



Tel Shiloh (Khirbet Seilun)

Archaeological Settlement
in the Political Struggle over Samaria



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לאמק שוה עמושב

2014

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Emek Shaveh is an organization of archaeologists and heritage professionals focusing on the role of tangible cultural heritage in Israeli society and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We view archaeology as a resource for strengthening understanding between different peoples and cultures.

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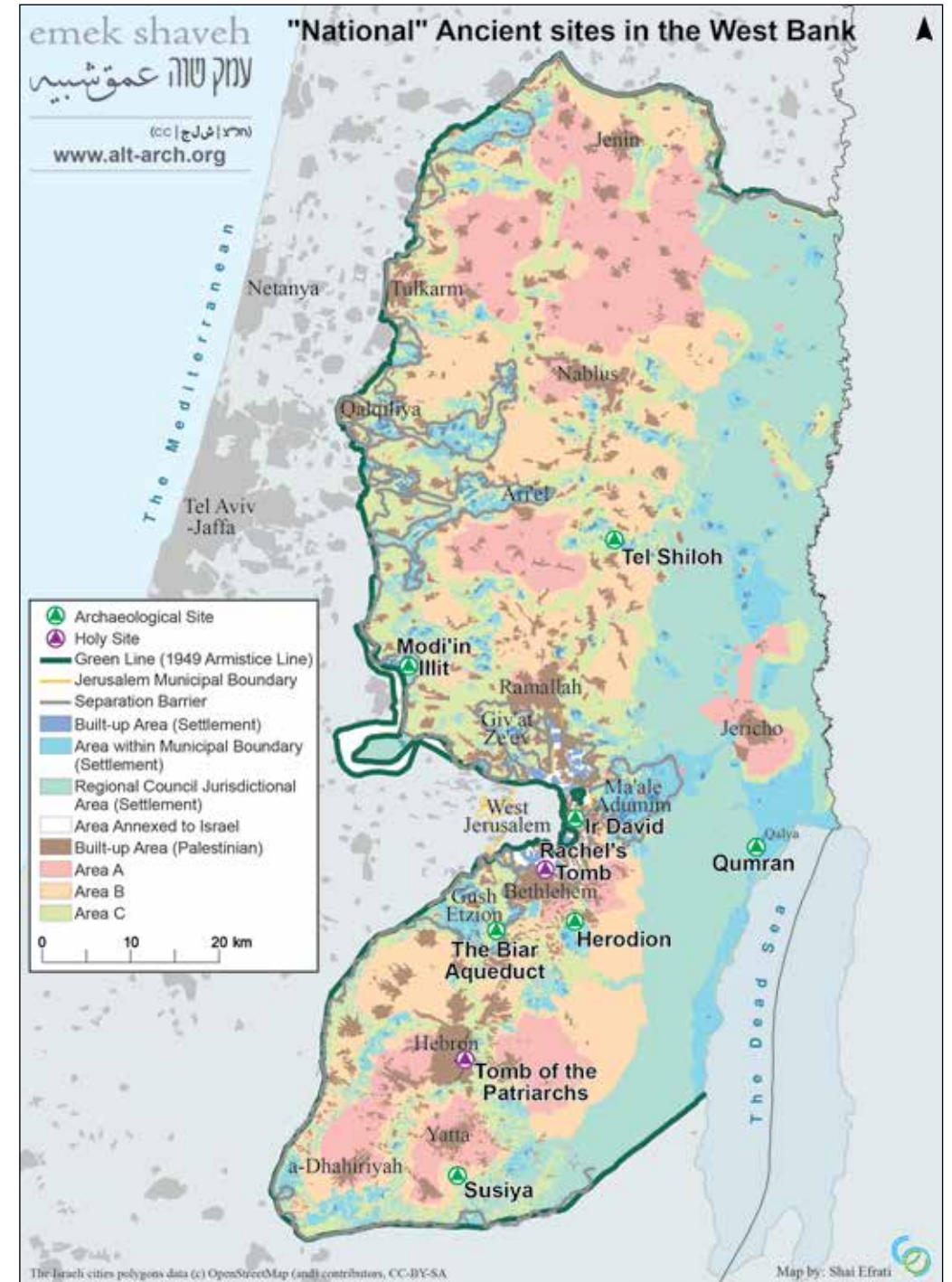
1. Location of the site and the organizations involved in its management

