Temple Mount, in a neighborhood that was populated by the nobility of Jerusalem.

We have defined a small room (6) at the northern edge of the Burnt House as a kitchen. This room, too, was entirely burnt out during the fire. Near its northern wall was a crude hearth of small fieldstones, built in two parts. The left-hand section contained a round pottery oven.

A unique find came to light near the doorway on the east, where more of the wall was destroyed than at any other spot. Leaning against the preserved fragment of the wall were the skeletal remains of the lower arm and hand of a human being, with the fingers still attached. The hand was spread out, grasping at a step. Dr. B. Ahrensburg, who examined these remains, determined that they



were of a woman in her early twenties. The associations conjured up by this spectacle were rather frightful. We could visualize a young woman working in the kitchen when the Roman soldiers burst into the house and put it to the torch. She tried to flee but collapsed near the doorway, only to perish in the flames. This arm seems to be the first and only human remains discovered so far that can definitely be associated with the great human tragedy that accompanied the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This tangible evidence, surprising in its freshness and shocking in its realism, gave us the feeling that it had all happened only yesterday.

We are well aware of the events of this tragedy: The Romans captured the Temple and burnt it on the ninth of Ab (28 August, 70 A.D.), taking the Lower City at the same time. But the Upper City on the Western Hill, above the scarp facing the Temple Mount, held out stubbornly. On the eighth of Elul, a month after the Temple had been burnt, the Romans attacked the Upper City

with full fury, taking it, setting the houses afire and slaughtering the inhabitants. Josephus describes the fighting in detail:

Caesar, finding it impracticable to reduce the upper city without earthworks, owing to the precipitous nature of the site, on the twentieth of the month Lous [Ab] apportioned the task among his forces. The conveyance of timber was, however, arduous, all the environs of the city to a distance of a hundred furlongs having, as I said, been stripped bare. . . . The earthworks having now been completed after eighteen days' labor, on the seventh of the month Gorpiaeus [Elul], the Romans brought up the engines. Of the rebels, some already despairing of the city retired from the ramparts to the citadel, others slunk down into the tunnels. Pouring into the alleys, sword in hand, they [the Romans] massacred indiscriminately all whom they met, and burnt the houses with all who had taken refuge within. Often in the course of their raids, on entering the houses for loot, they would find whole families dead and the rooms filled with the victims of the famine. . . . Running everyone through who fell in their way, they choked the alleys with corpses and deluged the whole city with blood, insomuch that many of the fires were extinguished by the gory stream. Towards evening they ceased slaughtering, but when night fell the fire gained the mastery, and the dawn of the eighth day of the month Gorpiaeus [Elul] broke upon Jerusalem in flames—a city which had suffered such calamities. . . . The Romans now set fire to the outlying quarters of the town and razed the walls to the ground. Thus was Jerusalem taken in the second year of the reign of Vespasian, on the eighth of the month Gorpiaeus [20 September, 70 A.D.].

(*The Jewish War* VI, 8-10)

The story of the Burnt House, which so dramatically and vividly illustrates a most tragic and fateful chapter in the history of Jerusalem, thus comes to an end. But although the house met its end, the story itself is actually not yet complete, for in our own days, two thousand years later, when the descendants of the slaughtered returned to the site, they uncovered the physical traces of the destruction and rebuilt their homes over the ruins. Now they too, like Bar Kathros, can look out through their windows and see the Temple Mount, where the "previous tenant" had apparently worshipped. History has repeated itself. We hope that no other folksong beginning with the refrain "woe is me" will ever be heard here again.

This article has been adapted from Chapter Three, section 5, of *Discovering Jerusalem: Recent Archaeological Excavations in the Upper City* by Nahman Avigad (Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1983). Printed by permission of Thomas Nelson Publishers.

day. Much more common were larger sundials, permanently fixed to exterior walls. Two small sundials have previously been discovered in Jerusalem — one in the recent excavations adjacent to the Temple Mount, and another long ago, in excavations on the Ophel Hill.

Dealing with our time-measuring instrument brings to my mind that it is about time to end our tour of the Mansion. It is my hope that this tour has enabled the reader to imagine himself wandering through the rooms and corridors of this splendid dwelling when it was still a flourishing household, to gaze at the colorfully frescoed and vividly stuccoed walls, and at the delicate furniture and artifacts. The wealthy owners, belonging to the aristocracy of Jerusalem, could have imagined themselves sitting amidst their luxury in a villa at Pompeii or Herculaneum, were it not for the fine view of Mount Moriah through the window, rather than of Mount Vesuvius.

