Archaeological Activities in Politically Sensitive Areas in Jerusalem's Historic Basin
Preface

Excavations in the Old City
  >> The Old City Walls
  >> The Nea Church
  >> Herod's Gate/Burj al-Laklak
  >> Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street
  >> Damascus Gate
  >> Jaffa Gate
  >> Hezekiah's Pool
  >> Ophel Excavations - Davidson Center
  >> Bab al-Rahma Cemetery
  >> Beit ha-Liba
  >> The Mughrabi Bridge
  >> The Expansion of the Western Wall Plaza
  >> The Little Western Wall
  >> Other Projects in the Western Wall Plaza

Excavations in Silwan
  >> The Givati Parking Lot
  >> Jeremiah's Well
  >> The Spring House

The Tel Aviv University Excavations in Silwan

Summary
Preface

Jerusalem’s Old City and the Historic Basic (also called the Holy Basin) contain some of the most important sites to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. On account of its religious and historical significance, the city has attracted the attention of many scholars: already in the 19th century various scholars were conducting scientific excavations in the Old City. The scope of archaeological work increased significantly after 1967, when large-scale excavations were begun in the Jewish Quarter and south of the Western Wall. In the last twenty years most of the excavations in the Historic Basin have been conducted by the Israel Antiquities Authority (henceforth: IAA).

Archaeological activities are often an inseparable part of the political struggle over Jerusalem. The administration and control of different excavation sites, the presentation of the finds, and the historical narrative told to the visitor are all central parts of the struggle over the Old City, which in essence is a large archaeological site.

This report presents a survey of the most important archaeological sites that have been excavated or expanded in recent years. We will show how the excavators’ conduct at these sites, located in the central and most politically sensitive areas of Jerusalem’s Historic Basin, served to advance the political goal of Judaizing Jerusalem, at a significant cost to the Palestinian population that shares the city’s space.

Excavations in the Old City

The Old City Walls

In 2004 a number of stones fell from the walls of the Old City into the courtyard of the College des Frères school in the Christian Quarter. This incident led the authorities responsible for the Old City and its antiquities to preserve and reinforce the walls. In 2007, after several years of surveying and planning, the IAA began preservation work on several sections of the walls.¹ The preservation was undertaken under the authority and with the funding of the Prime Minister’s office, and administered by the Jerusalem Development Authority. The preservation work continued until 2011 and cost some 20 million NIS.²

The current Old City walls were built in the 16th century, at the beginning of Ottoman rule in the Holy Land. Certain sections of the wall were built on the route of earlier walls from the Crusader period, the Arab period, and the Byzantine-Roman period.³

The Nea Church

During excavations in the Old City in the 1970s, the remains of the Nea Church, dated to the 6th century, were discovered. The church is known in the professional literature as one of the largest and most impressive churches in Jerusalem; its splendor is said to have rivalled even that of the Holy Sepulchre. The remains discovered include a part of the eastern apse, a system of underground vaults, and the south-eastern corner of the church. Above the remains dated to the Byzantine period, the remains of a Crusader church were also discovered. This church is smaller than the Nea Church, but is nevertheless one of the largest from this period discovered in Jerusalem.⁴

Today these churches are located on the grounds of the central public park in the Jewish Quarter, called Gan HaTekumah. However, the structures are fenced off and closed to the public. The site is neglected and littered with trash and broken stones; the architectural details themselves seem to be part of the rubbish. According to the plans of the Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, which holds most of the land in the Jewish Quarter and is responsible for its churches, the area next to the Nea Church is set aside for a future underground parking lot that will serve the quarter’s Jewish Israeli residents.⁵

2) Oral interview given by a representative of the Jerusalem Development Authority on the Old City basin in a meeting with the Jerusalem municipality’s chief engineer Shlomo Eshkol on 22 September 2011.
Herod’s Gate/Burj al-Laklak

This area is located in the Muslim Quarter near Herod’s Gate and east of Damascus Gate. A buffer between the Old City walls and the houses of the Saadiah neighborhood, this is one of the few open spaces in the Muslim Quarter. In 1998 the IAA began a rescue excavation in the area as part of a project to prepare the ground for building a residential complex for settlers. Even though the area was intended for housing and not for tourism, the rescue excavations were funded by the Ministry of Tourism. The excavations continued until 2008, and during that time the remains of structures dating from the 1st century CE to the Ottoman period were discovered. After the excavations, no effort was taken to protect the antiquities that had been unearthed. Access to the area is blocked by a locked fence.