Tel Shiloh (Shiloh Mound) is situated in southern Samaria (in the West Bank), north of the Palestinian village Turmus 'Aya and west of the settlement of Shiloh, and is included within the settlement's borders. The name of the ancient settlement has been preserved over time in the Arabic name for the site, "Khirbet Seilun." It is managed by the "Mishkan Shiloh Association – The Center for the Study and Development of the Cradle of Settlement in the Land of Israel," along with the Binyamin Regional Council. In Israel and the West Bank, antiquities sites are managed by the Nature and Parks Authority. Tel Shiloh is the first instance where an archaeological site in the West Bank is managed by a private foundation and a regional council.

Tel Shiloh is situated on privately owned Palestinian land, and until the beginning of the 1980s, families from the village of Qaryut lived in the site. When the State of Israel began conducting archaeological excavations at the site, the residents were evicted and today, the Palestinians are unable to work their land or access it for any other reason. As the site is now included within the settlement, it is possible to deny their entry to the archaeological tel (a multi-layered site) on the grounds that they do not possess entry permits to the area of the settlement.



View of the heart of the ancient tel



2. The political importance of Tel Shiloh

Tel Shiloh is one of the most highly invested-in archaeological-tourist sites in the West Bank. The Binyamin Regional Council regards the site as a central feature in the development of tourism in the area. Developing the tel is also of central importance in the policies of the current government. For example, the ceremony inaugurating the new tourist site at the tel, a lookout tower called “Migdal Haroeh” in Tel Shiloh which took place in July 2013, was attended by Minister of the Economy Naftali Bennett, Building and Construction Minister Uri Ariel, Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin, former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and others.¹ The inauguration of a tower in an archaeological tel would, one would think, constitute a marginal event in the settlement activities in the West Bank, but the presence of such senior political and military figures at the ceremony clearly indicate that Tel Shiloh carries special significance in the political struggle over the settlement project in Samaria. Developing the site is a clear means of drawing large numbers of visitors and forming a broad consensus around its significance as an inseparable part of the State of Israel. It appears that the managers of Tel Shiloh are working to strategically position the site as a politically neutral alternative to the City of Hebron, following a decision by the current Minister of Education to scale down school children’s visits to the city.²

In 2014 building plans for Tel Shiloh were submitted to the Central planning Bureau of Judea and Samaria. The plans feature a 11,000 m² visitors’ center – an unprecedentedly large facility for an antiquities site. According to the plan, the tel would be developed into a conference, events and tourism center with the capacity to accommodate 5,000 visitors per day. Its goal is to strengthen the settlements and the Israeli presence in the area through tourism.

Further evidence to the site’s importance in national programs is the fact that Tel Shiloh has been included in the category of national heritage sites funded by the State of Israel. Today Tel Shiloh is one of the most highly-funded antiquities sites in the West Bank.³ To date, 20 million NIS have been invested in its development. Plans for future development will entail a further investment of tens of millions of shekels.

1) Photographs from the inauguration of the Migdal Ha-Ro’eh, [Ancient Shiloh’s Facebook Page](#); M. Miskin, “[This Has Been Our Land for Almost 4,000 Years](#),” Arutz 7, 24th July 2013.

2) R. Wilf, “[Instead of Tours to Hebron, Student Field trips to Shiloh](#)” [Heb.] NRG, July 22, 2013.

3) Government Decision No. 4306 [Heb.] (TMR 2), February 14, 2012 (entered into law on February 23, 2012).

3. Archaeological research at Tel Shiloh

3.1 Chronicle of the excavations

The site was excavated by various expeditions throughout the 20th century and once again in recent years. From 1926-1932 a Danish expedition conducted extensive excavations at the site. Another excavation was conducted in 1981-1984 by researchers from Bar-Ilan University. From 2010, excavations have been carried out by the University of Ariel and the Staff Officer for Archaeology at the Civil Administration⁴ focusing on the western section of the site, the foot of the tel on its southern side, and on the northern edge.

