

PRESS RELEASE

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Only U.S. Opportunity to See Artifact With Oldest Alphabetic Sentence at Southern Adventist University

By Tina Smith, communication manager, and Becky Brooks, editorial manager

In partnership with the Israel Antiquities Authority and The Israel Museum, Southern Adventist University is the only location in the United States where visitors can see the first complete alphabetic sentence in human history ever found.

This oldest deciphered sentence is inscribed on an ivory lice comb, which was excavated by Southern archaeologists and dates to 1700 BC. The rare artifact is on display at the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum on Southern's campus on loan from the Israel Antiquities Authority. The current exhibit, titled "The Ivory Comb: Lice and Literacy at Lachish," is now open to the public through May 2.

"We're very honored to be showcasing this ivory comb exhibit," says Michael G. Hasel, PhD, professor of archaeology at Southern, director of the Lynn H. Wood Archaeological Museum, and co-director of the Lachish excavations. "Even though the comb itself is about twice the size of a postage stamp, it is significant to our understanding of the invention of the alphabet, which was the greatest breakthrough in human communication. The alphabet is still used by 75% of the world's population today."

The artifact was uncovered in 2016 during the fourth expedition to Lachish, which was one of the largest cities during the Canaanite period. The Bible mentions Lachish for the first time in Joshua 10, saying that the king of Lachish joined forces with a Canaanite coalition to defeat Israel.

The comb was later investigated for publication under microscopic analysis by scholars from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and its significance increased in 2022 when shallow scratches were deciphered on the ivory and confirmed as wording by an epigrapher. The inscribed sentence reads "May this ivory (tusk) root out the lice of the hair and the beard" in tiny proto-Canaanite letters, a predecessor to all modern alphabets. The microscopic analysis also revealed the remains of a louse between two of the comb's teeth, indicating the successful execution of its intended function and creating a valuable archaeological connection.

Featured in *The New York Times* and *Smithsonian* as well as by CNN and BBC, the small but linguistically valuable comb was named the number one discovery in biblical archaeology by *Christianity Today* in 2022.

“The find cannot be overestimated. The invention of the alphabet was the most important contribution to communication in the last four millennia,” says Hasel. “Before this time, complicated systems of writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia limited literacy. Today, most of the world constructs sentences using the alphabet found on this comb.”

The opening night of the exhibit on Southern’s campus also included an archaeology symposium on January 27, featuring internationally recognized scholars who shared presentations relating to the moment of discovery, subsequent analysis and reading of the ancient script, and the implications for the development of the alphabet still used by billions of people around the world today.

Featured along with Hasel at the symposium were Yosef Garfinkel, PhD, professor emeritus of the Archaeology of Israel at Hebrew University of Jerusalem; Katherine Helsler, '19, PhD candidate at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee, who was the Southern student in whose area the comb was uncovered; Madeline Mumcuoglu, PhD, research fellow at the Institute of Archaeology at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who discovered the inscription in 2022; Daniel Vainstub, PhD, professor of Bible archaeology and Near East studies at Ben Gurion University of the Negev; and Christopher Rollston, PhD, department chair and professor of biblical and Near Eastern languages and civilizations at George Washington University in D.C.

The public is welcome to visit the free exhibit at Southern. For open hours and additional information, visit southern.edu/museum.

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Captions

GET PHOTO: The ivory comb is on display at Southern Adventist University, the only location in the United States where visitors can view the artifact.

Photo Credit:

SAU_Comb_Closeup: This ivory comb, found by Southern archaeologists, features the first written Canaanite sentence ever found.

Photo Credit: Dafna Gazit, Israel Antiquities Authority

SAU_Comb_Archaeologists: Michael Hasel and Katherine Hesler work in the Lachish excavation area where the comb was uncovered.

Photo Credit: Zachary Kast

SAU_Comb_Lachish: An aerial view shows the ancient site of Lachish, Israel.

Photo Credit: Emil Aladiem

About Us

Founded in 1892, **Southern Adventist University** provides a quality, Christian education to more than 3,200 students currently earning degrees ranging from associate to doctoral. Grounded in Jesus Christ and dedicated to the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the university equips students to embrace biblical truth, embody academic and professional excellence, and pursue Spirit-filled lives of service. Identified in “Best Colleges” rankings for 23 consecutive years by U.S. News & World Report, Southern is also slated as one of the most diverse regional universities in the South. Southern welcomes community members to enjoy the university’s wellness center, vegetarian health food store, and nearly 40 miles of wooded trails on 1,300 acres in Collegedale, Tennessee.