Archaeology on a Slippery Slope

Elad’s sifting project in Emek Tzurim National Park

The Temple Mount Sifting Project, sponsored by ELAD and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, is often portrayed in the media and in popular publications as a vital salvage operation of utmost scientific import. In recent years, an attempt has even been made to upgrade the initiative to a full-fledged scientific enterprise, with the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) now outsourcing sifting for its digs—the ELAD-sponsored City of David excavations and others—to the project.

The truth of the matter is that the sifting project is political in conception and of questionable scientific import from the outset. Using it to sift soil deposits from systematic excavations certainly fails to meet scientific standards; this use increases the chances of the introduction of forgeries and diverts the emphasis of the excavation from the site as a whole to the individual find.

Background

Since 2004, an initiative known as the “Temple Mount Sifting Project” has been in progress at the Emek Tzurim National Park, on the slopes of the Qidron Valley in East Jerusalem. The project (which is in fact the park’s only function) offers interactive activity for school children and the general public. The soil for sifting purportedly originates in debris removed from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in the wake of major construction work conducted without archaeological oversight by the Muslim Waqf. These operations, which went on for many months during the years 1999-2000, caused significant damage to Temple Mount/Haram antiquities (for further discussion, Emek Shaveh’s publication: Between Holiness and Propaganda, Chapter 3: Archaeology in the central Holy Sites in the Old City of Jerusalem). In 1999 piles of debris were deposited at various locations and in 2000 some were transferred to the
Qidron Valley. A perfunctory examination of the debris pile in the Qidron Valley by the Israel Antiquities Authority revealed an assortment of artifacts from all periods of activity on the Temple Mount, including the modern period.

A group of Israelis, with the support of ELAD (an NGO involved in Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem that also manages the visitors’ center on the Mount of Olives and the City of David archaeological site), initiated the transfer of soil to Emek Tzurim for sifting. Their hope was, and is, to find valuable remains in the debris, especially finds that could testify to activity in and around the First and Second Temples. The project, under the scientific auspices of Bar Ilan University, is directed by archaeologists in whose names the IAA issues an annual excavation license.

Over the years the media has reported several discoveries yielded by the Emek Tzurim sifting project. One remarkable find was a seventh-century B.C.E. clay sealing, or bulla, with the inscription “Bet Lehem,” testifying to the existence of Bethlehem at that time.
The tent of the “Temple Mount Antiquities Sifting Operation”, against the backdrop of the Temple Mount

**Sifting as a method in archaeological research**

Sifting (or sieving) as a means of increasing the rate of artifact retrieval is a common practice in archaeological excavations. The smaller the finds sought after (for example, minute bones or carbonized plant remains in early prehistoric sites), the more important systematic sieving becomes for the research. As with any archaeological method, the value of sieving depends on archaeologists' ability to establish the connection between the finds and the archaeological deposit in which they originated. For this reason, sifting is normally conducted as an integral part of the excavation itself. It takes place within the site and under the strict supervision of the archaeologists responsible for the dig. They must ensure that nothing is added or lost en route from the excavated layer to the sieve, in order to preserve the connection between the find and its original context. The results of the sifting also contribute to the understanding of the excavated layers in "real time", 
enabling excavators to adjust the pace and resolution of their work to the nature and quantity of the finds.

Only very rarely do archaeologists engage in sifting as pure “treasure hunting”. One such example is the sifting operation conducted in the necropolis of the first Egyptian kings at Umm el-Qab, some 500 kilometers south of Cairo. Here, hasty excavations in the early 20th century left great mounds of debris containing many small finds overlooked by the first excavators. In recent years archaeologists have worked to sift through the mounds of debris—alongside new excavations in the tombs themselves—thus adding essential information that might otherwise have gone undiscovered.

Incidentally, sifting for finds is a common practice among antiquities looters in both Egypt and Israel; sieving is therefore no guarantee of scientific practice.
Soil and bags for sifting
How is the Emek Tzurim sifting project conducted?

Repeated visits by Emek Shaveh at the sifting site have revealed the following situation: The soil designated for sifting is piled at one end of the compound outside the tent. The pile is covered with a tarp but accessible to any visitor to the site (see video). Sifting is carried out in a large tent containing a few dozen sifting stations. Each station is operated by two to three paying visitors at a time, who spill a bucket of soil into the sieve and collect ceramic, glass, metal, and other finds in small containers. The sifting is overseen by staff members, most of whom lack archaeological training.