3.2 The archaeological finds at Tel Shiloh

Tel Shiloh is located at the heart of the mountain range between the Jordan Valley in the East and the coastal region in the South. The first urban settlement in the mountain region emerged in the Middle Bronze Age II (18-16th BCE) with the establishment of the cities Jerusalem, Nablus, Hebron and others. One of the prominent characteristics of urban centers from that period is the presence of a wall surrounding the heart of the settlement. Shiloh’s wall at the time surrounded an area the size of approximately 30 dunam (30,000 m²). Archaeological research suggests that Shiloh was smaller than some of the other cities in the mountain region such as Nablus and Jerusalem. A clay figurine discovered in the foundations of the Middle Bronze Age wall attests to the influence of the northern kingdoms in the Land of Israel/Palestine and Syria at the time on ritual practices.⁵

Following a hiatus, the site was resettled in the Iron Age I (11th Century BCE). At the time it was a small village whose residents only partly used the structures from the preceding period. A figurine featuring an Egyptian inscription from the Iron Age discovered at the site attests to links between the region and the Egyptian kingdom.⁶ Egyptian finds in the mountain region are commonplace for this period. However, it is unclear how significant Egypt’s influence was in the area or whether this influence was commercial, political, or military. The settlement was destroyed following a violent assault on the village and it remained in its ruined state apparently until the 8th century BCE (Iron Age II), and it was abandoned once again within the same century. Historians associate its abandonment or destruction with the Assyrian conquest at the end of the 8th century BCE.

4) H. Huberman, [Thirty Years Later: Returning to Excavate Tel Shiloh](#), [Heb.] Arutz 7, July 22, 2010.

5) O. Gat, “Second conference on Tel Shiloh”, 31 July 2014.

6) M. Popovitz, “An Inscription on an Egyptian Figurine from Shiloh – New library”, *Judea and Samaria studies* 1996 (Heb), pp.33-36.

The second century BCE, the Hellenistic period, witnessed the development of the settlement, once again over the ruins of the older site. This settlement was destroyed in the second or first centuries BCE, and there are those who associate the destruction with the Hasmonean conquest. During the early Roman period, the settlement expanded and its remains have been found throughout the present-day area of the site and beyond, in excavations conducted south of the tel, and in the settlement of Shiloh.⁷ As there are scant remains from this period, it is difficult to estimate how large a settlement it was. In addition to structural remains and dwellings, coins, a ritual bath and stoneware were found. Some attempt to identify the population from that period as Jewish⁸ but research at Tel Shiloh and the surrounding area attests to remains identified with members of the Samaritan community, who comprised the majority of the population of this stretch of land at least up until the 5th century CE. Archaeological research shows that the site was continuously settled from the Roman period (1st Century CE) up until the Arab period (10th century CE). The site appears to have developed throughout this period, reaching a peak in the Byzantine and the early Arab periods (6th-10th centuries CE).⁹ In the Byzantine period, the 5th century CE, a Samaritan revolt broke out against the Byzantine regime, during which the Samaritan community suffered a terrible blow that resulted in the construction of churches on top of their sacred sites.¹⁰ It is possible that the extensive construction of churches and the transition of Shiloh into a Christian place, perhaps even a religious site, can be associated with this period. The first church built in Shiloh dates to the 5th century, and two additional churches discovered at the tel contain evidence that they were used for worship until the early Arab period in the 8th century CE.

The settlement reached its peak in terms of size and affluence during the Byzantine period. The archaeological finds attest to large-scale construction of residential compounds and large churches adorned with elaborate mosaics.¹¹ The wealth discovered in the churches attests to the economic prosperity and most probably also to the spiritual and religious centrality of Tel Shiloh. A mosaic inscription found at the site mentions the name “Shiloh,” giving credence to the opinion that during the Byzantine period it was a sacred site and identified with the biblical Shiloh and the place of the Tabernacles (see Section 4). It is unclear whether this association was a result of Christian beliefs such as

7) Y. Kagan “Crop growers, a pit and a prison from the early Roman period in the industrial area of Shiloh,” *Excavations and discoveries in Samaria* (Heb), 2009 pp.239-243.

8) R. Leviathan Ben-Aryeh and H. Hizmi, “Tel Shiloh, excavations in the northern area, 2012, 2013,” *Judea and Samaria studies* 23 (Heb) 2014, pp.113-130.