END OF THE TOUR

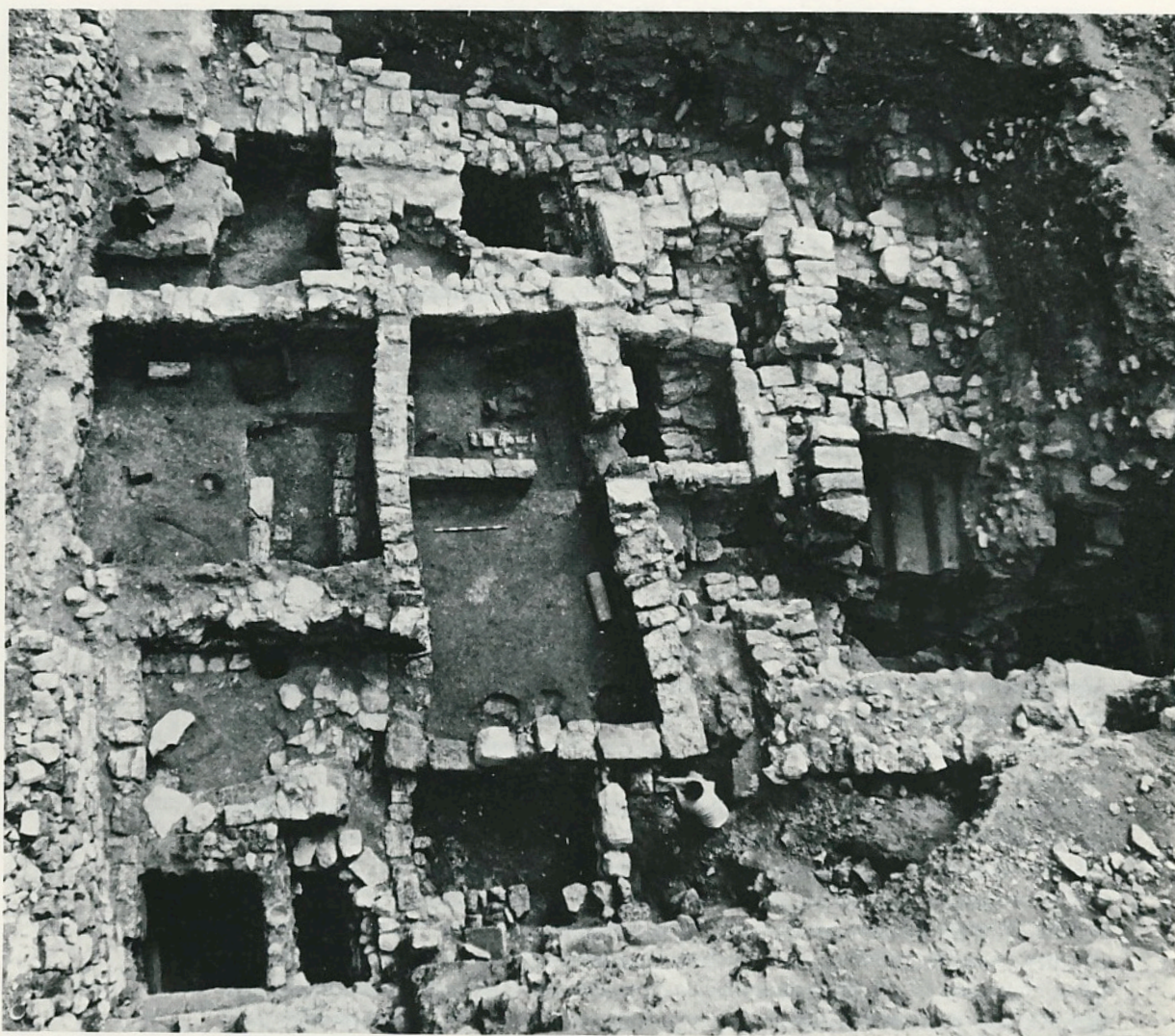
The pursuit of things Hellenistic was then not uncommon in Jerusalem, particularly among the Hellenistic nobility. That this in no way prevented them from maintaining the Jewish precepts, particularly the requirement of immersion which the Jews of Jerusalem observed so devotedly, is indicated by the many ritual baths uncovered in our excavations. In the Mansion the baths seem to have received especial attention, both in number and in total area, as well as in design. This raises the possibility that there was some connection here with the occupation of the owner. Might this have been the home of one of the High Priests, who were known to have lived in this quarter? In the next section we shall see that the Burnt House, in the same close neighborhood, can most probably be ascribed to a member of one of the High priestly families.

