

David's Tomb on Mt. Zion

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Introduction

In January 2013, the tiles that decorated the walls of David's Tomb were methodically destroyed in an act of vandalism. The tiles were the remnants of a unique decoration from the 17th century – the Ottoman Period. The destruction was carried out with the goal of removing any Muslim element and strengthening the Jewish face of David's Tomb. The inter-religious tension at David's Tomb, and use of vandalism of the antiquities as an expression of this tension, did not begin with the destructive act in January 2013. Over the past decade, there has been a noticeable rise in tension between Jewish visitors and residents of Mt. Zion vis-à-vis Christians and Muslims there.

The compound known as "David's Tomb" is located on Mt. Zion, southwest of the Zion Gate, and outside the wall of Jerusalem's Old City. The tomb chamber is on the bottom floor of a two-story structure; the second story is identified in Christian tradition as the Coenaculum, the room where the Last Supper took place. Since 1949, Mt. Zion and the tomb chamber have been located inside the Green Line, and they are part of Israeli territory. The ground floor features a foyer, and the room housing the tomb, which contains an enshrouded sarcophagus. On the second floor is the Coenaculum, a large, long room with pillars that support a vaulted ceiling. Each floor has a separate entrance. While David's Tomb is administered by the Ministry of Religions as a religious site, the Coenaculum is administered by the Ministry of the Interior, and prayer is forbidden there.¹ Most of the spaces around the tomb are maintained by the Diaspora Yeshiva. Adjacent to the compound is the ancient Muslim cemetery of the Dajani family and the Sephardic synagogue. Next to the entrance to the compound on the northern side are the Dormition Abbey and the Benedictine Monastery, which belong to the Catholic Church.

¹ S. Puni, "[Renovating David's Tomb](#)", *ynet*, December 25, 2010



View towards the David's Tomb Compound and the Muslim Cemetery

Traditions and Religious Worship at the Compound

The Tomb building is identified in Jewish, Christian and Muslim culture as the tomb of King David. The first testimony identifying the compound as David's tomb is associated with the 10th-century Jerusalem Muslim geographer al-Muqaddasi, but it can be assumed that this tradition is Christian in origin.² According to historical sources, during the Byzantine and Early Arab Periods the tomb compound was part of the Hagia Sion Church, (Holy Zion Church), destroyed in 1099. In addition, already in the fourth century it was associated with the tradition of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples.³ The first testimony from a Jewish source identifying the structure as David's Tomb was recorded by Benjamin of Tudela in the mid-12th century. At the beginning of the 12th century, Crusaders began building the new church "Our Lady of

² E. Reiner, "The Place Where there was an Oak Casket Until the House was built – History of of the Tradition of a Zionist Mountain," *New Findings in the History of Jerusalem and Environs*, [Hebrew], vol 3, 2009, 49-56.

³ <http://www.bibarch.com/archaeologicalsites/cenacle.htm>

Mt. Zion” on the ruins; the church included David’s Tomb, and above it, a room identified as the room where the last supper was held. Following conflicts between Jews and Christians over ownership of the place, the Ottoman Sultan decided in 1548 that the entire mountain was Muslim sacred property, and the site was transferred to the management of Sheikh al-Dajani. The structure was turned into a mosque, and a minaret was added. During this period, the Muslim connection to the place gained hold. During the British Mandate Period, the rights of members of all religions were upheld to visit and worship at their respective holy places. David’s Tomb was defined as a Muslim holy site. In keeping with practice during the Ottoman Period, Christians were permitted to enter the Coenaculum but not to pray there, and Jews were allowed to pray there just once a year, and even then, only if the political situation allowed.⁴

After the war in 1948, David’s Tomb was the only Jewish holy site remaining on the western side of the city. The tomb’s location and its view from the roof of the Western Wall and the Mount of Olives have turned it into a pilgrimage site for masses of Jews and tourists. The government institutions, mainly the Ministry of Religion, have initiated activity there, emphasizing its religious value. This trend continues to this day. The room containing the tomb today mainly attracts Jewish national-religious youth, and groups ideologically close to the settlers, known as “hilltop youth,” as well as ultra-Orthodox Jews who come to pray there regularly. According to the Ministry of Tourism, hundreds and even thousands visit the compound daily.⁵ The claims that David’s Tomb is located, according to the Bible, in the City of David (i.e. the southeastern hill, today the location of the Village of Silwan) do not detract from the sacred status of the site. David’s Tomb is a clear example of the phenomenon whereby a religious tradition, with the support of the political establishment, is stronger than historical-archaeological research in determining a place’s narrative and identity.