9) A. Kampinski, “Shiloh,” *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in Israel*, Vol. 4 (Heb), 1992, 1536-1538; I. Finkelstein, *Ibid*, 1538-1542.

10) See for example “Mount Gerizim,” Y. Magen, *Ibid*, Vol. 1 pp.353-359.

11) H. Hizmi, “The Excavations of Tel Shiloh: First account of the excavation period 2011 in area N1,” *Judea and Samaria Studies*, 23, 2014, pp.99-112.

those of Helena, the mother of Constantine, in the fourth century CE, or whether it had been inherited from older Roman-Hellenistic traditions or even from earlier periods. The residential structures used by the inhabitants of the site during the Byzantine period continued to be in use during the early Arab period, the Abbasid period, and even during the Mamluk period (13th Century CE).¹²

The fact that some of the churches became mosques during the Arab period demonstrates Tel Shiloh’s significance as a place of worship passed on from one religion to another, even when its inhabitants changed. Despite the extensive excavations at the site, most of the information about the 11th-12th centuries CE, the Crusader period, comes from the [insert: x-century] Muslim historian al-Hawi, who mentions the mosque and the traditions linked to it.¹³

Today, the al-Yatim Mosque (Jami’ al-Yatim) stands at the heart of the site on top of the remains of a Byzantine Church. The mosque was used by the residents of Qaryut until the end of the 1970s. The remains of another mosque, Jami’ al-Sittin (Mosque of the Sixty) – is located in the entrance to the parking lot across from the present-day visitors’ center.

In conclusion, Tel Shiloh began as a small and marginal site on the ridge of the central Samarian mountain region in the second millennium BCE and was destroyed and then rebuilt several times. The site evolved and expanded in the Roman period (the 1st to 4th centuries CE), but its status as a sacred site is apparent predominantly in archaeological remains dated to the Byzantine and the Arab periods. The lack of clear evidence that it functioned as a place of worship in earlier periods (whether in the Roman period or the Iron Age) does not mean that ritual worship did not take place in earlier periods. But from a point of view of archaeological study we must focus on the actual artifacts discovered, and not those that may one day be revealed.

12) *Ibid*.

13) A. Tal, “Eliyahu: Guidelines for learning about the pilgrimage destinations,” from: *The Land of Israel in Arabic texts from the Middle Ages (634-1517)* (Heb), 2014, pp.119-120.

4. Searching for the Tabernacle at Tel Shiloh: religious traditions and archaeological research

Tradition identifies Khirbet Seilun with the biblical Shiloh, the site of the Tabernacle (Mishkan) and the Arc of the Covenant and as the spiritual center of the tribes of Israel in the period before the Kingdoms of Israel (around 1200 BCE).¹⁴ Archaeological excavations cannot uncover evidence for the site of a temporary dwelling such as a Tabernacle made of animal skin, which means that the exact location of the Tabernacle is a matter of faith rather than a subject of physical-archaeological research. Yet, there is no doubt that the biblical story shapes the way the archaeological site of Tel Shiloh is displayed to the public, and one cannot ignore its impact on how Israelis in general and the settlers in particular perceive its importance. Proving the factual veracity of traditions and matters of faith is not one of the objectives of archaeological research. Excavation work intended to reveal ancient ruins can teach us about the material life of a given place, such as the main periods when the site was settled, the size of the settlements in the various periods, the economic circumstances of the community at the time, the location of the city walls, and the location of the government buildings and places of worship. On the other hand, many questions will remain unanswered. Attempts to answer them will be based merely on assumptions. Moreover, one of the questions that arise in sites that are associated with traditions or beliefs is how one can interpret the absence of finds.

14) Joshua 18:1; Samuel 1, 1:3; Judges 21:19.

5. Evangelicals and settlers

One unique group that attaches special religious importance to Tel Shiloh is devout Christians, mainly Evangelicals from the United States, Europe and Korea. For example, in 2009 there were approximately 30,000 visitors at Tel Shiloh, of whom 60% were identified as Evangelical Christians.¹⁵ In 2011, the rabbis of the settlement opposed the inclusion of Evangelical volunteers in the archaeological digs, claiming that the latter view involvement in the excavation as an act of worship. Therefore, the Evangelicals could “have an impact on the weaker segments of the community”¹⁶ by bringing them closer to the Christian faith.

