

Tel Shiloh (Khirbet Seilun)

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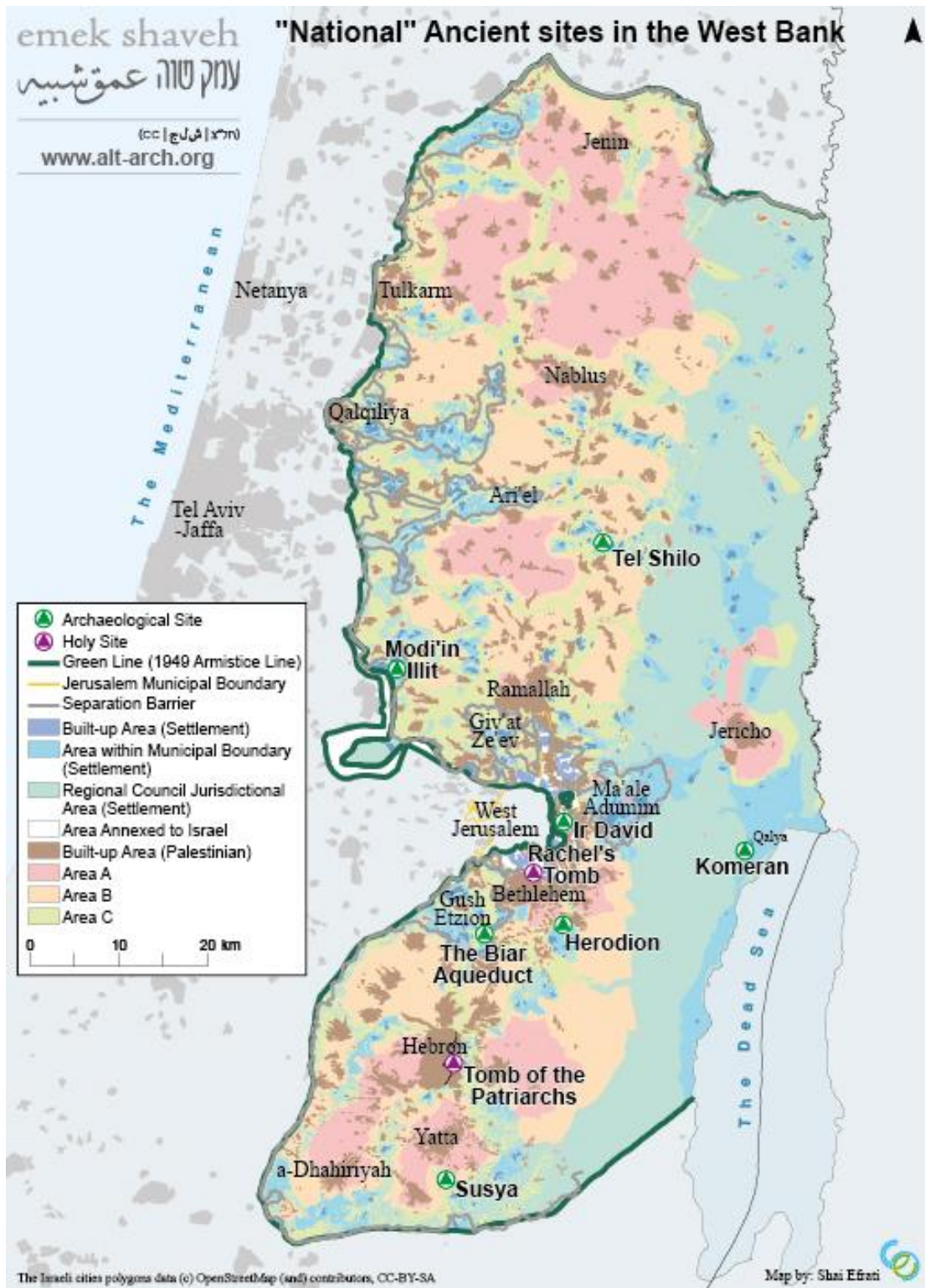
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Introduction

The inauguration ceremony for the Migdal Ha-Ro'eh ('The Tower of the Seeing Prophet') at Tel Shiloh, which took place in July 2013, was attended by the heads of religious Zionist society, ministers from the Jewish Home political party (HaBayit HaYehudi), deputy ministers from the Likud, and others. Ostensibly, this was the inauguration of a tower at an archaeological site, a marginal event in the West Bank settlement movement, but the presence of high-ranking government officials indicates that Tel Shiloh is highly significant in the political struggle over the settlements in Samaria.