⁴ D. Bar, “Shifts in the Religious-Political Reality in Jerusalem after 1948: The Case of Mt. Zion, David’s Tomb, and the Coenaculum,” [Hebrew], *Ofaqim Be-Geographiyah* 52 (2000), 5-18.

⁵ A. Rosenblum, “Conservation Works at the David’s Tomb Compound,” [Hebrew] *Devar Avar*, July 2013, 18-21.



Synagogue in front of the entrance to David's Tomb



David's Tomb

Archaeological Excavations and Conservation Activity

Due to the sanctity of the place and the interreligious tension, the site of the tomb has barely been excavated. The structure was first documented in 1859 by Ermete Pierotti, an Italian engineer, who claimed that he found a cavern beneath the cemetery on the western part of Mt. Zion, which led below the tomb compound.⁶ Pierotti believed that the cavern was the true site of David's Tomb, carved out in the rock. In 1951 a brief excavation was carried out there by Yaakov Pinkerfeld, but the results were never published.⁷ Pinkerfeld believed that the original structure is a synagogue from the 1st c CE, due to the depression discovered there (apparently, he presumed, for placing a Torah scroll) and the direction the building faces (not towards the east, like churches, but towards the Temple Mount). This theory drew great interest, and attempts were made to identify the structure as a synagogue or a Jewish-Christian church, which would have strengthened the Christian ties to the place.⁸ These theories have been strongly critiqued by various archaeologists, who claim that they lack evidence in the form of on-site archaeological findings. Moreover, the little evidence that is available refutes identification of the compound as an ancient synagogue.⁹

In excavations conducted near David's Tomb, a few remains of structures from the Byzantine period were unearthed, and it was further discovered that later, the Crusader Church incorporated within it the remains of the ancient churches. In 2011, a limited exploratory excavation was conducted in the courtyard of the Franciscan cloister by A. Re'em, on behalf of the Antiquities Authority. The excavator identified the remains of a wall and installations that probably date to the Roman-Byzantine period, and later through the Crusader and Ottoman Periods.¹⁰ All of the archaeological excavations in the compound were limited in area and scope, and

⁶ A. Re'em, "David's Tomb at Mt. Zion," [Hebrew], *Hiddushim B-Archilogiyah shel Yerushalayim ve-Sevivoteihah*, vol. 7, 2013, 221-242.

⁷ http://www.bibarch.com/ArchaeologicalSites/j_pinkerfeld.htm

⁸ See, for example, B. . Pixner "[Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion](#)", *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16.3 (May/June 1990) p. 16-35, 60

⁹ H. Geva, "Searching for Roman Jerusalem", *Biblical Archaeology Review* 23.6 1997, 34-45, 72-73,

¹⁰ A. Re'em, "Yerushalayim, Har Zion," *Hadashot Archeologiyot*, vol. 124, 2012.

therefore, it is difficult to reconstruct the history of the site and its character based on archaeological research. Among researchers, opinion is divided as to whether the structure extant today originated in the Late Roman (2-4 c. CE), Byzantine (4-7 c. CE), Crusader a (12-13 c. CE) or Mamluk or Ottoman (14-16 c.) periods. Identification of the place as a synagogue or Jewish-Christian church indicates mainly the great power of religious tradition to shape the narrative of a holy site, while ignoring the actual findings.¹¹

In 2007, the Diaspora Yeshiva began construction work at the site, which threatened to lead to the collapse of southern wing of the structure. The construction was halted and following this, the Jerusalem Development Authority decided to integrate the David's Tomb compound with the Israeli government's Old City project. The work was carried out by the Antiquities Authority and the National Center for the Development of Holy Sites under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism. As part of the conservation work, the rooms of the historical inn at the southern part of the compound were restored, as were the central courtyard and corridor to the northern entrance, the vaulted hall and the Coenaculum.¹² The conservation work was concluded during 2013. The conservation department at the Antiquities Authority in this case invested a few years of work and received funding on the order of millions of shekels.¹³

¹¹ S. Puni, "[Renovating David's Tomb](#)", *ynet*, December 25, 2010

¹² A. Rosenblum, "Conservation Works at the David's Tomb Compound," [Hebrew] *Devar Avar*, July 2013, 18-21.

