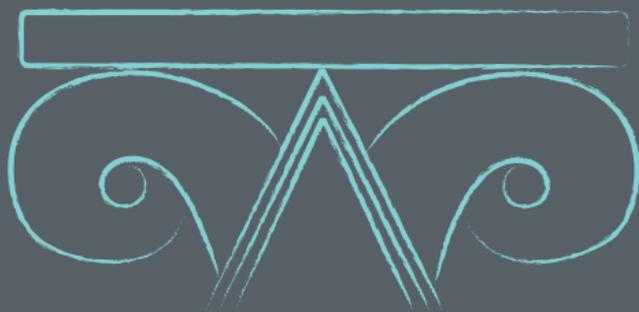


Jerusalem - Old City
FAQs

emek shaveh
עמק שווה עמושׁיה



How old is the Old City?

The walled city as we know it was established by the Romans as 'Aelia Capitolina' in the second century CE, after they had destroyed the great capital city of Judea. Since its foundation, this city was destroyed and reconstructed several times, but maintained, more or less, its external outline. The visible city, then, is comprised mainly of buildings constructed in the period of Ottoman (16th-20th centuries) and Mamluk (13th to 16th centuries) rule, but it incorporates buildings of the Crusader, Early Islamic and, in its foundations, of the Byzantine and even Roman periods.

Where, then, is the original Jerusalem?

If 'original' means the earliest town to bear the name Jerusalem, it can be found outside the Old City walls, on the southeast spur of the Temple Mount. There, within the mound of Ancient Jerusalem (the 'City of David') lie the remains of the first town, built by Canaanites in about 1800 BCE. If 'original' refers to the city described in the Bible and sacked by the Babylonians, it lies partly on the ancient mound, partly on the Temple Mount ridge, and partly within the southern quarters of the Old City. If 'original' refers to the city that reached its greatest extent under Herod and his descendants, the city destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE – it extends beneath the entire Old City and well to its north. Its remains, however, can hardly be seen on the surface, with the exception of the retaining walls of the temple enclosure.

So the real Jerusalem lies beneath the surface?

For those of us who live in the real world, the real Jerusalem is that which exists today: old and new, Palestinian and Israeli, religious and secular. But 'real' Jerusalem is also composed of memory and identity. We are free to choose the personal or historical memories, the religious or national, communal or familial identities that provide meaning to our lives. Jerusalem is very much an artifact of longing, faith and passion. Who could say that such images of Jerusalem are less real than the buried remains?

To be sure, archaeologists cannot impose memory on anyone. But their work is not subject to an imaginary Jerusalem: It can and should provide new and unexpected perspectives on various aspects of reality, and its discoveries should influence the stories that we tell about the city.

But surely the main archaeological periods are Jewish? David and Solomon? The First Temple? Herod's temple?

Jerusalem's history begins 7000 years ago, and runs on to the present. In between, there are certainly remains of Biblical Jerusalem, especially from the time of the later kings of Judah, but we should really avoid using religious terminologies for archaeological periods. There is, in fact, no physical evidence for the temple of Solomon and his successors. There is no evidence for rituals such as sacrifices or for the existence of priests, or of anything that we might associate with Jewish religious practice. Given the limited possibilities for excavation, it is not too likely that such remains will ever be found. We can't even pinpoint the actual location of the temple, and have

no attestation of its existence outside of the Bible. In archaeological terms, therefore, the material culture that characterizes Jerusalem between about 1000 and 550 BCE is best characterized as Iron Age, and it is quite similar to that found well beyond the borders of Jerusalem and Judah.

As for the period of Herod and Jesus, the remains of the Temple enclosure are more impressive, but these remains – which may have been in use only for a few decades before their destruction – do not determine the cultural character of the rest of Jerusalem, let alone that of the region. The dominant material culture of the time was Roman, and the greater proportion of all archaeological finds in Jerusalem reflects the cultures of the dominant empires: Hellenistic (from the conquest of Alexander to the Roman conquest), Roman (until the conversion to Christianity), Byzantine (Roman-Christian) and of course, Islamic (with a Crusader interlude).

Are you saying that David and Solomon never existed? That they and the temple are myths? That there is no evidence for Jews in Jerusalem?

Not at all! We are saying that there is a gap between people's expectations from archaeology and what it can deliver. Pushing the archaeological envelope and transforming ruins into political flash-points should not be the solution. Archaeology can support different historical scenarios, but it neither conclusively proves nor absolutely disproves them.