Tel Shiloh is located in southern Samaria, north of the Palestinian village of Turmus 'Aya, and west of the settlement of Shiloh. In the past, the lands were owned by residents of the village of Qaryut, located north of the archaeological mount (the "Tel.") Today, the site is included within the area of the Shiloh settlement. The name of the Biblical site, Khirbet Seilun, has been preserved at the site. Although in Israel and the West Bank, the Nature and Parks Authority operates the important antiquities sites, Tel Shiloh is operated by a non-profit organization, "The Mishkan Shiloh Association -The Center for the Study and Development of the Cradle of Settlement in the Land of Israel," together with the Binyamin Regional Council.



Archaeological Research and Religious Traditions

According to the Bible, Shiloh was the site of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*), where the Holy Ark resided, as well as the spiritual center of the tribes of Israel.

Archaeological research is of course unable to uncover any evidence as to the location of an impermanent structure such as an animal-skin tent, and therefore, the question of the location of the tabernacle is a faith-based, spiritual question, rather than a matter of physical-archaeological substance.

The first excavation there was carried out by Schmidt in 1915. From 1926-1932, an extensive excavation was carried out by a Danish expedition headed by Kjaer and Schmidt. Yet another excavation was conducted from 1981-1984 by I. Finkelstein, S. Bunimovitz and Z. Lederman of Tel Aviv University. In recent years the site has also seen excavations, as well as expansive preservation projects by the Staff Officer for Archaeological of the Civil Administration.

The layer of first settlement is dated to the Middle Bronze Age II (18-16th c BCE) and includes a locality surrounded by a wall and adjacent rooms. After a gap, the site was resettled during the First Iron Age (11th c BCE). At that time it was a small village whose residents used parts of the structures from the preceding period. This settlement was destroyed following a violent attack. The subsequent layer is of remains of a poor settlement from the 8-7th c. BCE. It was again settled during the Hellenistic and Ancient Roman periods (2-1 c. BCE), and again during the Byzantine and Early Moslem periods, which left most of the remains found at the site today.

Four Byzantine churches embellished with mosaics were exposed at the site, as well as residential structures, trade workshops and more. During the Byzantine Period, a holy status was conferred on the site when it was identified with the location of the Biblical Tabernacle. In one of the Byzantine churches, a mosaic inscription was uncovered that mentioned the name "Shiloh". During the Early Arab and the Moslem periods that followed it, mosques were constructed on the remains of the churches, and the place became an Islamic holy site. Also found at the site were remains of a settlement from the Crusader and Mamluk Periods, altogether indicating continuous settlement for a span of over 1,500 years.¹ During the last centuries, it was inhabited by residents of Qaryut, who lived in large tents around a building that served as a mosque, and worked the land.¹

¹ A. Kampinski, "Shiloh," *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in Israel*, vol. 4 (Heb), 1992, 1536-1538; I. Finkelstein, *Ibid*, 1538-1542.



Excavation Area at Tel Shiloh

Migdal Ha-Ro'eh ('The Tower of the Seeing Prophet')

Since the decision was made to include Tel Shiloh in the list of national heritage sites, the State of Israel and various organizations have been pouring millions of shekels annually into the development of tourism at the location.² One of the main projects is the establishment of a lookout tower at the highest point on the Tel. The tower is known as Migdal Ha-Ro'eh, and it overlooks the entire area “as far as the city of Ariel.” The tower has a round shape and is a two-story poured concrete structure, which rises to a height of some nine meters. A visit to the tower includes an audio-visual presentation about the history of Israel, and Biblical stories relating to the tradition of Tel Shiloh. The narrative centers on the formation of Israel from the twelve tribes, and the life history of Samuel the Prophet. During the audiovisual presentation, there is no mention of the history following the Biblical Period, even though this period was quite brief relative to the other periods whose remains were exposed at the site.³ There is little

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

³ M. Yaakobson, “[Historical Spaceship: The Tower of the Seeing Prophet Visitor’s Center at Shiloh](#),” [Heb.]*, Xnet, July 22, 2013.

connection between the audiovisual presentation and the historical findings at the site. Rather, the location of the tower and its height indicate a connection between control over the space and control over the historical narrative.