After the first plan to build a Jewish neighborhood on the site was rejected by the regional planning and building committee, a new building plan was submitted in 2013, but at this point it is unclear if and when the committee will take up the proposal. It seems that if the committee approves the plan to build at the site, the first stage of construction will be a continuation of the archaeological excavations.

Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street

Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street is one of two main streets that cross the Old City. The street begins at Damascus Gate and ends at the Western Wall Plaza. Walking along its length one encounters the holiest sites of the three monotheistic religions. The street crosses the Via Dolorosa, holy to Christians and identified as the path that Jesus walked before his crucifixion; further along are located the entrances for Muslims to the Haram al-Sharif; and at its end stands the entrance to the Western Wall Plaza. On the basis of excavations conducted over the course of the 20th century along this street, scholars have hypothesized that it was built by the Romans in the 2nd century CE; at that time Jerusalem, known then as Aelia Capitolina, was part of the Roman Empire.

For example, a secondary entrance to the Roman gate was discovered under today’s Damascus Gate; the remains of flooring from the time were found at the intersection of al-Wad with the Via Dolorosa and in the western portion of the Western Wall Plaza, where the construction of Beit ha-Liba is planned. In the southern part of the street, near the Tanner’s Gate in the Old City wall, a pedestrian gate was unearthed, located a few dozen meters to the west of the Dung Gate. In October of 2012 the Jerusalem Municipality began infrastructure work on the street, including upgrading the sewage pipe running underneath it.

Over the past forty years many excavations have been conducted under the houses of the Old City and its streets. Such excavations are also taking place today in the area between the Western Wall and Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street, in the area known as the Ohel Yitzhak synagogue complex. Excavations, reaching deep underground, are also underway in different areas close to the Western Wall tunnels. It is known that settler organizations and some government authorities have intended for some time to create underground connections between the various Jewish settlements in the Muslim Quarter and the ancient sites there (e.g. Zedekiah’s Cave). Though we do not possess documentation of these intentions, the information is based on interviews with involved parties.

The renovation of the sewage line represents an opportunity to excavate along the entire length of the street and to study its history. As mentioned, the Ohel Yitzhak synagogue is located at the southern end of Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street. An excavation of underground spaces beneath the synagogue has been ongoing since 2005; these spaces connect on one side to the Western Wall tunnels, and can be joined on the other with spaces that will likely be discovered beneath Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street. On the basis of precedents in the Old City, and considering the great interest that the four underground passages have raised in certain quarters, we foresee that if subterranean spaces that can be enlarged are discovered, it is possible that the IAA will decide to expand the scope of the excavation using government funds.

Several buildings located on Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street are controlled by the settler organization Ateret Kohanim, which is devoted to Judaizing the Muslim and Christian Quarters of the Old City. One of these buildings is former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s house, which was purchased in the 1990s and sits a short distance to the north of the intersection of Via Dolorosa and Ha-Gai/Al-Wad. One of the first buildings purchased by settlers in the Muslim Quarter, also located on Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street, is the Ateret Yerushalayim yeshiva. The yeshiva serves as a center for study and spiritual growth for the hundreds of students who pass through its doors every year.

Other houses belonging to settlers are located further along the street, as is the alley that leads to the Little Western Wall, located next to the Haram al-Sharif, which serves as a prayer space for Ultra-Orthodox Jews and settlers. Prayer services in the Ohel Yitzhak synagogue were renewed in 2007 after a renovation.

10) E.g., N. Hasson, “Jerusalem’s Time Tunnels,” Haaretz Online, April 24, 2011.
11) Ibid.
Damascus Gate

This gate serves as the main entrance through which thousands of Palestinians enter the Old City every day. The remains of a gate from the late Roman period (2nd century CE) were discovered under the current structure. The Israeli authorities (the East Jerusalem Development Company, the IAA, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Jerusalem Municipality) are advancing a preservation plan that will turn the area into a tourism site.

Jaffa Gate

In 2009 the Jerusalem Development Authority began an initiative at Jaffa Gate to blur the sense of separation between West Jerusalem and the Old City through the creation of a single, continuous space. As part of this plan, in 2010 archaeological excavations were conducted in which archaeologists discovered a portion of a Roman wall and a sewage system stretching from Jaffa Gate to Hezekiah’s Pool in the Christian Quarter.