Are there rules in archaeology? Is there archaeological truth?

If history is imagined as a broken pot, of which only a few sherds remain, archaeology can offer a reconstruction of the pot, based on a preconceived notion of its shape, on reason, and on plausibility. Each additional piece that is recovered improves the reconstruction: allowing certain possibilities and ruling out others. This is an endless process: there always remain alternate versions of events. But each find reduces the number of plausible alternatives, and may sometimes rule out a reconstruction that had been popular before it was found.

The search for the most plausible story, like the attempt to get at the truth in a court of law, is conducted by following multiple lines of evidence. Reconstructions based on multiple lines of evidence enjoy greater scientific credibility. Nonetheless, scientific plausibility often comes into conflict with beliefs and preconceptions. In such cases, there is disagreement on the very rules of engagement, and it cannot always be resolved.

Still, you can dig objectively, can't you?

To allow archaeologists to compare the results of one dig to another, they have developed rules of 'good practice'. These rules establish, for example, a proper way of excavating (from top to bottom, or from later to earlier), recording standards (planning, photography, and narrative), standards for conservation and description of finds, and so on. A fundamental precondition of good practice is the full disclosure of excavation methods and of the finds, whether remarkable or run-of-the-mill.

Still, good practice does not create objectivity. There is no way of neutralizing the personal and social context of the excavators, and these influence the manner in which they collect their evidence. Moreover, many things happen in and around an excavation that require contact with the outside world: choosing a location, negotiating with other stake-holders, the extent of the work carried out. And then we have the interpretations of the excavation and its results. All these are no longer codified by 'good practice'; they require individual decisions based on personal values. And so, 'objective' rules are always subject to 'non-objective' realities.

Why shouldn't the Israelis be allowed to run their excavations as they see fit? Surely they're highly professional?

Jerusalem is contested ground, and the past has become hostage to this contest, with each side trying to tell a story that excludes the other. Historically, archaeology has been used in such situations by interested parties – in 20th century Europe, in the post.Soviet bloc, and elsewhere. In Jerusalem, the influence of ideological sponsors on archaeology has been strongly felt, causing many doubts about the veracity of the finds presented and the degree to which all periods receive equal treatment. Therefore, we think that Israeli archaeology should be closely scrutinized and held to account.

A free and professional archaeology should be measured by its independence; by its ability to reveal something new about ourselves, our forebears, and the people around us. It should help dispel ignorance, preconceptions and myths about the past. It should give voice to those forgotten by

history, and tell us about human engagement with changing environments, about the development of technology and human imagination, culture and community. The archaeology of Jerusalem, spanning 7000 years, should tell a far more complex, diverse, interesting and broadly relevant tale than that created to support a particular political creed.

Surely you are not comparing the Israeli excavations to what the Islamic Waqf inflicted on the Temple Mount!

Unfortunately, there is a degree of symmetry between the activities of the Jewish religious authorities in the Western Wall area and the Muslim religious authorities on the Haram el-Sharif (Temple Mount). Both removed many tons of earth and fill from subterranean chambers, in one case – along the entire length of the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount (the Western Wall Tunnels), and in the other – from the ancient vaults beneath the el-Aqsa mosque. In both cases, the Israel Antiquities Authority could offer only token resistance.

Viewed in quantitative terms, Israel has in fact inflicted the greater damage on historic buildings in the Old City. In 1967, while clearing the Western Wall plaza, the entire historic Mughrabi neighborhood, including a mosque, was razed to the ground after the eviction of its residents. The renovation of the Jewish quarter entailed the destruction of many centuries-old buildings before archaeologists arrived on the scene.

But the issue is not, after all, one of quantity or even of quality. Scientific precision has little value where deeply held religious and political convictions hold sway, and comparisons are rendered meaningless when each side can see only its own interests.

Why not have each religion – Jewish, Christian, and Muslim – care for its own heritage?

As in every historical city, periods and cultures in the Old City of Jerusalem are intertwined, above the surface as well as below. There are those who would wish to promote the existence of an authentic Jewish Jerusalem hidden beneath the Muslim city; one that can be accessed in the tunnels of the 'City of David' and the Western Wall. But that is an illusion: the vaults and tunnels are not all of the same time, and most are modern creations, made up of Ottoman period cisterns, Mamluk vaults, and rock-cut installations of Roman date or earlier.