The tower was inaugurated, as stated, in July 2013, in the presence of Finance Minister Naftali Bennett, Building and Construction Minister Uri Ariel, Deputy Foreign Minister Ze'ev Elkin, former Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, and others.⁴ Development of the site is a clear means of drawing masses of visitors and forming a broad consensus regarding its significance as an inseparable part of the State of Israel. At the same time that the Minister of Education is making declarations about reducing the visits of school students to Hebron, it appears that the administrators of Tel Shiloh are working to position the destination as a politically neutral for archaeological site outings, relative to the city of Hebron.⁵



The Migdal Ha-Ro'eh Tower during construction

⁴ Photographs from the inauguration of the Migdal Ha-Ro'eh Tower, [Ancient Shiloh's Facebook Page*](#); A* Young, "and M. Miskin "[This Has Been Our Land for Almost 4,000 Years](#)", Arutz Sheva, 24of July 2013

⁵ R. Wilf, "[Instead of Tours of Hebron, Student Fieldtrips to Shiloh](#)" [Heb.] *NRG*, July 22, 2013.



Migdal Ha-Ro'eh at Tel Shiloh

Construction of the tower inflicted heavy damage on the findings below and surrounding it. The accepted approach in Israel, and particularly among the archaeological community, is to refrain from building on multi-layered archaeological mounds. In most cases, construction is carried out at the margins of antiquities sites, based on an understanding that construction at the heart of the site necessitates damage to a large number of layers and findings. Usually, this part of the site is the location of the most important structures in the history of the locality. In the past, senior archaeologists voiced sweeping opposition to construction at Tel Romeida in Hebron.⁶ Almost no criticism, however, was voiced over the construction of the tower.⁷

When one considers the findings at Tel Shiloh, it appears that there is no justification for a massive investment, certainly not to build a concrete tower and damage the heart of an archaeological mound. Tel Shiloh is a site of small

⁶ [“Penthouse Deal in Biblical Hebron,”](#) [Heb.] *Haaretz*, April 11, 2001.

⁷ N. Hasson, [“Archaeologists v. Settlers in Battle over Tel Shiloh”](#) [Heb.] *Haaretz*, September 16, 2012.

proportions (approximately 8.5 acres). The most impressive remains there are of Byzantine Churches.

Archaeological Excavations at the Site since its Declaration as a National Heritage Site

Since 2010, renewed excavations have been underway at Tel Shiloh, conducted by Ariel University and the Staff Officer for Archaeological of the Civil Administration.⁸ The excavations are being carried out east of the site, at its southern slopes, and at its northern extremity – some claim that this was the location of the biblical Tabernacle.⁹

Since, as stated, there is no way of identifying the location of the 3,000-year-old tent, it is clear how archaeological research is being recruited on behalf of assumptions with no scientific basis.



Excavation site at Tel Shiloh

⁸ H. Huberman, [Thirty Years Later: Returning to Excavate Tel Shiloh](#), [Heb.] Arutz 7, July 22, 2010.

⁹ A. Forsher, [“The Biblical Tent of Meeting is Located in Archaeological Excavations,”](#) [Heb.] *Yisrael Ha-Yom*, July 2, 2013.

In other parts of the site, mainly around the archaeological mound, excavations are taking place whose goal is to trace the course of the gated city wall in ancient times. They are being carried out along the remains of a wall from the Middle Bronze Age II, exposed in previous excavations.

As was mentioned before, during the last months of 2013, the Staff Officer for Archaeological of the Civil Administration began conducting an archaeological excavation on the outskirts of the site. This excavation is visible from Road 60, which passes north of Ramallah, and is a preliminary stage to the construction of an amphitheater at the site.¹⁰

Palestinians and Settlers

Tel Shiloh is located on Palestinian lands, and until the early 1980s, families from the village of Qaryut lived there. The residents were evacuated by the State of Israel at the time of the archaeological excavations at the site. The settlement of Shiloh began as a work camp erected for laborers at the archaeological site. The camp then developed into the Shiloh settlement on the hill adjacent and to the east of the archaeological mound. Later, the Israeli government expanded the Tel to the area of the settlement. Alongside the Tel are agricultural lands belonging to the Palestinian residents of Qaryut. Today, these residents are prevented from reaching the lands in order to cultivate them. Since the site is part of the settlement, it is always possible to prevent their entrance to the archaeological Tel, on the claim that they lack authorization to enter the grounds of the settlement.