Similarly, in 2015 cleaning work was done on a complex of sites located to the north of the plaza outside Jaffa Gate. In a number of excavations undertaken in this area researchers discovered an aqueduct from the late Roman period, a public bath from the Byzantine period, and an Ayubid wall.

Hezekiah’s Pool

This is a water cistern in the Christian Quarter, built in the shape of an asymmetrical rectangle. From the north the cistern borders on the Coptic caravansary, and on its other sides it is surrounded by houses and shops. Despite the fact that the cistern has never been excavate or studied, it is dated to the late Roman period (2nd century CE) on the basis of excavations conducted in the water channel that leads to the cistern.

Photographs from the beginning of the 20th century testify to the fact that the pool was then full. However, today the cistern is closed to visitors. In recent years there have been a number of cleaning initiatives in the pool to address its poor sanitation. For instance, an internet group formed to advocate for the cleaning of the pool because of its importance to the Jewish people. The group identifies this site with the time of King Hezekiah (the 8th century BCE), despite the fact that, as mentioned, excavations conducted in the pool’s surroundings indicate that it was built in the late Roman or Byzantine periods (the 3rd to 7th centuries CE).

As if in coordination with this initiative, the Jerusalem Municipality began to clean the pool despite the claim by the Copts, the Greek Orthodox, and the Muslim Waqf that the pool belongs to them. The cleaning began in June of 2011 and continued for several months, entailing intensive and continuous labor. The cleaning project was carried out in a one-sided manner, and the parties involved did not succeed in coordinating despite their shared interest.

13) Information concerning the plan to renovate Damascus Gate can be found on the website of East Jerusalem Development, Ltd.
17) The Pool of Hezekiah Conservation Project.
Ophel Excavations- the Davidson Center

Located to the south of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, this area abuts the Old City walls and the village of Silwan. This is the largest area of continuous excavation in the Old City. The excavations conducted here over the years have revealed the existence of a multi-layered site in continual use from the early Roman period (the Second Temple period) until today. Graves from the Abbasid period (8th to 9th century CE) were found at the site, as were the remains of large structures identified as palaces or administrative buildings from the Umayyad period (7th to 8th centuries), and residential structures and a monastery from the Byzantine period (4th to 7th centuries). Likewise remains were found that were identified as military structures that apparently served the Roman army after the city was conquered (2nd century BCE to 1st century CE). A small number of additional remains were found that were dated to the period of the Judean Kingdom in the Iron Age (7th to 8th centuries BCE).\(^{18}\)

At the end of the 1990s the area was declared a national park. A few years later, at the beginning of the 2000s, the Davidson Center, which serves as an antiquities museum for the area of the Ophel, was built on the site. The center, administered at first by the East Jerusalem Development Company, was later transferred to the Company for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem.\(^{19}\) The museum has decided to preserve and restore the Umayyad palaces, identified with the beginning of Islam, as well as the structures from the beginning of Christian rule in the Holy Land, dated to the Byzantine period, and the Herodian street identified with the time of the Second Temple. Apparently, this decision supports the museum directors’ wish to create a tableau for the viewer that shows how different cultures were influenced by those that preceded them, creating thereby a feeling of continuity. However, as can be seen by perusing the website of the Ministry of Tourism, which highlights the central findings of the Davidson Center, the remains identified with the history of the Jewish people receive the most emphasis on the site, while the remains from other periods are not highlighted.\(^{20}\)

In recent years excavations led by Eilat Mazar have been conducted under the auspices of the Hebrew University.\(^{21}\) The excavations, which are taking place directly below Al-Aqsa Mosque, are significantly raising tensions between the Palestinian and Muslim side, worried about the damage to archaeological remains identified as part of the Muslim heritage of the Old City, and the Israeli archaeologists who are digging with the goal of finding remains identified with the


22) An example of this tendency can be found here: “A Reservoir from the First Temple Period Newly Discovered Near the Western Wall (September 2012),” the IAA website, 2012.
We can note two central excavations in the area of the Davidson Center in recent years:

1. The Mikvah (Ritual Bath) Trail

In recent years preservation work has been underway on a number of pools that were found in the eastern portion of the Ophel excavations, outside the walls of the Old City. The pools, dated to the Second Temple period, are presented as ritual baths (mikva'ot, singular mikvah) that were used in Jewish religious practice during the time of the Second Temple. The ritual baths are scattered among remains from other periods, and in some cases were used in different periods for various purposes (mostly as cisterns and storage spaces). The Mikvah Trail begins underneath the southern wall of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and Al-Aqsa mosque.

