

Was King Solomon the ancient world's first shipping magnate?

Marine archaeologist unearths evidence suggesting biblical king's riches were based on voyages he funded with Phoenician allies



The Judgement of Solomon, 1518 -19, by Raphael. Photograph: Alamy

Dalya Alberge

Sun 25 Apr 2021 05.00 EDT

King Solomon is venerated in Judaism and Christianity for his wisdom and in Islam as a prophet, but the fabled ruler is one of the Bible's great unsolved mysteries.

Archaeologists have struggled in vain to find conclusive proof that he actually existed. With no inscriptions or remnants of the magnificent palace and temple he is supposed to have built in Jerusalem 3,000 years ago, the Israelite king has sunk into the realm of myth.

Now British marine archaeologist Dr Sean Kingsley has amassed evidence showing that Solomon was not only a flesh-and-blood monarch but also the world's first shipping magnate, who funded voyages carried out by his Phoenician allies in "history's first special relationship".

Over 10 years, Kingsley has carried out a maritime audit of "the Solomon question". By extending the search beyond the Holy Land, across the Mediterranean to Spain and Sardinia, he found that archaeological evidence supports biblical descriptions of a partnership between Solomon, who "excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in

wisdom”, and the Phoenician king Hiram, who “supplied Solomon with cedar timber and gold, as much as he desired”.

Kingsley told the Observer: “I’ve spread a very wide net. That kind of maritime study has never been done before.”

He said: “For 100 years, archaeologists have scrutinised Jerusalem’s holy soils, the most excavated city in the world. Nothing definitive fits the book of Kings’ and Chronicles’ epic accounts of Solomon’s palace and temple. By exploring traces of ports, warehouses, industry and shipwrecks, new evidence shakes up the quest for truth.”

He explored Andalusian port towns from Mezquitilla to Málaga and found that the archaeological evidence reveals “a Phoenician coast”. He visited the site of the great mine of the ancient world, Rio Tinto – 70km inland from Huelva – which produced gold,



Rio Tinto mining park in Huelva, Spain. Ancient accounts reveal that silver mined here came from a spot called ‘Solomon’s Hill’. Photograph: Gabriel Solera/Getty Images

silver, lead, copper and zinc – and where, crucially, he realised that old maps and historical accounts referred to a particular spot as Cerro Solomon or Solomon’s Hill.

One 17th-century account notes that Solomon’s Hill was previously called Solomon’s Castle, and another describes people being “sent there by King Solomon for gold and silver”.

At the site, archaeologists have found ancient mining tools, such as granite pestles and stone mortars used to crush minerals, and remnants of lead slag that held a high proportion of silver. Kingsley said that lead isotope analysis has shown that silver hoards excavated in Israel originally came from Iberia.

Recent digs in nearby Huelva have found evidence of the Israelites and Phoenicians, including elephant tusks, merchants' shekel weights and pottery. The Near Eastern link can be dated as far back as 930BC, the end of Solomon's reign, and Kingsley has concluded that Huelva is "the best fit for the capital of the biblical Tarshish", the ancient source of imported metals, which archaeologists have "signposted wildly", everywhere from southern Israel to the Red Sea, Ethiopia to Tunisia.

He was struck by texts and ruins that support a "far more conclusive candidate" in this area of the southern Iberian Peninsula, which was known in antiquity as Tartessos, a Greek derivation of Tarshish. A Phoenician script on a ninth-century BC stele found in Sardinia refers to the land of Tarshish, also proving its historical reality.

Kingsley, who has explored more than 350 shipwrecks in the past 30 years, will publish his research in the forthcoming spring issue of *Wreckwatch* magazine, the free journal for maritime archaeology, which he also edits.

Solomon is believed to have built the First Temple of Jerusalem on the Temple Mount. Kingsley writes that everything historians know about it comes from the Bible, including details such as its inner sanctum lined with pure gold: "Building cities, palaces and a flagship temple didn't come cheap. Long-distance voyages to the lands of Ophir and Tarshish brought a river of gold, silver, precious stones and marble to the royal court.

"Neither Israel nor Lebanon could tap into local gold and silver resources. The biblical entrepreneurs were forced to look to the horizon. The land of Tarshish was a vital source for Solomon's silver. As the Book of Ezekiel recorded: 'Tarshish did business with you because of your great wealth of goods.'"

Kingsley added: "What turned up in southern Spain is undeniable. Phoenician signature finds, richly strewn from Rio Tinto to Málaga, leave no doubt that Near Eastern ships voyaged to what must have seemed the far side of the moon by 900BC.

"When I spotted in ancient accounts the name of the hill where silver was mined at Rio Tinto – Solomon's Hill – I was stunned. Biblical history, archaeology and myth merged to reveal the long-sought land of Tarshish celebrated in the Old Testament.

"It looks like Solomon was wise in his maritime planning. He bankrolled the voyages from Jerusalem and let salty Phoenician sailors take all the risks at sea."