A denominational division might work for religious buildings (and even those are often shared). But archaeology needs, on the one hand, the protection of 'color-blind' legislation (which doesn't value one culture over another), and on the other – the protection afforded by a mutual respect for heritage based on the understanding that buildings and ancient remains might have different significance for different people, and that their mere age does not determine their value.

Why do you say that archaeology lies at the heart of the conflict?

Archaeology is central to the conflict because it is a field of confrontation between two competing attitudes to the past, and the past is central to the collective identity of each side. Without the belief in Jewish national continuity, there would be no Israeli-Zionist consciousness. Without a belief in their attachment to the land, there would be no Palestinian consciousness. Archaeology is directly relevant to the identities of both sides.

Israel was founded on principles of modernism and development. Archaeology itself was born within modernity, in the context of increasing interest by the West in the Orient. Modernism established a gap between past and present. While the present was devoted to progress and industry, the past was designated as something to be studied, protected, fenced off or put in museums. In the Orient itself, however, people lived their lives within a landscape that was itself a product of thousands of years of human settlement. The past was not fenced off and set apart, but was part of the fabric of life – sometimes revered and protected, and sometimes used as a material or symbolic resource.

When the West arrived in Palestine, its entry was experienced, among other things, through the demand by the British authorities to stop using the past as a local resource, even leading in some cases to the removal of ancient objects and structures and their relocation in museums in Palestine or overseas. Moreover, Zionists began to make the claim that the land itself, and sometimes the very houses in which Palestinian Arabs lived, actually held proof of Jewish priority that trumped the rights of the inhabitants. Archaeology began to be experienced as a wedge driven between the Palestinians, their landscape, and even their homes. Nowadays, with each instance of archaeological “proof” of Jewish presence that is championed by Israeli media, archaeology becomes more deeply implicated in the attempt to separate Palestinians from their homeland.

If Palestinians and Israelis are ever to enter a serious dialogue on a future of coexistence and mutual respect, Israeli archaeology must end its involvement in the battle

of identities, promoting understanding between cultures rather than ethnic exceptionalism. It must broaden its horizons and become much more than a prop to given histories.

What, then, is the solution? What archaeology can be done in Jerusalem?

The solution is to stop treating the past as an extension of faith and national mythology, and to reinstate the archaeological past as a universal human narrative; to conserve significant remains from every period in the city's history and to allow all those living in and visiting Jerusalem to discover the memories most meaningful to them. Archaeologists will tell of the people of Jerusalem throughout its history: their houses and streets, what brought them together and what kept them apart, the languages in which they spoke, their economic life, their domestic animals, their decorative and artistic creations, their wealth and poverty, their names, their food and even their musical instruments. They will tell of the beginnings of Jerusalem, thousands of years before the great religions came into being, of the history of its waterworks since the days of the Canaanites, of the people of Judah, who showed far more interest in the fertility of their women than in the relations between priests and kings (neither the one or the other have left any material trace), of the lead coffin makers of the Roman period, who decorated their caskets with ropes in order to keep the dead in their place, and of the artisans who filled Islamic Jerusalem with their unique architectural treasures. They will also tell of Jerusalem's dead and of their graves and tombs

that surround the city on every side, and which contain thousands of individual tales of people who lived here or who came from the four corners of the earth to be buried here. This archaeology will not confine itself to antiquity: archaeologists, as students of material culture, will record contemporary Jerusalem and discover, along with the people themselves, the truths embedded in its diverse physical reality.

Everyone, whether Jewish, Muslim or Christian, believer or agnostic, nationalist or cosmopolitan, will be able to find something in these stories that speaks to them or to their community, or that surprises and even angers them. But no one will be able to say that “archaeology proves” one thing or another, because it is as diverse as life itself.

Further Questions:

- Would you like to learn more?
- Would you like to discuss these questions in a group setting?
- Would you like to come for a tour focusing on these issues?

Emek Shaveh offers workshops and tours dealing with the connection between archaeology, identity and politics in Jerusalem.

For further information please email to info@alt-arch.org
or call [+972-54-5667299](tel:+972-54-5667299) website: www.alt-arch.org

Emek Shaveh

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 view archaeology as a resource for building bridges and strengthening bonds between different peoples and cultures, and we see it as an important factor impacting the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our fundamental position is that an archaeological find should not and cannot be used to prove ownership by any one nation, ethnic group, or religion over a given place. 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.

emek shaveh
לאמק שוה עמוק שבי