A system of gates, known as the Hulda gates, was also discovered here, as well as steps that lead to them. The gates and the steps are dated to the time of the Second Temple, and identified with the pilgrimage path taken by worshipers in the period. The path ends at the nearby exit in the Old City walls, opposite the northern entrance to the village of Silwan and a few meters away from the excavations in the Givati parking lot and the City of David archaeological park. The Israeli authorities are planning to create an underground or elevated link between this path and the Silwan excavations. The focus on preserving objects connected to Jewish ritual from the Temple creates a clear connection between Jewish worship of the time and observance today, as similar purity rituals are also practiced by contemporary religious Jews.

2. The Ophel Wall

In June of 2011 the “Ophel Walls” site opened to the general public. This is a small portion of the area of excavation of the Ophel, situated to the east of the Mikvah Trail. Several remains dated to the 7th and 8th centuries BCE, the period of the Judean Kingdom, were discovered here. They include a retaining wall and portions of internal walls identified as parts of a tower or a residential building. In later periods building on these walls continued. On account of this continued use and the damage done by the passage of time, there is no scholarly consensus concerning the identity of the remains and their meaning.

Though this section has yielded few findings, it has nevertheless become a central part of the tourist route at the Davidson Center. The goal of this route is to connect the ongoing excavations in the City of David to the excavations at the Ophel, thereby emphasizing a single historical layer, in which little has been discovered, as more important than other layers. In this way the tourist route serves as a means of harnessing the archaeological findings to strengthen particular political ends.

24) The preservation project of the Mikvah Trail to the south of the Temple Mount was undertaken from 2010 to 2012 at the initiative of East Jerusalem Development, Ltd.


The Bab al-Rahma Cemetery

The Muslim Bab al-Rahma cemetery is located next to the eastern wall of the Old City. It appears that the Golden Gate/Bab al-Rahma was sealed in the 8th century CE, and that its existence long preceded the building of the Ottoman wall in the 16th century. There have been no archaeological excavations so far that could date the earliest graves, but according to Muslim tradition, the cemetery, which is still in use to this day, was founded a short time after the Golden Gate was sealed.

Today the cemetery covers the entire length of the eastern wall of the Old City. In recent years, several Israeli groups have been trying to prevent burial in the southern part of the cemetery, which serves the residents of the village of Silwan. In 2005, the Public Committee against the Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount, a consortium of archaeologists, intellectuals and lawyers, petitioned the High Court of Justice to order the government to enforce the ban on burial in the southern portion of the cemetery. Another petition on this issue was lodged in 2004. According to the Public Committee, the location had been declared an archaeological site

27) High Court of Justice 2800/05 and 7192/04 (in Hebrew).
that is part of the Jerusalem Walls national park. They claim, therefore, that burial there should be considered as posing harm to the antiquities. In the wake of their petition the government agreed, even before the High Court’s deliberations, to prevent burial there.

In 2009 the High Court of Justice denied the petition, but ruled that the authorities are obligated to uphold the law and to protect the site from harm, including preventing further burial. Today residents who wish to bury their dead in the southern part of the cemetery must obtain prior permission from the High Court; in most cases the families do not turn to the court after the death of their loved ones. In a few instances attempts to conduct burials on the site have resulted in the arrest of family members or the transfer of the deceased to other families’ burial plots.

In August of 2012, which coincided with the end of the month of Ramadan, the Israeli authorities expanded northward the area in which burial is prohibited. The Israeli authorities’ prevention of Muslim burial on the southern side of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif dovetails with the Israeli ambition to remove, or at least to limit, the Muslim connection to this area.

Beit ha-Liba

Beit ha-Liba is the name of an initiative to establish an office and conference space for the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, a government organization under the authority of the Prime Minister’s office. The organization is tasked with coordinating the prayer in the Western Wall Plaza and with responsibility over tourism in the Western Wall tunnels. Beit ha-Liba is located opposite the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. Like the construction plan in the Givati parking lot (see further below), the plan for Beit ha-Liba includes an archaeological display on the ground floor of the building, and three floors above; all together, a total space of some 3,700 square meters will be built.