There is a clear separation on the site between the soil attributed to the Temple Mount and that originating in systematic excavations. The sifting of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif soil is carried out by paying visitors to the national park, whereas the material from the systematic excavations (primarily from the City of David), is sifted by the staff of the national park. During our visits to the site we did not encounter any of the archaeologists who hold the sifting license, nor did we see any IAA archaeologists. The soil from all of the IAA excavations is kept in large sacks or in standard sandbags with a capacity of about 15 liters. The bags, labeled with locus numbers (excavation units) by the excavators, are accessible to any visitor to the site. Trays with finds from the excavations carry printed labels marked with the sifting project license number and with the excavation unit numbers.
The politics of the Temple Mount sifting operation

The Temple Mount sifting project was conceived in the wake of a widespread outcry in Israel over massive construction and debris removal by the Waqf at the entrance to the al-Marwani Mosque (a.k.a. Solomon’s Stables). The Waqf’s actions did indeed demonstrate a blatant disregard for ancient strata. However, any assessment of the value of the sifting project must take into account a number of factors:

a. There is considerable doubt as to the authenticity of the connection between the mounds of debris being sifted and the Temple Mount in general, or the entrance to the al-Marwani Mosque in particular. Much modern trash was found in the debris, and it is entirely possible that materials originating elsewhere found their way into the pile.

b. It is important to note that construction and debris removal within and alongside the Temple Mount have been conducted without archaeological supervision for decades, by both religious and secular authorities. In archaeological excavations conducted by Israel in the 1960s and 70s, bulldozers shifted thousands of tons of Temple Mount dumps from the
archaeological areas south and west of the Mount; and for some twenty years, representatives of Israel’s Ministry of Religious Affairs dug tunnels, now known as the “Western Wall Tunnels,” all along the Western Wall, removing both debris and finds to an unknown location.

There is therefore little doubt that the great importance attributed to the pile of debris in the Qidron Valley on the one hand, and the thundering silence with regard to the removal of debris from the areas adjacent to the Temple Mount on the other, have less to do with the archaeological significance of the finds—whose source, as we have noted, is clearly questionable—and more with the political leanings of those operating the sifting project and their desire to criticize the Waqf and the Israeli government authorities.

**ELAD – Sifting contractors for the Israel Antiquities Authority**

Since 2004, the IAA has granted an annual excavation license to the Emek Tzurim sifting project. This is unusual, since the project does not entail actual excavation at an archaeological site, but only picking through materials of questionable origin. This recognition of ELAD’s sifting project has led to the expansion of its activities: for several years now the IAA has transported soil from its regular excavations in ancient Jerusalem (City of David) and its environs to Emek Tzurim for sifting, in contravention of archaeological good practice and indeed of the IAA’s own guidelines, which discourage removal of archaeological materials from their site of origin. As we have explained above, sifting is not an autonomous “treasure-hunting” operation, but part of the excavation process itself. Nonetheless, neither the original excavators nor the holders of the "sifting license" were anywhere to be seen at Emek Tzurim. This suggests a disconnect between the source of the material and the site of collection. Such a disconnect could detract from the value of the artifact or even nullify it entirely. It is particularly disturbing in view of the manifest negligence in the treatment of the excavated material, as observed by Emek Shaveh. The bags of soil are exposed and can be tampered with without interference.
Summary

Sifting, normally a secondary activity in archaeological excavations, has been transformed into a prominent tool in the battle to enhance the Israeli claim to Temple Mount while delegitimizing the Muslim Waqf. It has become another means for increasing the stake of ELAD in East Jerusalem. An examination of the scientific value of the operation has revealed the following:

1. There is no scientific justification for investing such great efforts in the sifting of a negligible portion of the Temple Mount debris.
2. There is no certainty that the finds attributed to the Temple Mount indeed originated there.
3. The sifting of deposits from the City of David and other salvage excavations falls short of scientific standards, in the absence of the excavators and of proper control over all stages of the process.
4. The project is nonetheless marketed as an educational activity of great scientific importance. Such a misrepresentation – supported by both the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, among others – serves to bolster the political goals of ELAD.

The IAA should be encouraged to cease using the sifting site for the outsourcing of activities that should be carried out on site. Activity at Emek Tzurim should be seen as little more than recreational. The objects found there must not be treated as finds with a known origin.

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