

= Acra (fortress) =

The Acra (or Akra , Hebrew : אַקְרָא or אַקְרָא , Greek : Ἀκρά) was a fortified compound in Jerusalem built by Antiochus Epiphanes , ruler of the Seleucid Empire , following his sack of the city in 168 BCE . The fortress played a significant role in the events surrounding the Maccabean Revolt and the formation of the Hasmonean Kingdom . It was destroyed by Simon Maccabeus during this struggle .

The exact location of the Acra , critical to understanding Hellenistic Jerusalem , had been a matter of lengthy discussions . Historians and archaeologists had proposed various sites around Jerusalem , relying mainly on conclusions drawn from literary evidence . This approach began to change in the light of excavations which commenced in the late 1960s . New discoveries had prompted reassessments of the ancient literary sources , Jerusalem 's geography and previously discovered artifacts . Yoram Tsafrir had interpreted a masonry joint in the southeastern corner of the Temple Mount platform as a clue to the Acra 's possible position . During Benjamin Mazar 's 1968 and 1978 excavations adjacent to the south wall of the Mount , features were uncovered which may have been connected with the Acra , including barrack @-@ like rooms and a huge cistern . In November 2015 the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the likely discovery of the Acra in a different location , south @-@ west of the Temple Mount and north @-@ west of the City of David .

The ancient Greek term acra was used to describe other fortified structures during the Hellenistic period . The Acra is often called the Seleucid Acra to distinguish it from references to the Ptolemaic Baris as an acra and from the later quarter in Jerusalem which inherited the name Acra .

= = History = =

= = Background = = =

Following Alexander the Great 's death in 323 BCE , Judea was contested between the Ptolemaic Kingdom in Egypt , and the Seleucid Empire based in Syria and Mesopotamia . Seleucid emperor Antiochus III 's victory over Egypt in the Battle of Panium brought Judea under Seleucid control . The Jewish population of Jerusalem had aided Antiochus during his siege of the Baris , the fortified base of Jerusalem 's Egyptian garrison . Their support was rewarded with a charter affirming Jewish religious autonomy , including barring foreigners and impure animals from the Temple 's precincts , and an allocation of official funds for the maintenance of certain religious rituals in the Temple . Despite being allowed religious freedom , many Jews were enticed by and adopted elements of the prestigious and influential Greek lifestyle . The imperial culture offered a route to political and material advancement , and this led to the formation of Hellenistic elites among the Jewish population . Hellenization produced tensions between observant Jews and their brethren who had assimilated Greek culture .

Antiochus IV Epiphanes ascended the Seleucid throne in 175 BCE . Shortly afterward , Epiphanes was petitioned by Jason for appointment to the position of High Priest of Israel ? an office occupied by his brother Onias III . Jason , himself thoroughly Hellenized , furthermore promised to increase the tribute paid by the city and to establish within it the infrastructure of a Greek Polis , including a gymnasium and an ephebeion . Jason 's petition was granted , yet after a 42 @-@ month rule he was ousted by Antiochus and forced to flee to Ammon . In the meantime , Antiochus IV had launched two invasions of Egypt , in 170 BCE and again in 169 BCE , and routed the Ptolemaic armies . Antiochus ' victories were short @-@ lived . His intent to unify the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms alarmed the rapidly expanding Roman state , which demanded that he withdraw his forces from Egypt . With Antiochus engaged in Egypt , a false rumor spread in Jerusalem that he had been killed . In the ensuing uncertainty , Jason gathered a force of 1 @,@ 000 followers and attempted to take Jerusalem by storm . Although the attack was repulsed , when word of the fighting reached Antiochus in Egypt , he suspected his Judean subjects of exploiting his setback as an opportunity to revolt . In 168 BCE , Antiochus IV Epiphanes marched on and sacked Jerusalem , looting the temple treasury and killing thousands of its residents . Reversing his father 's policy , Antiochus IV

issued decrees outlawing traditional Jewish rites and persecuting observant Jews . Temple rituals were discontinued , Jewish observance of Sabbath prohibited , and circumcision outlawed .

= = = Construction = = =

To consolidate his hold on the city , monitor events on the Temple Mount and safeguard the Hellenized faction in Jerusalem , Antiochus stationed a Seleucid garrison in the city :

And they built the city of David with a great and strong wall , and with strong towers , and made it a fortress [Greek : Acra] for them : And they placed there a sinful nation , wicked men , and they fortified themselves therein : and they stored up armour , and victuals , and gathered together the spoils of Jerusalem ; And laid them up there : and they became a great snare . And this was a place to lie in wait against the sanctuary , and an evil devil in Israel .