Excavations conducted almost continuously between 2005 to 2009 by the IAA revealed finds from different periods, including the remains of the Mughribi quarter that Israel destroyed in 1967, and remains from the Mamluk (13th to 16th centuries), Byzantine (4th to 7th centuries), and Roman periods (2nd to 4th centuries), as well as a structure from the 7th century BCE. The most important find in the area of excavation is a Roman road from the time of Aelia Capitolina, dated to the 2nd century CE. The route of the road crosses the Old City from north to south, and is identical with the route of Ha-Gai/Al-Wad Street.

The construction of this building has garnered considerable opposition from various Muslim groups who argue that it violates the status quo in the holy places. Moreover, they demand that, in accordance with the decisions of the High Court of Justice concerning construction near the Mughribi Gate and with the peace treaty with Jordan, any construction in this area has to be coordinated and undertaken in cooperation with Jordan and the Muslim Waqf. In the past, Ultra-Orthodox rabbis also expressed opposition to the plan. The rabbi of the Western Wall even stated that he will not act in opposition to rabbinic opinion, though it seems that other rabbis of equal stature also support the plan.

In addition to these objections, a group of archaeologists from various universities has also opposed the Beit ha-Liba project on scientific grounds. According to these scholars, the construction of Beit ha-Liba could damage archaeological remains at the site. The IAA challenged this position, and at the end of the day its plan was accepted and the construction was approved.

However, responding to a petition submitted to the National Planning and Building Committee

29) High Court of Justice 7800/05 and 7192/04, ruling of July 19, 2009 (in Hebrew).
30) A new report from Emek Shaveh is expected to be published during November 2015.
against the approval of the structure, the latter decided to reject the current plan for Beit ha-Liba, and requested that the planners reduce the scope of the construction. Accordingly, the Committee remanded the debate over the plans to the Regional Planning and Building Committee.\(^3\)

We argue that the construction of Beit ha-Liba will cause considerable damage to the Old City and will harm its residents. First of all, the construction will change the skyline of the Old City. Secondly, the emphasis placed on Jewish archaeological finds that were discovered at the excavation site,\(^3\) and the lack of attention to finds from other periods, reinforces the concern that the construction of Beit ha-Liba will encourage the further use of archaeology as a political tool. Archaeology used in this way creates, as it were, a timeless connection between the Jewish people and Jerusalem, and ignores other cultures’ connections to the city.

\(^3\) Y. Shuv, “Victory for the Worshipers: The Western Wall Plaza will not be Made Smaller,” Behadrey Haredim, June 12, 2014 (in Hebrew).

\(^3\) An Ancient Hebrew Seal of Netanyahu ben Yoash,” the IAA website, n.d. (in Hebrew).

---

The Mughrabi Bridge

The Mughrabi bridge leads to the Mughrabi Gate, the only entrance to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif open to non-Muslims. The bridge was built along the route of an ancient rampart, and stretches from the Western Wall Plaza to the area where the Davidson Center excavations are underway. The Israeli authorities have been trying for years to advance a plan to build a new bridge. However, every attempt to renovate the bridge has been stymied by international pressure, and has raised the concerns of the Muslim Waqf, which claims that the renovation will upset the status quo on the Haram al-Sharif.\(^3\)

In June of 2012 the IAA began rescue excavations underneath the Mughrabi Gate that were intended to prepare the area for the construction of a new bridge. Over the course of the excavations, they discovered remains dated from the early Islamic period (the 7th to the 10th

\(^3\) For more information on the Mughrabi bridge and the political ramifications involved in its renovation see Emek Shaveh’s report Why is the Mughrabi Bridge a Political Issue?, 2014.

century). These layers were removed for the purpose of preparing the area for construction. Among other activities, parts of a public structure dated to the Umayyad period (7th century CE) were dismantled.

At the time of this writing, the new bridge has not yet been built, and there is ongoing maintenance work that is intended, in our opinion, to further the construction of a new Mughrabi bridge when the plan is approved. For example, in 2013 a concrete wall was built, apparently intended to support the bridge after the destruction of the remains of the Mughrabi quarter on which it rested. Similarly, deep wells were drilled that were intended, apparently, for placing new supporting columns.

In August 2014 a new wooden bridge was built with funding from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. In comparison with the route of the earlier bridge, this bridge follows the route of the ancient rampart more closely and is shorter for that reason. According to sources who were involved in the approval of this plan, the construction of this bridge is intended to facilitate the renovation of the original structure. We would argue, however, that the goal of this construction is to create facts on the ground that will lead to the expansion of the prayer space of the Western Wall while, at the same time, bypassing the need for approval for the construction of a new bridge.