5. The "Burnt House"

The incidents surrounding the discovery and uncovering of this house have earned it a very special place in the story of our excavations. Not only was it an emotional experience of great depth for our team as its discoverers, but it aroused such general interest that it has also become ingrained in the consciousness of a broad public. Even today, some ten years after its initial discovery, I cannot help but feel guilty when tourists whom I meet wandering through the Jewish Quarter, groping their way through the confusion of construction and tumult, ask where they can find the "Burnt House" mentioned in their guidebooks. In the first place, we cannot guide them to the remains of this building because the site is temporarily inaccessible and has not yet been prepared for visitors. Additionally, I am well aware that we shall never be able to present the site and its finds in a manner that will enable visitors to envisage even a fraction of the excitement and emotion it aroused in those who had the good fortune to view it while it was being excavated.

From the vantage point of hindsight, it seems that we excavators would probably not have been so overawed by the discovery of the Burnt House had we not come upon it so suddenly, in the very first year of our project. At that time we had not yet come across any house that had witnessed the catastrophe of A.D. 70, and we were still emotionally unprepared for the impressions and associations raised by the prospect

laid bare before us. In subsequent years, after several other such burnt houses had been discovered, our emotions were already somewhat blunted to the sight of such stark violence. But this Burnt House was not only the first such discovery, but it also exceeded all the others in the quantity of objects found and in the preservation of the traces of destruction and fire. It was a good thing that the Burnt House was the first of its type to be found, for it caught us while we were still open to impression.



117. The Burnt House, bird's-eye view

In January 1970, work began in preparation for construction at 36 Misgav-Ladakh Street, near the modern stairway leading down to the Western Wall Plaza (our Area B, p. 32). After the heaps of rubble and refuse had been cleared away, initially by mechanical means, there was a rather thick layer of fill and refuse containing nothing ancient. Then stone walls suddenly began sprouting out of the earth. As we leveled off the area in order to lay out a grid of squares in preparation for our systematic archaeological excavations, we saw immediately that these were the walls of actual rooms. As a first step in stratigraphic excavation, we dug a trench the breadth of one of the rooms, in order to determine the sequence of the layers. At a depth of about a meter we encountered a floor of beaten earth. Already, the sides of the trench provided a clear and impressive cross-section, which we were able to read like an open book.

THE DISCOVERY

The upper layer contained fallen building stones which had changed color as the result of a fire. The layer beneath was a mixture of earth, ashes, soot and charred wood; at the bottom of the cross-section, overlying the floor, were pottery fragments and parts of scorched stone vessels. The plastered walls were also black with soot. The picture was clear to any trained eye. There was only one phase of occupation, and its composition was unambiguous: the building had been destroyed by fire, and the walls and ceiling had collapsed along with the burning beams, sealing over the various objects in the rooms. When did this occur? The pottery indicated that it was sometime in the 1st century A.D.

* This stirred our imagination. Was the destruction of this building, so close to the Temple Enclosure, connected with the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70? We seemed to have before us a unique picture— of a house sacked by the Roman legions, burying all the household effects and leaving everything just as it had been, undisturbed by later activities. I could not call to mind any similar discovery in earlier excavations in Jerusalem.

In the excavation diary, I wrote: "On the same day (13 January 1970) I was somewhat excited." But after the initial excitement came moments of doubt. My initial impression might merely have been wishful thinking, and the facts might not lend themselves to such far-reaching conclusions. My chief assistant at the time, Ami Mazar was away and Ronny Reich, the area supervisor, was as carried away as I was. I therefore invited several of my fellow Jerusalem archaeologists to visit the site, each one separately, to see their reactions to the cross-section. All of them arrived at the same conclusion as ours.

THE EXCITEMENT

Systematic excavation of the entire area only served to increase our tension, as well as our expectations. The salient question was whether the same phenomenon was found in the other rooms as well. As we cleared each room, an identical picture emerged. First we would come across stone debris from the collapsed walls, which filled the rooms. The dressed blocks were of the soft, local *nari* limestone, which had been baked to various colors by the great heat of the fire. Some had become lime-white, while others were grey, red, and yellow, and mostly very crumbly.

Among the debris filling the rooms was a mixture of ash and soot, and large quantities of charred wood.

A HUGE FIRE

Soot reigned over all, clinging to everything. It covered the plastered walls, and even the faces of our workmen turned black. There was no doubt that the fire had rampaged here, apparently fed by some highly inflammable material contained in the rooms. It may well have been some oil, which would account for the abundance of soot. The traces were so vivid that one could almost feel the heat and the smell of the fire. So at least some of our visitors maintained.