The name Acra derived from the Greek acropolis and signified a lofty fortified place overlooking a town . In Jerusalem , the word came to symbolize anti @-@ Jewish paganism : a fortress of the " impious and wicked " . Dominating both the city and the surrounding countryside , it was occupied not only by a Greek garrison but by their Jewish confederates as well .

The Seleucid suppression of Jewish religious life met with considerable resistance among the native population . While Antiochus was occupied in the east during 167 BCE , a rural priest , Mattathias of Modiin , raised a rebellion against the empire . Both the Seleucid administration and the local Hellenized faction failed to grasp the magnitude of the revolt . In 164 BCE Judas Maccabaeus liberated Jerusalem and reconsecrated the Temple . Although the surrounding city had fallen , the Acra and its inhabitants held out . Maccabaeus besieged the fortress , whose inhabitants sent an appeal to the Seleucid king (now Antiochus V) for assistance . A Seleucid army was dispatched to put down the revolt . When it laid siege to Beth @-@ Zur , Maccabaeus was forced to abandon his siege of the Acra and face Antiochus in battle . In the subsequent Battle of Beth @-@ Zechariah , the Seleucids won their first victory over the Maccabees , and Maccabaeus was forced to withdraw . Spared from capitulation , the Acra persisted as a Seleucid stronghold for 20 more years during which it weathered several Hasmonean attempts to oust the Greek garrison .

= = = Destruction = = =

Judas was killed in 160 BCE and succeeded by his brother Jonathan , who attempted to build a barrier to cut off the Acra 's supply line . Jonathan had already assembled the manpower required for the task when he was forced to confront the invading army of Seleucid general Diodotus Tryphon at Beth Shan (Scythopolis) . Having invited Jonathan to a friendly conference , Tryphon had him seized and murdered . Jonathan was succeeded by another brother , Simon , who besieged and finally captured the Acra in 141 BCE .

Two sources provide information about the ultimate fate of the Acra , although their accounts are contradictory in places . According to Josephus , Simon razed the Acra after ousting its inhabitants , and then quarried the hill on which it had stood to render it lower than the temple , purge the city of its evil memory and deny it to any future occupier of Jerusalem . The account appearing in 1 Maccabees paints a different picture :

And Simon decreed that every year they should celebrate this day with rejoicing . He strengthened the fortifications of the temple hill alongside the citadel [Greek : Acra] , and he and his men dwelt there .

Thus in this version , Simon did not immediately demolish the Acra , but instead had it occupied and may even have resided within it himself . 1 Maccabees does not mention its ultimate fate . The fortress had been built as an internal checkpoint to monitor and control Jerusalem and its population . If situated in the City of David as most scholars agree , its location would have added very little to Jerusalem 's defenses against external threats . It may have fallen out of use and been dismantled around the end of the 2nd century BCE following the construction of the Hasmonean Baris and Hasmonean Palace in Jerusalem 's upper city .

Bezalel Bar @-@ Kochva offers a different theory : The Acra was still standing in 139 BCE when

Antiochus VII Sidetes demanded it back from Simon , along with Jaffa and Gezer , two Hellenized cities Simon had captured . Simon was willing to discuss the two cities but made no mention of the Acra . It was at this point that he must have sealed its fate , as a way to deny the Seleucids any future claim or hold on Jerusalem . Thus , when Antiochus VII subdued the city during Hyrcanus I 's reign , each and every one of his demands were met ? except the one demanding the stationing of a Seleucid garrison in the city . Hyrcanus may have been able to reject , and Antiochus to drop , this demand because there was nowhere to billet the garrison , as the Acra would no longer have been standing . This explanation places the razing of the Acra somewhere in the 130s BCE .

= = Location = =

The location of the Acra is important for understanding how events unfolded in Jerusalem during the struggle between Maccabean and Seleucid forces . This has been the subject of debate among modern scholars . The most detailed ancient description of the nature and location of the Acra is found in Josephus ' Antiquities of the Jews , where it is described as residing in the Lower City , upon a hill overlooking the Temple enclosure :

... and when he had overthrown the city walls , he built a citadel [Greek : Acra] in the lower part of the city , for the place was high , and overlooked the temple ; on which account he fortified it with high walls and towers , and put into it a garrison of Macedonians . However , in that citadel dwelt the impious and wicked part of the multitude , from whom it proved that the citizens suffered many and sore calamities .