After the wooden bridge was completed, there was strong international pressure to dismantle it. It was claimed that the bridge’s construction, undertaken without the approval of the Jordanian government or the Islamic Waqf, upsets the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. As a result, less than two weeks after it was completed, the government ordered it to be dismantled.

We argue that this incident is indicative of the way that archaeological excavations in the Old City serve as means to advance plans with political ramifications that can inflame the entire region.

**The Expansion of the Western Wall Plaza**

In 2012 Jerusalem’s local planning committee approved a proposal to enlarge the space of the Western Wall Plaza by 600 square meters. According to that plan most of the expansion of the plaza was set to occur through an underground archaeological excavation that would allow the construction of two prayer spaces: one above ground and the second underneath. It was intended that the project would be funded by the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, but thus far work has not yet begun. If it does take place, the project will enable visitors coming from the Dung Gate to reach the Western Wall Plaza or the Western Wall tunnels directly.

**The Little Western Wall**

The Little Western Wall is a portion of the wall located in the Muslim Quarter in a narrow alley at the end of a street that leads to the Haram al-Sharif. This wall is a part of the western retaining wall of the Temple Mount; portions of it have been dated to the Second Temple period. The Little Western Wall has been identified as the closest point to the Holy of Holies of the Temple where Jews are allowed to pray, and since 2006 it has been recognized as a place of Jewish prayer by the State of Israel.

The Little Western Wall is located next to a Muslim residential neighborhood, causing considerable friction between the populations, and various authorities have had to intervene. For example in August of 2013 a hearing was held by the Knesset’s Internal Affairs Committee that dealt with the location of trash bins serving the Palestinian residents, and the claim by Jewish worshipers that the bins detracted from the holiness of the site.

In 2014, in her role as head of the Internal Affairs Committee, MK Miri Regev visited the Little

---


42) Y. Eli, “For the First Time Since ’77: Jerusalem’s Old City to be Renovated,” *NRG*, December 5, 2012 (in Hebrew).

43) A new report from Emek Shaveh is expected to be published during November 2015.


45) Notices of the Internal Affairs and Environment Committee, MK Miri Regev, Chair of the Internal Affairs Committee, in a debate over the status of the Little Western Wall: “Why don’t we consider the Little Western Wall as part of the Western Wall? It’s inconceivable that trash not be removed from the site,” The Knesset, E 19, August 31, 2013 (in Hebrew).
Western Wall. During her visit Regev argued that it is important to enable all the religions to conduct their prayer services in their holy places.46 This statement underlines how the discourse surrounding the connection between archaeology and holiness allows the authorities to turn a blind eye to the Old City’s local Muslim population in the name of promoting the Judaization of the city. Regev’s statement raised grave concerns, particularly concerning the government of Israel’s policy in relation to archaeological sites, after she assumed responsibility over the IAA as part of her appointment as Culture Minister in May 2015.

Other Projects on the Western Wall Plaza

In addition to the projects mentioned, we can point to at least two other projects that have decisive influence on the character of the Western Wall Plaza. In the northern area of the plaza is a two story structure called Beit Strauss. In September 2013 the IAA began excavations on the site. No information has been published concerning the excavation’s findings, or whether the excavation has reached bedrock. Moreover leading archaeologists, including those who are members of the board of the IAA, have expressed concern that the excavation could cause damage to antiquities located there.47 Since the area was part of the Mughrabi quarter, it is to be expected that structures will be uncovered from the time that the quarter was founded in the 14th century and from earlier periods as well.

The expansion of the plaza serves as a precedent in so far as it allows the appropriation of areas in which public activities of a civil/secular nature take place—such as the presentation of archaeological findings—for the sake of the enlargement of prayer space on the Western Wall Plaza. This incident is one of several cases in which public space was appropriated for the sake of prayer (e.g. the Little Western Wall). We believe that there is a need to balance between the areas intended for prayer and those designated for presenting the history of the city. This balance is necessary in order to prevent religious considerations from overwhelming historical considerations here.

Excavations in Silwan

The Givati Parking Lot

The Givati parking lot is located at the northern end of the village of Silwan, opposite the City of David visitors center and some twenty meters south of the Old City walls. In the past, the area served as one of the only available open recreational spaces for the residents of the neighborhood. However, since 2003 the IAA has been conducting salvage excavations at the site that are funded by the Eliad Foundation. The excavations were first directed by Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron, and since 2007 by Doron Ben-Ami.