¹³ Based on an announcement of the Antiquities Authority and estimate of the scope of work and staff (five laborers and two conservation directors +materials).



Entrance to David's Tomb from the "Women's Section"

Destruction of the Tiles in the Tomb Chamber

The conservation work included conservation and reconstruction of the Ottoman tiles from the 17th century, which covered a portion of the walls of the chamber housing the tomb. These were hand-illustrated tiles decorated with leaves, flowers and geometrical shapes in shades of green, turquoise and deep red on a white background.¹⁴ The tiles were decorated in an artistic style common to the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, which continued to be prevalent in parts of the empire in the 17th and 18th century.¹⁵ On December 19, 2012, during the conservation work, a young ultra-Orthodox man was caught smashing the ancient tiles. The young man told police that he performed the deed in hope that it would help him merit finding a

¹⁴ N. Shalev-Khalifa, *At the Edges of the Ancient Forest – Ceramic Tiles at the Compound of King David's Tomb* [Hebrew], *Hiddushim B-Archilogiyah shel Yerushalayim ve-Sevivoteiha*, Vol. 3 (2009), 67-73.

¹⁵ Efrat Asaf, "[Renovations and Conservation at the David's Tomb Compound.](#)" [Hebrew]

wife.¹⁶ Two weeks later, on the night between January 2-3 2013, again the ceramic tiles at the site were vandalized.¹⁷

The damage of the tiles was defined as total. The Antiquities Authority submitted a complaint to the police and published an announcement regarding the extraordinary archaeological, cultural and religious importance of David's Tomb. In its announcement, the Antiquities Authority noted the extensive funds (millions of shekels) invested in the conservation work, and called on "those responsible for the compound, the Israel Police and the Jerusalem Municipality, to assist in its preservation in order to prevent the recurrence of similar incidents."¹⁸ The Antiquities Authority decided not to restore the tiles, but to leave the walls bare.¹⁹ The response of the Antiquities Authority in this affair is quite enigmatic. Funds, labor and much thought were invested for several years in the conservation of the compound, including in the special tiles. Despite this, the Antiquities Authority declined to demand their restoration, and agreed to remove almost all of them from the walls. Today, only small strips of the tiles can be seen, surfacing along the seam between the ceiling and the floor. Instead of restoring the tiles, the Antiquities Authority emphasized the advantage provided by the bare walls, which make it possible to see the lines of the original openings.

Destruction of the antiquities drew harsh critique from various directions. The Turks, who viewed the destruction of the tiles as damage to an Ottoman heritage site, expressed their protest and even visited the site. It is clear that in terms of the Turks, the decision of the Antiquities Authority is perceived as an abnegation of its responsibility to restore the tomb.

¹⁶ N. Hason, "[Ultra-Orthodox Man Arrested for Smashing Tiles at David's Tomb](#)," *Haaretz*, January 3, 2013.

¹⁷ N. Hason, "[Vandalism at Jerusalem Holy Site may have Aimed to Erase Traces of Muslim Past](#)," *Haaretz*, January 3, 2013.

¹⁸ Press release, Antiquities Authority, "[Severe Vandalism Last Night at the David's Tomb. Antiquities Authority to Submit Complaint to Jerusalem Police](#)," January 3, 2012.

¹⁹ N. Hason, "[Who is 'Judaizing' David's Tomb?](#)" *Haaretz*, August 3, 2013.