The location of the " lower part of the city " , elsewhere referred to as the " Lower City " , at the time of Josephus (1st century CE) is accepted to be Jerusalem 's south @-@ eastern hill , the original urban center traditionally known as the City of David . Lying to the south of the Temple Mount , however , the area exposed today is significantly lower than the Mount itself . The top of the Mount is approximately 30 metres (98 ft) above the ground level at the southern retaining wall of the later Herodian @-@ era expansion of the Temple enclosure . The elevation decreases to the south of this point . Josephus , a native of Jerusalem , would have been well aware of this discrepancy , yet is nevertheless able to explain it away by describing how Simon had razed both the Acra and the hill on which it had stood . Archaeological research south of the Temple Mount , however , has failed to locate any evidence for such large scale quarrying . On the contrary , excavations in the region have uncovered substantial evidence of habitation from the beginning of the first millennium BCE down to Roman times , casting doubt on the suggestion that during Hellenistic times the area was significantly higher than it was at the time of Josephus or that a large hill had been cleared away . This had led many researchers to disregard Josephus ' account and his placing of the Acra , and suggest several alternate locations . Since 1841 , when Edward Robinson proposed the area near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the site of the Acra , at least nine different locations in and around the Old City of Jerusalem have been put forward .

= = = Western hill = = =

Several researchers have attempted to place the Acra in the Upper City on Jerusalem 's western hill , within the area currently occupied by the Old City 's Jewish Quarter . These propositions seek to locate the Acra within Antiochia , the Hellenistic polis established in Jerusalem according to 2 Maccabees . This conjectural new city would have been hippodamic in plan and therefore would have required a flat expanse of land which only the western hill could have provided . Furthermore , the eastern edge of the hill is adjacent to the Temple Mount and higher in altitude ? two characteristics attributed to the Seleucid citadel .

Opponents of this proposed location point out that there is very little archaeological or historical evidence supporting the establishment of a Hellenistic polis within Jerusalem , let alone sited on the western hill which appears to have been only sparsely populated during the Hellenistic period . Excavations in today 's Jewish Quarter display evidence of habitation from the First Temple Period , as well as renewed Hasmonean and Herodian settlement , but scant evidence of Hellenistic

occupation . Research into the dispersal of stamped Rhodian amphorae handles has revealed that over 95 % of these handles found in Jerusalem were excavated from the City of David , indicating the city had not yet expanded to the western hill during Seleucid rule . Furthermore , the western hill is separated from the Temple Mount and the City of David by the steep Tyropoeon Valley ? a distinct tactical disadvantage for any force that may have been required to intervene in events within the temple precincts or heavily populated eastern sectors of Jerusalem .

= = = North of the Temple = = =

The Acra was not the first Hellenistic stronghold in Jerusalem . Sources indicate that an earlier citadel , the Ptolemaic Baris , had also occupied a location overlooking the Temple 's precincts . Although the exact location of the Baris is still debated , it is generally accepted to have stood north of the Temple Mount on the site later occupied by the Antonia Fortress . The Baris fell to Antiochus III at the turn of the 2nd century BCE and is absent from all accounts of the Maccabean Revolt . Despite the narratives which have the Acra constructed within a very short time @-@ span , it was nevertheless formidable enough to weather long periods of siege . These factors , coupled with references in which the Baris was itself called an acra , have led some to suggest that the Baris and the Acra were in fact the same structure . Although both 1 Maccabees and Josephus seem to describe the Acra as a new construction , this may not have been the case . Antiquities of the Jews 12 : 253 may be translated to give the sense that the " impious or wicked " had " remained " rather than " dwelt " in the citadel , which could be taken to mean that the Acra had been standing before the revolt and that only the Macedonian garrison was new .

Koen Decoster proposes that Josephus wrote of " a citadel in the lower part of the city " to an audience that would have been familiar with the Jerusalem of the 1st century CE ? a city that did feature two citadels : the Antonia Fortress and the Herodian palace . As Josephus ' Roman Jerusalem had already expanded to the higher western hill , " a citadel in the lower city " could have referred to anything located east of the Tyropoeon Valley , including the Antonia which stood north of the Temple and did indeed rise above and dominate it . In his view , this is the place Josephus must have had in mind when he wrote of the Acra .

Opponents of a northern location counter that this site is not supported by the historical sources , and that this would place the Acra away from Jerusalem 's population center . Unlike its predecessor and successor citadels , it was not meant as a defence against external threat , but rather to oversee the inhabited Jewish parts of the city , a role incompatible with a proposed northern location .