These rescue excavations are part of a series of works aimed at preparing the site for the construction of the Kedem visitors center. According to the original plan, the center was intended to encompass over 16,000 square meters, and to serve as the entrance gate to the Jerusalem Walls national park and the tourist sites in the Old City and in Silwan.48 However, though this plan was approved by Jerusalem’s Regional Planning Committee, it was rejected by the national oversight committee after opposition was expressed by a number of parties, including Emek Shaveh.49

The archaeological excavations revealed a multi-layered site. Researchers discovered for the first time the remains of a residential neighborhood (either Karaite or Jewish) from the Abbasid period (8th to 9th centuries CE); the impressive foundations of Byzantine or Roman structures; a large residential structure from the late Roman period (2nd to 3rd century CE); a two story structure from the early Roman period (1st century BCE to 2nd century CE); evidence of a destroyed layer that may possibly be dated to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE; and a handful of additional ancient remains.50 As can be seen from Emek Shaveh’s earlier reports on the archaeological excavations and the Kedem Center plan, we believe that this project is one of the most prominent examples of how archaeology is used as a political tool to make possible the appropriation of public space for private purposes, and to exclude the Palestinian population.

Specifically, one can see that the salvage excavation at the Givati parking lot prepared the ground for the plan to build the Kedem Center in three ways. First of all, the depth of the excavation, which reached more than ten meters beneath the ground, created the foundation and base for the planned building. After the plan is approved in the various planning and building committees, it will be possible to begin construction without any further digging. Secondly, the involvement of the IAA in the excavation allowed the public to turn a blind eye to the political use that the Eliad

49) The Appeals Subcommittee, the National Planning and Construction Committee, appeals 57/14, 6/14, 66/14, 67/14, and 83/14 (Jerusalem, 2015) (in Hebrew).
Foundation and government bodies made of the excavation, and instead to see the work as an archaeological project of purely scientific proportions.11

Finally, correspondence between the El’ad Foundation and the IAA concerning the stages of the construction of the Kedem Center, which was revealed in the Emek Shaveh report "A Privatized Heritage: How the Israel Antiquities Authority Relinquished Jerusalem’s Past" (2014), is instructive of the ongoing process of the privatization of archaeology in East Jerusalem. This process, contextualized by the handover of archaeological sites from the state to private organizations like El’ad, turns the IAA into a contractor working according to the directives of this organization. This leads to the destruction of archaeological finds which contradict El’ad Foundation’s desire to justify the Silwan settlement and the expulsion of its Palestinian residents.

According to the original plan, the Kedem Center would overshadow the village of Silwan and serve to disconnect the village from the Old City via a chain of tourist sites controlled by El’ad.14 However, as mentioned, in the appeal against this rapacious plan, the appeals committee rejected it and remanded the deliberations to the Local Planning and Building Committee. In order to be approved, the committee requested extensive changes in the plan, including reducing the complex’s overall area; securing free passage for those coming and going from Silwan to the Old City; requiring that at least half of the antiquities area be exposed to the public view.15 The committee also established an important precedent in deciding that, in opposition to what is stated in the Antiquities Law, after the completion of the excavations at the site, the IAA must submit its preservation plan for the approval of the Regional Committee. In this way the Local Planning and Building Committee, for the first time, subordinated the Antiquities Law to the planning and construction law, and opened the preservation phase to the review and criticism of the public at large.16

In the wake of this decision we are waiting for the submission of a new building plan for the Kedem Center that meets the requirements of the appeals committee. It is already clear that this decision represents an important turning point in the struggle to turn Jerusalem’s archaeological remains into a means for the creation of open dialogue among the groups that share the city.