The landscape seen from the tower is mountainous terrain typical of the West Bank. The tower is located such that no Palestinian villages or buildings can be viewed from it. The most prominent locality is, of course, the settlement of Shiloh, located southeast of the Tel. Visitors thus have no occasion to ask who the neighbors are or to whom the land belongs. The view from the lookout obviates these questions from the outset.

¹⁰ Emek Shaveh, [*“Israel’s “National Heritage Sites” Project in the West Bank: Archeological Importance and Political Significance*](#) (2011).



View from Tel Shiloh

Evangelists and Settlers

An additional group that considers Tel Shiloh to be a site with a special religious significance is devout Christians, usually Evangelists, from the United States, Europe and Korea. For example, in 2009, some 30,000 people visited Tel Shiloh, 60% of them Christian Evangelists.¹¹ In 2011, rabbis of the locality opposed the participation of Evangelist volunteers at the archaeological excavations taking place there, claiming that they viewed participation in the excavations as an act of worship, and there was a fear of blurring the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism, “which could affect the weaker layers in the settlement.”¹²

It is likely that one of the reasons for investing in the tower at its present location is motivated by the directorate’s intent to prevail over the Christian tradition, which identifies the location of the tabernacle in one of the Byzantine Churches

¹¹ Y. Meidad, “[Tel Shiloh in the News](#),” *The Right Word [Blog]* [Heb.], April 4, 2010.

¹² A. Binyamin, “[Christian who Dig at Tel Shiloh View it as an Act of Worship](#),” *Ha-Kol Ha-Yehudi* [Heb.], January 27, 2012.

at the Tel, and to deepen the tradition that identifies it instead at the northern part of the Tel. This is one of many examples of use of the archaeological site to fortify a belief rooted in a particular world view, rather than presenting it based on the findings and remnants exposed there. Although Tel Shiloh is an archaeological and not a religious site, the tension between the various religious groups testifies that in the eyes of many, it is not merely a place of archaeological interest, but also a religious site.



*Archaeological excavation at the northern side of the tel – the presumed site of the
Tabernacle, according to the site's management*

Summary and Conclusions

The State of Israel appropriated the site of Tel Shiloh, beginning in the 1970s and 80s, under the guise of an archaeological work camp. In what followed, the site became part of the Shiloh settlement, and today, it is one of the most intensively funded sites in the West Bank.

At Tel Shiloh, faith and tradition infuse content into the archaeological site. The Tel itself is a site of small proportions (approximately 8.5 acres, as mentioned),

testifying to very limited settlement during the Biblical period. Despite this, the government of Israel decided in 2010 to invest considerable sums in the site and to turn it into a key tourist and heritage center in Samaria. The archaeological excavations make it possible to generate public interest around new discoveries, and already, one can see that there is an attempt to “prove” the Biblical story through archaeological research.

The archaeological excavations and the tourist development are clear means for reaching an audience that is not affiliated with the settlers, and does not necessarily support the settlement enterprise. The manner of work at Tel Shiloh is similar to the work methods recognized at the City of David site in East Jerusalem. The perspective that guided the directors of the City of David site was to appeal to the heart of the public-at-large through tourism and heritage. Today, almost every student in the Israeli school system visits there in the course of his or her schooling. It seems that the same objective is guiding the directors of the Tel Shiloh site. The perspective is that using didactic tools in conjunction with the on-site experience, it is possible to arouse broad public interest. Thousands of visitors become supporters through Israeli presence at the site, just by virtue of the fact that they arrive there as tourists.

The tremendous, disproportionate investment in a site of these dimensions would not be carried out were it not for political interests bent on bolstering the settlements in the area. These interests led to the eviction of the Palestinian residents from their lands, and appropriation of the site for the benefit of the settlement. Today, they are conducting a one-dimensional presentation of the site, massive building at the heart of the archaeological layers, and administration by a private-ideological organization rather than a government agency.