When we reached the floor level, objects began appearing, scattered about or in heaps: pottery, stone vessels, broken glass, iron nails, and the like. The known types of pottery gave us a general dating in the 1st century A.D. for the destruction of the building. But the many coins strewn over the floors — partly of the Roman Procurators of Judea and mostly from the First Jewish Revolt against Rome — permitted a more precise dating. The coins of the revolt bear the legends "Year Two/The Freedom of Zion," "Year Three/The Freedom of Zion," and "Year Four/Of the Redemption of Zion." The latest of them, of the fourth year of the revolt, are from A.D. 69.

THE BURNING OF THE CITY

It was now quite clear that this building was razed by the Romans in 70 CE, during the destruction of Jerusalem. For the first time in the history of excavations in the city, vivid and clear archaeological evidence of the burning of the city had come to light. We refrained from publicizing this fact immediately, in order to keep from being disturbed in our work by visitors. But word of the discovery soon spread and people began thronging to the site to see the finds on the spot. The already considerable excitement upon seeing the scorched objects being recovered from the ashes increased with the discovery of a spear leaning against the corner of a room, and it reached a crescendo when the bones of a human arm were revealed.

Beyond the image of the destruction, each of us pictured in his mind the scene so vividly described by Josephus: the Roman soldiers spreading out over the Upper City, looting and setting the houses ablaze as they slaughtered all in their path. The owner of this house, or one of its inhabitants, had managed to prepare his spear; another member of the household did not manage to escape from the house, and died in the flames. The tangible evidence, surprising in its freshness and shocking in its realism, gave us the feeling that it had all happened only yesterday.

Something amazing occurred in the hearts of all who witnessed the progress of excavations here. The burning of the Temple and the destruction of Jerusalem — fateful events in the history of the Jewish People — suddenly took on a new and horrible significance. Persons who had previously regarded this catastrophe as stirring but abstract and remote, having occurred two millennia ago, were so visibly moved by the sight that they occasionally would beg permission to take a fistful of soil or a bit of charred wood "in memory of the destruction." Others volunteered to take part in uncovering the remains, regarding such labor as sacred. The latent sentiment released — by people normally quite composed and immune to showing their emotions — was unbelievable.



118. Heap of broken stone vessels in the Burnt House. In the corner of the room is a round oven, with a stone roller for tamping the earth floor

119. Clearing the finds in fig. 118

The international news media took considerable interest in the discovery of the Burnt House, far beyond our expectations. Visits by journalists and by radio and television teams, most of them from abroad, brought our work almost to a standstill for several days. The extent of the broad coverage throughout the Western world is reflected in the fact that *The New York Times* published four reports on our excavations on four consecutive days (16-19 January 1970).

THE NEWS MEDIA

This deep international interest in ancient Jerusalem was revealed again and again during the years of excavating in the Jewish Quarter.

The “Burnt House”



Judaea Capta coin minted in Rome in honor of the Roman victory over Judaea. Obverse: bust of the Emperor Vespasian. Reverse: a Jewess seated, mourning, beside a plundered statue, with “Judaea” in Latin inscribed below.



Stone weight from the Burnt House inscribed “(belonging) to the son of Kathros.”

The so-called Burnt House was one of many in the Upper City set ablaze by the Romans once victory was theirs in 70 A.D. Josephus (War 6.403–407) describes the final torching of the quarter, which fell one month after the Temple was taken:

Pouring into the alleys, sword in hand, they massacred indiscriminately all whom they met, and burnt the houses with all who had taken refuge within. Often in the course of their raids, on entering the houses for loot, they would find whole families dead and the rooms filled with the victims of the famine, and then, shuddering at the sight, retire empty-handed. Yet, while they pitied those who had thus perished, they had no similar feelings for the living, but, running everyone through who fell in their way, they choked the alleys with corpses and deluged the whole city with blood, insomuch that many of the fires were extinguished by the gory stream. Towards evening they ceased slaughtering, but when night fell the fire gained the mastery, and the dawn of the eighth day of the month Gorpiaeus broke upon Jerusalem in flames.

Heartrending testimony to the accuracy of his record was found in the kitchen of this house—the skeletal arm and hand of a young woman, who had attempted to flee when she realized what was happening but was engulfed in the flames. Apart from the kitchen, the complex consisted of a small courtyard, four rooms and a mikveh.