Perhaps the investment in “Haroh Tower” in its current location reflects the site management’s attempt to underplay the Christian tradition, which identifies the exact location of the Tabernacle with one of the Byzantine churches on the tel, and to divert more weight to the tradition that identifies it in the north of the tel. This is one example among many for the utilization of an archaeological site to reinforce a faith that draws on a very specific world-view, rather than letting the actual artifacts discovered at the site shape the way it is presented to the public.



A section of the site’s ruins

15) Y. Medad, “[Tel Shiloh in the news](#)” (Hebrew), *The Right Word* (blog), 4th April, 2010, accessed 30 October 2014.

16) A. Binyamin, “Christians who dig in Tel Shiloh (Hebrew), *Ha-Kol Ha Yehudi*, 27 January, 2012, accessed 10 January 2013



The al-Yatim Mosque built on the remains of a Byzantine church



KDJKAJHDKAJHAKLJHADSLASHL



Excavations in the north of the tel – a quest for the site of the Tabernacle?



KDJKAJHDKAJHAKLJHADSLASHL

6. Presenting the site to the public

6.1 Signposts and directions at the site

The signposts at Tel Shiloh have not been conceived according to a coherent system that explains the content of the finds and their importance. Instead, there are a few old stone signs that note the function of various structures and their dates. The sign beside al-Yatim Mosque mentions the possibility that a synagogue once stood on that spot. When standing next to the remains of a structure identified as Jami' el-Sittin (the Mosque of the Sixty), the guides tend to say that this structure was also probably a synagogue once. This information is at best based on conjecture or wishful thinking, and is not supported by archaeological or historical research.

The signs erected in recent years focus on biblical events. For example, a large sign at the foot of the biblical tel explains the process of consolidating the twelve tribes into the People of Israel. One of the signs mentions Shiloh as the place where Joshua placed the Tabernacle and asked the People of Israel: "How long are ye slack to go to possess the land, which the Lord God of your fathers hath given you?"¹⁷ The message to the Jewish Israeli visitor in the present political reality is clearly a call to strengthen Israeli control over the West Bank and an attempt to delegitimize the idea of a territorial compromise in the region.

6.2 The "Haroeh Tower"

One of the central projects in Tel Shiloh is the construction of the lookout tower at the highest point in the tel which overlooks the surrounding area stretching "all the way to the city of Ariel," in the words of one tour guide [?] The tower is called "Haroeh Tower," alluding to the Prophet Samuel. The tower is a round two-story cast concrete structure rising to a height of some 9 meters. The construction of the tower caused significant damage to the archaeological finds beneath and adjacent to it. The common approach in Israel and within the archaeological community in particular is to refrain from building on archaeological tels (multi-layered sites). It is understood that any construction at the heart of a site will entail extensive damage to layers and finds. Therefore, for the most part, construction takes place at the margins of antiquities sites. In the past, senior archaeologists objected completely to construction in Tel Rumeida in Hebron.¹⁸ Yet virtually no criticism was voiced with respect to the construction of "Haroeh Tower" in Tel Shiloh.¹⁹

17) Joshua 18:3, King James Bible.

18) "Penthouse deal in biblical Hebron" [Heb.], Haaretz, April 11, 2001.

19) N. Hasson, "Archaeologists V. Settlers in the Battle over Tel Shiloh" [Heb.], Haaretz, September 16, 2012.

6.3 The audio-visual presentation

On the top floor of "Haroeh Tower," the visitor is invited to view an audio-visual presentation that recounts the biblical stories set in Shiloh, beginning with the erection of the Tabernacle, continuing with the story of Hannah the mother of Samuel, through to the wars between the people of Israel and the Philistines. The viewer looks out through a transparent screen at the northern end of the site and the surrounding mountains. The opening scene describes a confrontation between the leaders of the tribes of Israel and Joshua when the former approach him complaining about the division of the land into tribal portions: "The land is full of Philistines!" they say. In his stern response Joshua reminds them that following the death of Moses he led them here to inherit the land, settle in it, build and plant trees. "The land is good – very good. Cleave to it and it will cleave to you." The tribes then set out to conquer the land in its entirety. But the tribes are not yet united: In a joint decision they fight the tribe of Benjamin in an attempt to destroy it.

