The process of archaeological unearthing raised participants’ awareness and understanding of the people who lived at the site during different periods – people who, like them, faced environmental questions such as how to maximize water use efficiency and protect their water resources. Presentation of the findings and making them available to the public-at-large through creation of signs and guided tours will further strengthen the school community’s connection with the human environment that uses and enjoys Independence Park.

Community Excavation is an excavation in which professional archaeologists excavate an ancient site together with local residents. Its goal is to empower the community through the experience of researching the past, and to encourage conservation of the site as a significant public space in the local landscape.

Emek Shaveh is an organization of archaeologists and community activists focusing on the role of archaeology in Israeli society and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We believe archaeology tells a complex story that is independent of tradition, religious or otherwise, and that by listening to this story and bringing it to the wider public we can promote values of tolerance and pluralism. For us, community excavation is the main means of presenting archaeology that tells not the narrative of kings and conquerors, but one of the place and its residents during different historical periods.

The Experimental High School is located in the Jerusalem city center, near Independence Park and the Mamilla Cemetery. Like its preschools and elementary school, it operates in the spirit of open education; some 330 students are enrolled in grades 7-12.

Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is a unique organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli environmentalists. Our primary objective is the promotion of cooperative efforts to protect our shared environmental heritage. In so doing, we seek to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region.

The Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology at the Hebrew Union College is an academic institution with an active field research program. Its work focuses on the Land of Israel, asking both universal questions about the development of human society and more particular ones concerning the special nature of ancient Canaan and Israel and the world of the Bible.
The Burial Site that Became a Water Cistern... and a Garbage Dump

The archaeologists who excavated the site identified three different stages. At the first stage, a two-level burial system was established, apparently during Late Roman-Byzantine Period, between the 4th-7th centuries. In the second stage, during the Early Moslem Period (7th-11th centuries), the burial caves were transformed into a large water cistern. The walls and floors of the rooms were removed, their surfaces were plastered, and openings were made in the ceiling in order to collect water. For a long period, the cistern was used to collect water. During the third and final stage, apparently in the 20th century, the cistern was no longer used for this purpose. A residence was built along its eastern side, and a tunnel was built between the two structures. The cistern thus became part of the living quarters of the house. During later generations, no use was made of it, and it became filled with trash.

Course of the Excavation

The cistern was excavated in two weekly sessions held in May and October 2012. Every day, a group of middle school students from the Experimental School took part in the excavation. The children donned protective helmets, took up their small hammers, builders’ shovels and brooms, and tried their hand at the process of working on the foundations, all with a level of patience that one rarely encounters during an ordinary classroom lesson. During the excavation, artifacts were discovered that concretely exemplified the story of the Independence Park area during different periods: packaging, documents from stolen wallets, syringes, eating utensils, pottery, and even antique marble and an ancient nail. During the second stage (the October excavation), a large portion of the cistern floor was exposed, from which many pottery shards were collected. While they were working, the participants discussed the changes in the local environment and in the way of life, as reflected by the artifacts remaining in the field, as well as the relationship between these factors and the changing function of the findings over hundreds and thousands of years.

Connecting Students with Relics from the Past and Protection of the Water Resources

The Experimental High School is located at the northern edge of the Mamilla Cemetery. Water in this area would naturally percolate into the mountain aquifer or flow down the slopes of the Valley of Hinnom towards the Kidron Stream. Today, due to municipal building and development, the runoff is washed into the drainage system where it mixes with the city sewage. In recent years, many schools have set up installations for rainwater collection and storage using pipes and plastic containers. In the past, however, water used to be collected in hewn cisterns. In the Independence Park, near the Elementary School, there was an ancient cistern that had not received the attention of proper archaeological documentation and excavation. Working on the cistern and restoring it allowed us to connect between the ethical and educational aspects of changing attitudes towards water resources and the school’s need for involvement in environmental issues.

The name and its significance

One of the most ancient mentions of the name Mamilla appears in a composition by a Christian monk from France who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem around the year 870CE. The monk refers to a church by the name of “Saint Mamila” located approximately “one mile” south of Jerusalem. It is possible that this church lent its name to the area. Another possibility is that the name is an elision of the Arabic words “ma min Allah,” which might be translated as “everything comes from God,” or “that which comes from God” - perhaps referring to the acceptance of death, and by implication, to the important and large cemetery that developed there beginning in the 12th century. Persians were burned in order to destroy every memory and trace of the Christians. Miraculously, a lion appeared there, collected the bones of the victims, put them in the cave, and protected them from all harm. The Jewish legend relates that those slaughtered were Jews who were murdered by the Greeks. In this legend, as well, a miraculous lion appears to guard the bones in the cave. The Moslem legend relates that the cave contains the skeletons of Moslem saints interred in the nearby cemetery. According to this legend, many graves there were destroyed completely in a fire that broke out there one night. By virtue of a miracle and the providence of Allah, the bones were saved from damnation and transferred into the cave. A lion was stationed at the openings in order to guard them for eternity.

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