Jeremiah’s Cistern
Near the entrance to the visitors center of the City of David national park is a water cistern that served the residents of Silwan before their homes were connected to the city water system. With the establishment of the visitors center there at the beginning of the 2000s, the center operators began referring to the place as "Jeremiah the Prophet’s Cistern," and to present it as an example of the cistern in which Jeremiah was thrown as punishment for his prophecy (Jeremiah 38:2-13). However, archaeological excavations have dated the first use of the cistern to the Byzantine period — at least one thousand years after the incident described in the Bible. In 2011 an excavation was conducted at the entrance to the City of David visitors center that was meant to connect Jeremiah’s cistern to the Givati parking lot. During the course of the excavation the remains of a large structure from the late Roman period (1st to 4th century CE) were discovered, along with the remains of a wall from the Byzantine period (4th to 7th centuries); a plastered facility dated to the end of the Byzantine period or the beginning of the early Islamic period (7th to 8th centuries); and a paved road from the Abbasid period (8th to 9th centuries).19

In May 2012 the State of Israel and the Jerusalem Municipality approved a budget of four million NIS for the production of a sound and light show in the cistern that would tell the story of the

54) Ibid, pp. 88-89.
The Spring House

This is a very long term excavation, funded by the El’ad Foundation and managed by the IAA, ongoing in the village of Silwan since 1995. The excavation has been conducted at the bottom of the slope of the City of David archaeological park, at the northern edge of the village and along the channel of the Kidron valley.

The excavations at the Spring House are intended to prepare the plot that will serve visitors to the City of David. The plan for the structure was presented during a discussion that took place in June of 2012 in Jerusalem’s Regional Planning and Building Committee, which intended to approve an existing structure near the Um al-Daraj/Gihon spring and to enlarge it. The plan includes the approval of the existing structure and the preparation of the plot that will serve visitors to the City of David archaeological park, by connecting Warren’s Shaft, the spring, and the first section of a walking path in the channel. The complex includes three buildings that have been built over the spring and beside it: the central building will gain another floor and a balcony overlooking the valley. All together, this will add some 200 square meters. The excavations will also reach deep beneath the ground, with the aim of creating subterranean spaces leading west. Though Emek Shaveh has lodged its opposition to this plan, at the time of writing there has not yet been a public discussion of the issue.

Despite the fact that the Um al-Daraj/Gihon spring is meant to be open and accessible to all the residents of Silwan, the archaeological excavation serves the goal of El’ad Foundation and the Israeli authorities to turn the spring into part of a tourist route that is closed to the residents. This plan is part of a complex of Israeli tourist sites that have been built along the northern edge of the village of Silwan. These sites create a belt that allows Israeli tourists to cross from the Silwan springs to the Western Wall Plaza without passing through the village of Silwan itself, and prevents Silwan residents from reaching the Old City.

Summary

This report intended to show how archaeology has been used to advance political ends in the Historic Basin of Jerusalem. As this document shows, a visitor in today’s Old City should expect a fascinating encounter with artifacts from a wide range of periods and cultures. These remains are not only witnesses to obscure historical periods, and ancient and forgotten cultures. The way in which these periods are presented, the interpretation given to them, and the relative importance they are assigned reflects the use of archaeology to advance religious and political ideologies.

At first glance, an archaeological excavation seems to be an academic matter that deals with questions of stratigraphy, the dating of finds, and even with the scientific standards of the excavation and the professional qualities of the excavators. But as this report shows, in many instances these questions hide an ongoing process of the appropriation of archaeology by specific national groups. In this sense, this report sheds light on the biased process that takes archaeological remains from Jerusalem’s Historic Basin away from the general public in the name of furthering the Judaization of East Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem’s current political and social climate, the transformation of archaeological sites, including those with significant religious importance, into political tools is disastrous. In this atmosphere, full of suspicion and hostility, every unilateral action in the city, even the relatively minor act of renovating a structure, can become the flashpoint for conflict that will intensify the tension between the sides.

We propose that this use of archaeology is not irrefutable fate. In the complex day-to-day reality of Jerusalem, archaeology can serve as a source of inspiration for constructive dialogue among the diverse communities that share the city. The participation of local and international actors in the consideration of development plans that include archaeological sites can serve to advance inter-religious and multi-ethnic communication. Such activity is essential, not only for the sake of the protection of the antiquities from physical harm, but also in order to preserve the delicate balance that exists in the city today. A complex presentation of the archaeological narrative—as a space of cross-cultural encounter and not only as a point of conflict and contention—can transform archaeology into an important and meaningful asset for both residents and visitors, and can dampen the flames of conflict. We can only hope that in coming years we will see more moderate voices prevail, and that the authorities responsible for protecting archaeological treasures in the State of Israel will be wise enough to preserve this valuable resource, and to use it to advance coexistence and not polarization.
For further information please visit the Emek Shaveh website: www.alt-arch.org

For tours, workshops, or lectures, please contact us at:
info@alt-arch.org or +972-(0)545-667299

www.alt-arch.org