This act is presented as a moral transgression even though it was based on a majority decision. Eli, the High Priest of Israel, angry over celebrations of the tribes' victory, says: "Benjamin is one of the tribes of Israel!" The tribes concede to his appeal and invite the survivors from the Benjamin tribe to a covenant among the tribes marked by a joint celebration of the festival of Tu B'Av (the fifteenth of the month of Av), the festival of love in Shiloh. The story is critical of a decision-making process that results in the destruction of the minority by the majority. The underlying message of the presentation is that even a majority decision to cede parts of the Land of Israel is immoral and undermines the unity of the people. In contrast to this destructive process, Shiloh is presented as a place where unity is created and consensus is built among the people, a place that cultivates a positive force that enables settlement and building in the land. These two messages - the importance of unity among the people and settling throughout the land - are the central motifs of the film, which also portrays Shiloh as the place where these processes took place for the first time.

The presentation then segues into the story of Elkana and his barren wife, Hannah, who prays for a child. God hears her prayers and she gives birth to a son whom she names Samuel. She brings him to the Tabernacle in Shiloh to serve God. Samuel is the figure who unites the tribes into one people in the period following the defeat of the people of Israel by the Philistines and after the Arc of the Covenant falls into their hands. He is responsible for anointing King Saul. The film ends with the relocation of the capital to Jerusalem, but reminds the viewer of the imperative not to forget Shiloh, where "our collective roots lie," "But go ye now unto my place which was in Shiloh, where I set my name at the first."²⁰ That is, leaving Shiloh will lead to a rift among the people, and harm

20) Jeremiah 7:12.

the efforts to build and develop the land, whereas remaining steadfast and cultivating the place will lead to unity, prosperity, and a strong and righteous government. The audio-visual presentation does not mention the history of the site following the biblical period, even though the archaeological finds from the post-biblical period are far more substantial than those associated with biblical times.²¹

6.4 The Museum at “Haroeh Tower”

In July 2014 a small museum was inaugurated on the lower level of “Haroeh Tower” that features archaeological finds from excavations at the site. The finds are presented in chronological order accompanied by explanatory placards. In addition, the museum features interactive computers that invite the visitors to view videos wherein a contemporary actor plays characters from the different periods in the display. Clearly, great efforts were taken to make the museum a place that would be interesting and pleasant to visit, and it appears to be designed to appeal particularly to families, school children, and soldiers.

A timeline indicating archaeological periods from the Middle Bronze Age through the Ottoman times to the modern period is displayed next to the finds. Alongside the archaeological timeline, another timeline accompanies the display which sets out the periods according to traditional Jewish historiography: the Age of the Patriarchs, the settlement of the tribes and the subsequent period of Judges, the Monarchic period, The Mishna and Talmudic periods, etc. Branching out of this timeline are little medallions that mention various events, most of which carry great significance from a religious-Jewish perspective such as the setting of the Tabernacle in Shiloh by Yehoshua Bin Nun, the signing of the Mishnah by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi (Judah the Prince), or the attempt to build a temple during the reign of the Emperor Julian. The last two events are not related to Shiloh at all. The only find from the Byzantine period displayed at the museum is a mosaic discovered at the church bearing a Greek inscription saying: “Our Lord J.C (Jesus Christ) have mercy on Shiloh and its inhabitants.” This text, which is offered as proof that the biblical Shiloh existed on this spot, appears on the sign in English, but not in Hebrew, probably because of its Christian origin.

The last display in the exhibition marks two events: the Six Day War in 1967 and the founding of the settlement of Shiloh in 1978. Thus we are brought full circle from the ancient Shiloh to the new present-day Shiloh. The narrative and the choice of languages – English and Hebrew – would suggest that the exhibition has been tailored for Jewish-traditional and religious-Christian audiences.



The Haroeh Tower on top of the archaeological tel

21) M. Yaakobson, “[Historical Spaceship: The "Haroeh Tower" Visitor's Center at Shiloh](#)” [Heb.], Xnet, July 22, 2013.

