

PRESENTATION ABSTRACT

Between Israel and Moab: Temple, Conquest, and Cult at Khirbat Ataruz

Khirbat Ataruz in central Jordan has been systematically excavated for over twenty-five years under the auspices of La Sierra University, revealing one of the largest and best-preserved temple complexes from the biblical period in the Levant. The site is explicitly mentioned in the Mesha Inscription as a temple center built during the Omride dynasty and violently destroyed by the Moabite king Mesha in the late ninth century BCE. The temple's core included three parallel long rooms, with the main sanctuary positioned centrally; at its rear, there was a standing stone set on a stone base, flanked by a significant offering platform from which many cultic objects were recovered. Next to the sanctuary was a hearth room, likely maintaining a perpetual sacred fire. Iconographic and spatial evidence indicates that the bull symbolized the principal deity and that the temple's design reflected a solar-oriented cultic tradition. The courtyard housed five animal-sacrifice altars and a holy cistern providing water for rituals, while the larger complex was bounded by two high places. The outer courtyard shows evidence of cultic food preparation and consumption, including a kitchen setup, an animal blood libation rock, and possible dining areas. The overall layout suggests the site was intentionally built as a cultic center with little domestic habitation, monumentalized by a grand staircase connecting the eastern city gate to the temple area. Ongoing analysis of ritual assemblages and architectural features offers detailed insights into temple practices and priestly activities. Although destroyed during Mesha's conquest, Ataruz continued to serve as a cultic site in the Moabite period, producing the Ataruz inscription and many Moabite cult objects commemorating the king's victory. As one of the few archaeological contexts documenting Israelite and Moabite religious traditions in direct succession, Ataruz—along with regional survey data identifying an extensive ancient road network, including routes through the Arnon River gorge referenced in the Mesha Inscription—provides a rare window into interregional interaction and religious life in the biblical era.