= = = A fortified compound in the City of David = = =

The available sources do indicate the Acra stood south of the temple , and because 1 Maccabees is a contemporaneous account of the Maccabean revolt , its account of the Acra (1 : 35 ? 38) is considered the most reliable . Josephus provides an unlikely account of the razing of a hill on which the Acra had stood , yet his description of the end of the Great Revolt (70 CE) provides additional evidence for it being located south of the Temple Mount :

... but on the next day they set fire to the repository of the archives , to Acra , to the council @-@ house , and to the place called Ophlas ; at which time the fire proceeded as far as the palace of queen Helena , which was in the middle of Acra ;

As the other buildings mentioned in the account all stood to the south in the Lower City , this also places the Acra there . This account attests to the persistence of the name " Acra " in this part of Jerusalem many years after Hellenistic rule ended and its citadels had been overthrown , and it can also be seen as referring not to a distinct building but rather to an entire region of the city . Indeed , several clauses in 1 Maccabees may be read as making a similar point :

However , two further excerpts from Flavius Josephus " The Wars of the Jews " seem to cloud the issue .

.... AND now the seditious rushed into the royal palace , into which many had put their effects ,

because it was so strong , and drove the Romans away from it . They also slew all the people that had crowded into it , who were in number about eight thousand four hundred , and plundered them of what they had " .

Flavius Josephus | The Wars of the Jews 7 : 1

The foundations of that royal palace have been tentatively identified in the City of David as the Stepped Stone Structure , by Eilat Mazar .

.... On the next day the Romans drove the robbers out of the lower city , and set all on fire as far as Siloam . These soldiers were indeed glad to see the city destroyed . But they missed the plunder , because the seditious had carried off all their effects , and were retired into the upper city ; for they did not yet at all repent of the mischiefs they had done , but were insolent , as if they had done well ; for , as they saw the city on fire , they appeared cheerful , and put on joyful countenances , in expectation , as they said , of death to end their miseries . Accordingly , as the people were now slain , the holy house was burnt down , and the city was on fire , there was nothing further left for the enemy to do . " .

Flavius Josephus | The Wars of the Jews 7 : 2

Reading Josephus with the benefit of knowledge gained from recent archaeological discoveries enables an alternative interpretation of his writings : " but on the next day the Romans set fire to the repository of the archives (Benjamin Mazar noted that his excavations of Robinson 's Arch between 1968 & 1977 revealed that the same supporting pier was also the eastern external wall of a monumental building , which Mazar suggested held the archives of Jerusalem mentioned by Josephus) , to Acra , to the council @-@ house ? and to the place called Ophel ; the fire proceeded as far as the palace of Queen Helena , which was built in the middle of & also upon the ruins of the Seleucid Acra . At which time , the Jews rushed into the royal palace , into which many had put their effects , because it was so strong and drove the Romans troops away from it . They also slew all the people that had crowded into it , who were in number about eight thousand four hundred , and plundered them of what they had .

On the next day the Romans drove these robbers out of the lower city , and set all on fire as far as Siloam . (No further mention of Acra being an entire Hellenistic quarter) . These soldiers were indeed glad to see the city destroyed . But the Romans missed out on the plunder , because the robbers had escaped to the upper city with their booty & did not yet at all repent of the mischiefs they had done , but were insolent & cheerful ; they were thinking they had done well considering that as the City of David was on fire , the holy house was burnt down & most of the people were now slain , there was nothing further left for the Romans to do to them " .

The Israeli Antiquities Authority have not rescinded their report about identifying the remains of the Seleucid Acra underneath the palace of Queen Helena that they also identified with remains excavated in 2007 in the Gi 'vati Parking Lot digs . They are presently convinced that the ruins are separate from any part of other fortifications of the City of David in the Hellenistic period (c . 300-141 BC) .

About five hundred men of the army of Nicanor fell , and the rest fled into the city of David .

And in his days things prospered in his hands , so that the Gentiles were put out of the country , as were also the men in the city of David in Jerusalem , who had built themselves a citadel [Greek : Acra] from which they used to sally forth and defile the environs of the sanctuary and do great damage to its purity .