7. The development plans: Tel Shiloh's archaeological park

At the end of March 2014, the Civil Administration publicized a new master plan for Tel Shiloh. The proposed plan (Judea and Samaria/205/15) is an initiative by the Binyamin Regional Council for the development of the tel and its environs for tourism. The plans relate to the summit of the archaeological tel, the slopes of the tel, and the surrounding area, totaling more than 300 dunam (300,000 m²). The plan proposes (as stated above) building on an area of 11,000 m², which would include an amphitheater (up to 950 m²), an events hall (up to 1000 m²), a commercial and tourism center (approximately 3,000 m²), a small hotel (up to 4,800 m²), and parking lots for 5000 visitors. Although we do not know how much it will cost, we have no doubt it will amount to many millions of shekels.

Such an extensive plan is almost unheard of in archaeological sites inside Israel, not to mention sites within the West Bank. In most cases, construction in archaeological parks encompasses only several dozen, maybe several hundred meters, for a souvenir shop, a snack bar, and an office. The plans for Tel Shiloh include buildings the size of which are without precedent in archaeological parks. For example local authorities have never before built a hotel, an amphitheater, and commercial facilities this large, a petting zoo (300 m²), a factory, and more. Building on such a large area, its proximity to the heart of the site, and the massive construction on top of ruins would result in irreparable damage to the archaeological site. Yet the archaeologists of the Civil Administration do not oppose the plan. Infrastructure works based on the new plan were commenced in April 2014, despite the fact that no discussion had taken place and the plan has yet to be approved. In response to our queries, we were told that the works are conducted according to law and according to a plan approved in 1992. Following an exchange of letters that included a warning to petition the High Court of Justice, we received a reply from the Civil Administration saying that the Binyamin Regional Council had decided to cease works and restore the site to its original state prior to the works. In our opinion, the works were stopped because they were conducted against the law. Only once the officials from the Civil Administration and the regional council understood that the next step would entail petitioning the High Court did they decide to suspend work and ensure that the site would be restored to the state it had been in prior to the works. The practice of ignoring the law until threatened with a legal suit should be worrisome for every system of good governance and begs the question whether the site of Tel Shiloh is in the right hands.

In August 2014 objections to the plan submitted by Emek Shaveh and the villagers of Qaryut were discussed in the regional planning committee. The meeting was attended by the chairman of the Yesha Council and the Binyamin Region, who stated that he

usually does not attend discussions in the planning committee. Perhaps his attendance is an indication of how important the plan is for the Council, and the significance of the concern that substantial funding promised to the Council had not materialized because the works had been suspended. The residents of Qaryut claimed their right to access their lands, but the planning committee did not recognize their claims since they did not present their ownership deeds. Nevertheless, no one contested the fact that in the past, the lands of the archaeological tel had belonged to the village of Qaryut, and that the mosque at the site was used by the villagers until the end of the 1970s.



kjfaskdfhaksjdhlaskjdlkskdjlakdjlakdjlakdjlaskhfkldsjfh

8. There is another way

Every discussion about how to manage and display the site at Tel Shiloh must take the political reality into account. As we see it, an appropriate solution for Tel Shiloh should be decided in the framework of an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. But even in the present political reality there are ways to change and influence the relationship between the public and the antiquities site, and ways to help protect it. The antiquities site ought to be separate from the area of the settlement and managed by a statutory body, not by a private foundation. Both these steps would create a situation whereby the site would be protected by an institution that is committed to the general public and is subject to public scrutiny and criticism.

The Palestinians ought to be given free and easy access to the site, just as they would to any other areas which they own. The site should be presented to the public in a manner that includes all the major periods uncovered in the excavations, and that focuses on the periods when the settlement was at its height. Although it is acceptable to mention the biblical tradition that identifies Tel Shiloh as the Shiloh of the Bible, it is important to highlight the difference between reality and faith. In this way, the site would be presented as an integral part of the greater environment in which it is situated, and its history would also be presented as part of the history of the entire area. In the present political reality, it would be best to refrain from massive construction or expansive excavations which alter the landscape and cause irreversible damage that will be impossible to undo once the political future of the site is decided. The visitors to the site could learn a great deal from the remains even if they are without event halls, large commercial facilities and an amphitheater.



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