Jerusalem researcher Amnon Ramon examined the conduct of the authorities in conserving David's Tomb, and raised a number of questions regarding the manner of decision-making and conduct of the authorities at the compound:

- What made wreaking damage at this important site, holy to the three monotheistic religions, possible, after just two weeks earlier the site was vandalized? Was the door easy to break through, and were cameras installed at the site?
- How was systematic damage possible at the site for a second time? How did the neighbors from the "Diaspora Yeshiva" not hear the noises from the destruction, particularly in light of the fact that the vandals used heavy tools and worked for several hours?
- How is the oversight consistent with the declarations of the heads of state regarding the State of Israel's commitment to protection of Jerusalem's holy sites? And why were the results of the investigation not published in the case of both incidents?²⁰

Ramon also raises a number of questions regarding the decision-making process in the Antiquities Authority:

1. Is it within the jurisdiction of an internal forum of the Antiquities Authorities to make decisions regarding such a sensitive topic?
2. Would it not have been correct to expand discussion of the issue and to raise it for discussion in broader forums?
3. Were alternatives considered, such as restoration of one of the walls? After all, the Antiquities Authority possesses copies of the tiles!

²⁰ A. Ramon, in a summary of the lecture "[The issue of conservation and the struggle for control of the holy places: the case of David's Tomb](#)" (Hebrew), Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, June 6th 2013

4. Does the decision to not preserve the tiles constitute a kind of reward to the criminals and desecrators of the tomb? What will be the implications of the decision on the future of Mt. Zion and other holy sites?



Line of tiles left on one of the walls of the tomb



The Muslim tiles – close up

Chamber of the Last Supper (Coenaculum)

The topic of control of the Coenaculum has already for many years occupied the heart of the discussions between Israel and the Vatican. Pope John Paul II, during his visit to Israel in 2000, conducted a mass in the presence of his entourage and local bishops. His successor, Pope Benedict XVI, also visited there in 2009. Rumors of progress in the contacts between Israel and the Vatican appeared in the media during 2013, particularly pertaining to the Coenaculum and David's Tomb. In July 2013, MK Nissim Ze'ev (Shas) submitted a proposal for a decision ("Israel Surrenders to Vatican – Compounds, Including at David's Tomb, Will be Transferred to Their Control"), in which he claims that Israel is succumbing to international pressure and transferring a site holy to the Jewish people to the Vatican, and therefore, a discussion on this topic must be held in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the Knesset. The proposal passed. During the discussion, Deputy Foreign Minister Zeev Elkin admitted that the negotiations indeed had progressed greatly and were nearing a conclusion, but noted that the agreement-in-process did not grant the Vatican ownership or control over the Coenaculum.²¹ Despite this, a similar rumor was again disseminated in February 2014, but its reliability is unclear. The topic is expected to remain on the agenda, mainly among ultra-Orthodox and Evangelist Christian groups, towards the upcoming second visit of Pope Francis XVI, planned for May 2014.²²

²¹ Protocol of Plenary no. 54 of the 19th Knesset, July 17, 2013, p. 231-235.

²² A. P., "[Pope Francis sets date for Israel visit: May 24-26](#)," *Haaretz*, January 5, 2014.



Chamber of the Last Supper (Coenaculum)



Arabic inscription and Muslim architectural detail in the Coenaculum

UNESCO and Mt. Zion

The Old City of Jerusalem and its walls were declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1981. The State of Israel included Mount Zion in its tentative list of heritage sites for which it seeks UNESCO recognition as World Heritage Sites.²³ Israel claimed that the heritage site of the Old City should be expanded towards Mt. Zion, since it is an inseparable part of ancient Jerusalem. In 2001, the Committee for World Heritage Sites decided to reject Israel's request, claiming that as long as Jerusalem's Old City was not part of an agreement under international law, it would not be possible to expand Jerusalem as a World Heritage Site.²⁴ Recognition that the religious and historical importance of Jerusalem does not end at the walls of the Old City is accepted by the finest researchers and by other professionals in the field. UNESCO also shares this understanding. Were it not for the political struggle, it would be possible and appropriate to expand Jerusalem as a World Heritage Site towards the direction of Mt. Zion, and also in the direction of ancient Jerusalem at the Mount of Olives. It cannot be known whether UNESCO's recognition of the David's Tomb site would pressure Israel into fastidiously protecting the tomb and whether in the past it would have prevented destruction of the tiles.