These suggest that , after the sacking of Jerusalem by Antiochus IV in 168 BCE , at least part of the City of David to the south of the Temple Mount was rebuilt as a fortified Hellenistic quarter of Jerusalem . More than a citadel , it was a Macedonian colony where Jewish renegades and supporters of the new regime lived . This is also supported by archaeological evidence , including Rhodian amphorae handles and 18 box graves found on the eastern slope of the City of David . The latter are dated to the early 2nd century CE , and are uncharacteristic of Second Temple era Jewish burial practices , yet similar to other known Hellenistic graveyards such as the one in Acre (Ptolemais) .

= = = A citadel nevertheless = = =

Even if the name " Acra " were applied to an entire Hellenistic quarter rather than to just a fortress , it is likely that a citadel would have stood within that compound to billet the Macedonian garrison which occupied it . It was normal for a Hellenistic city to have a fortified stronghold at or near the highest point of its walled area . Thus , whether a part of a larger enclave or independent of its surroundings , a citadel probably did stand at the northern tip of the City of David just south of the Temple Mount . Archaeologists have tried to use finds from excavations conducted in the area to pinpoint this citadel 's precise location .

Yoram Tsafrir has attempted to place the Acra underneath the southeastern corner of the Temple Mount enclosure . Tsafrir points to a straight vertical seam in the enclosure 's eastern masonry wall as evidence of different periods of construction . North of the seam is an early section of the wall built of large ashlar blocks . These blocks have faces with drafted margins around a prominent boss and are laid in homogeneous header and stretcher courses , one above the other . This style of construction is Hellenistic and distinct from the Herodian construction apparent south of the seam . Although the exact dating of this construction is uncertain , Tsafrir believes it is a remnant of the Acra 's foundations which were later incorporated into Herod the Great 's extension of the Temple platform . As further proof , Tsafrir also points to significant similarity between construction methods evident north of the seam , including the use of trapezoid @-@ shaped stones , with the methods employed in the Seleucid city of Perga in Asia Minor . 1 Maccabees 1 : 30 attributes construction of the Acra to Apollonius , Antiochus III 's " chief collector " (Hebrew : ?? @-@ ?????? , Sar Hamissim) , which appears to be an ancient mistranslation or his original title as chief (Hebrew : ?? , Sar) of the Mysians , a people of Asia Minor .

Meir Ben @-@ Dov believed that the Acra stood just south of the Huldah Gates of the southern wall of the Herodian Temple Mount platform . Benjamin Mazar 's excavations of the Ophel , the area adjoining the southern portion of the platform , have unearthed the foundations of a massive structure and a large cistern , both possibly dating to the Hellenistic period . These have been tentatively identified as remnants of the Acra , with the structure , featuring rows of small interconnected rooms , believed to be the remains of a barracks . These had been demolished and built over during the Hasmonean period , matching the descriptions in Josephus . The Hasmonean constructions were , in turn , flattened to create a public square fronting the main gates to the Temple platform during the Herodian renovations .

Several cisterns under the Temple Mount itself have also been proposed as possible remnants of the Seleucid citadel . These include a 700 @,@ 000 imperial gallons (3 @,@ 200 @,@ 000 l ; 840 @,@ 000 US gal) cistern shaped like an E , the northern edge of which is adjacent to the proposed southern line of the Temple Mount precinct before its Herodian expansion . This has been identified as the " be 'er haqar " or " bor heqer " mentioned in the Mishnah , Erubin Tract 10 @.@ 14 , and commonly translated , perhaps incorrectly , as the " cold well " .

Additional evidence for the existence of the Acra may come from the chance discovery , published by Shimon Appelbaum , of a fragmentary Greek inscription in the Old City of Jerusalem . The inscription is part of a fragment from the top of a sandstone stele and contains what may be an oath taken by soldiers stationed in the Acra , although the reading of the name " Acra " in the text has been contested .

= = 2015 discovery = =

In November 2015 the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the probable discovery of the Acra . According to archaeologists Doron Ben @-@ Ami , Yana Tchekhanovets and Salome Cohen , excavating the Givati parking lot adjacent to the City of David , they had unearthed a complex of rooms and fortified walls they identified as the Acra . This places it slightly south of previous suggested locations on the Ophel . Finds include fortification walls , a watchtower measuring 4 by 20 meters , and a glacis . Bronze arrowheads , lead sling @-@ stones and ballista stones were unearthed at the site , stamped with a trident , the emblem of Antiochus Epiphanes . These are indicative of the military nature of the site and the efforts to take it . The excavation also yielded

coins from the reigns of Antiochus IV through Antiochus VII , as well as a multitude of stamped Rhodian amphorae handles .

The Givati location has been questioned due to its being too low on the hill to overlook the Temple Mount , as described in literary sources .