It would appear from the nature of the complex and from the many ovens found there that it was used as a type of

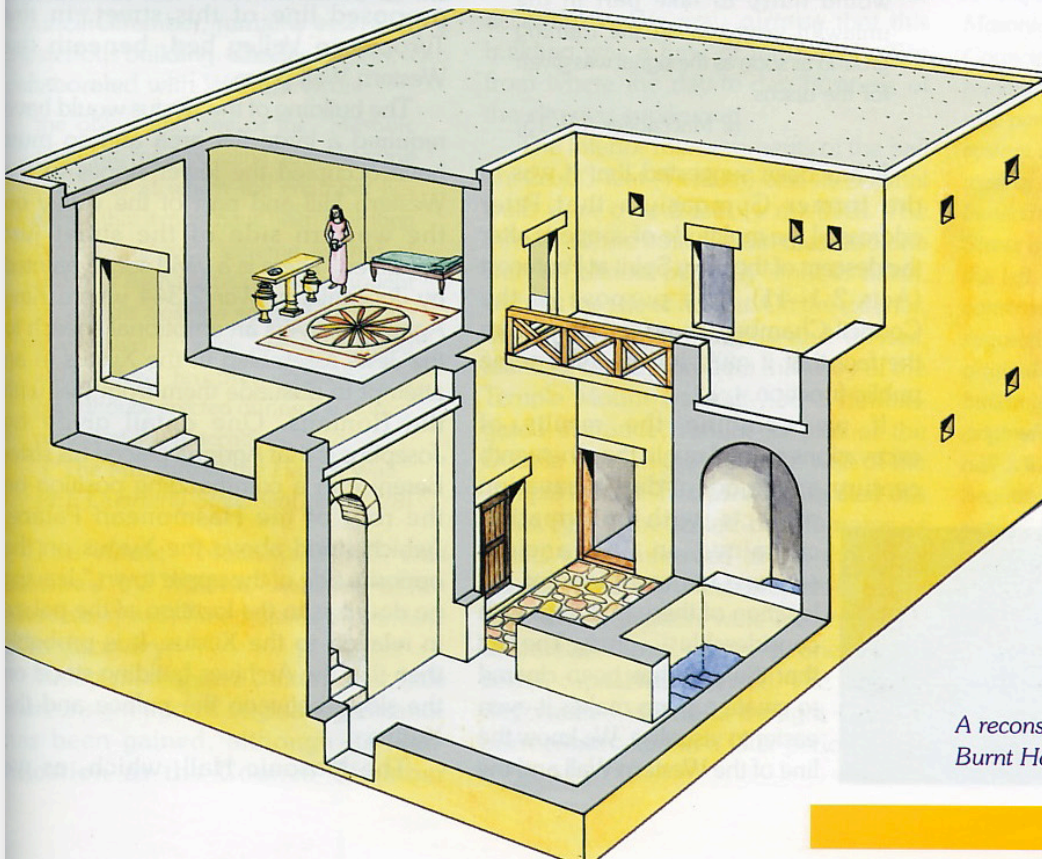
workshop located well out of sight under a large building. A stone weight inscribed with the words “[of] Kathros” points to a connection with another of the high priestly families, the House of Kathros, infamous for their cruel way with the written word, “Woe is me because of the House of Kathros, woe is me because of their pens” (from a satirical song preserved in the Babylonian Talmud, *Pesahim* 57.1). The workshop may have been used in the manufacture of spices for the incense or anointing oil used in the daily Temple service. If so, this would indeed have been a profitable industry and one which this family may well have appropriated to itself.

However, our particular interest for the present purpose is Jerusalem in 30 A.D., so let us try to imagine life in the quarter at that time. Whenever residents and visitors alike would pass these modern residences, they would have been forcibly reminded of the illegitimacy of their high priesthood. Since the beginning of Herod’s reign in 37 B.C., only one (the first) of their high priests had come from a legitimate Zadokite family. The others came from either the family of Boethus (of which the House of Kathros was an offshoot), Annas or Phiabi, low-born families which once they had risen to power strove to keep the office for as long as possible.

Found in 1970, early on in the excavations when the rebuilding of the Jewish Quarter was gathering momentum, the Burnt House became a national symbol. It evoked the drama of the nation’s history from tragic destruction, through two thousand years of dispersion to triumphant rebirth.



One of the larger rooms found in the basement of the Burnt House, in the Jewish Quarter excavations. Vessels, pieces of collapsed furniture and charred wooden beams were left where they fell. The room's stone walls have not been cleaned or restored and the original soot from the fire is still visible. It is an image frozen in time. Underneath this room lay a vaulted structure that needed to be excavated for a complete archaeological record. With this done, the scene of destruction was painstakingly recreated.



A reconstruction of the Burnt House.