Israel, which knew that there was no chance of expanding Jerusalem as a heritage site in the direction of occupied territories such as the Mount of Olives and the Kidron Valley, tried to expand recognition in the direction of the Green Line. UNESCO's decision attests to the fact that from an international standpoint, the path to generating recognition, collaboration and maximal protection of the tomb compound is connected to devising a political solution for the Old City.

The Political Significance of the Struggle on the Tomb Compound

The David's Tomb compound is under territorial dispute. The compound is located within the Green Line, and in any political agreement between Israel and the

²³ Israel National Commission for UNESCO, [World Heritage](#)

²⁴ WHC, Israel tentative list, [Jerusalem](#)

Palestinians, it will be part of Israel. The political sensitivity of the compound arises from a number of key factors: 1. the sanctity of the place and use of the religious compound by members of various religions. 2. location of the tomb as part of the broader compound of the historic (holy) basin of Jerusalem, adjacent to the Old City walls; 3. trends among extreme Jewish elements to erase the city's Christian and Muslim past.

The composition of the population that visits the tomb was known to the security services. Through simple measures (such as security cameras) it would have been possible to at least apprehend the vandals. It appears that the Israeli authorities are comfortable with emphasis of the Jewish character of the tomb, whether through passive acceptance and lack of alternative, or based on a conscious political decision. In this situation, the process of 'judaization' of the tomb continues undisturbed, and the site, meant to be a multi-religious center outside of the political struggle, becomes an inseparable part of the struggle over the place's identity and presentation of a single historical/religious narrative that erases the other.

David's Tomb is a compound with religious and cultural significance. The Vatican's interest in the Coenaculum and the Turkish protest against the damage to the tiles are two examples. The desire to add Mount Zion to UNESCO's World Heritage Site list, and the negotiations underway between Israel and the Vatican, are testimony to Israeli recognition of the international importance of the compound. However, alongside Israel's declared intentions, in practice the tomb is identified as a religious-ultra-Orthodox stronghold with a clear Jewish character. Symbols of its Muslim cultural heritage were violently removed from it, and the Coenaculum, located above the tomb, is secured by the Ministry of the Interior in order to prevent damage and disturbances of the Christian visitors to the site. It appears that the internal-Israeli political reality is not succeeding in adjusting itself to the political reality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

David's Tomb, like other holy sites, such as the Temple Mount in the Old City or the Tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron, is thousands of years old, and built layer upon layer. These sites were never properly excavated or researched. The religious tension and political interests make it impossible to relate to these structures as antiquities sites; their holy status clouds the research. As we have illustrated in the case of David's Tomb, some of the information originates in the most limited excavations, and most is from archaeological surveys or historical sources.

Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions mingle together at David's Tomb. This is evident in the architecture of the tomb building, and the Coenaculum. Since David's Tomb is not located in the heart of a political conflict, like the Tombs of the Patriarchs in Hebron or the Temple Mount / Haram a-Sharif, one might expect Israel to uphold its obligation to protect the structure from vandalism by extreme elements. Despite this, the authorities have failed in fulfilling this mission, and the sense is that the situation that has arisen is convenient for the government, or at least, the authorities have come to terms with the damage to the site.

The case of David's Tomb is a test case for Israel's ability to foster religious tolerance. It appears that greater international involvement in the compound will emphasize the international importance of the site. Such involvement could serve as a counterweight to extreme Jewish groups which are unprepared to accept a lifestyle or beliefs that are different from their own. Israel would do well to prove to itself and to the world that it is capable of protecting a site holy to all three faiths, one that is located outside of the political conflict, and that it does not enable extreme groups to determine the nature of the place. However, as mentioned above, it is impossible to detach the location of Mt. Zion and David's Tomb from the adjacent Old City. The political struggle in the Old City, which brings about national and religious extremism, also reaches David's Tomb. It appears that as long as there is no political accord in the Old City, the phenomena of the strengthening of extremist groups will be an inseparable part of the atmosphere at Mt. Zion and the tomb compound.