The Debate Over “King David’s Palace”

The Case of the Large Stone Structure at the City of David

The site known as “The City of David” is the location of ancient Jerusalem and one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. The ancient remains discovered at the site are presented to the public as proof of the accuracy of the biblical depiction of Jerusalem under the rule of King David during the 10th century BCE. This claim, however, is highly contested within the archaeological community. The following paper presents the leading interpretations on the find known as “the Large Stone Structure (LSS)”, and popularly referred to as the “King David’s Palace.”
The academic debate over the dating and function of the LSS is central in the discussion of the size and influence of Jerusalem in ancient times, particularly during the Iron Age IIA (10th century BCE), which according to biblical chronology is the period when King David established his kingdom in Jerusalem. A minority of scholars date the remains of the LSS to the 10th century BCE and associate the structure with King David’s palace. They present this interpretation as proof of the accuracy of the biblical account that during the 10th century BCE Jerusalem served as the capital of a powerful kingdom which stretched from the Euphrates in the north to Ezion Gaver (near present-day Eilat) in the south. The majority of archaeologists, however, identify the structure with either earlier or later periods. They claim that during the 10th century BCE Jerusalem was no more than a small mountain chiefdom.

The intersection of politics and archaeology in one of the most symbolically charged and politically sensitive places in the world means that even what normally could be considered as a purely academic debate is suffused with meaning and implications that resonate way beyond academic journals. The Elad Foundation, a private settlers organization, which operates and curates the City of David, conceals or at best underplays the debate about the LSS. As a result, most visitors to the City of David leave the site without being made aware that most researchers dispute the dating of the structure to the 10th Century BCE or its identification with King David.

In the following we will outline the various interpretive positions on the LSS. In the conclusion we would also like to suggest an alternative approach to curating the site.
Archaeological Excavations of the Large Stone Structure

The Large Stone Structure (LSS) is located toward the upper section of the Ophel ridge, approximately 100 meters south of the Temple Mount compound (number 2 on the map below). Today it is situated under the City of David visitors’ center. The area of excavation is located west of what is known as the Stepped Stone Structure¹ (SSS), which is built on the eastern slope of the Ophel (number 3 on the map).

The LSS was initially excavated by the British duo, Robert Macalister and John Duncan in 1923² who interpreted the structure as the remains of a Jebusite fortress that David had captured when he took Jerusalem. In 2005, archaeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar sought to examine this claim. In two articles published approximately two decades prior³, she had speculated that the structure was the palace built by David’s Phoenician allies in his honor following his conquest of Jerusalem. During an excavation funded by the Elad Foundation that Mazar led from 2006–2007 for the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, she found what she claimed was evidence to support this assumption.⁴ However, senior archaeologists who study ancient Jerusalem contested this interpretation of the Large Stone Structure. The following details central elements of Mazar’s claims and the main points made by scholars who have disputed her interpretation.

Interpretations of the Large Stone Structure at the City of David: King David’s Palace, a Canaanite Fortress, or a Complex of Walls from different periods?

Identification of the structure as King David’s Palace

Eilat Mazar suggested that the LSS and Stepped Stone Structure (SSS) formed part of the same complex of fortifications and construction of enormous magnitude. This speculation is based on several factors. First, Mazar attributed the ceramics discovered in loci she interpreted to be part of complexes sealed by the LSS to the Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE) – the period in which the city was under Jebusite rule. The decision to build the LSS on top of these loci indicates, in her view, that the construction of the palace was an important aspect of the changes in the organization of the city. Moreover, in Mazar’s opinion, the ceramic evidence found in sealed complexes within the structure itself dates its construction back to the end of the Iron Age I in 1000 BCE, when David conquered Jerusalem per Mazar’s claim. Due to the size of the structure and the ceramic findings that included many luxury items, Mazar concluded that this structure served as an important public building, namely a temple or king’s palace. But since it is implausible for a temple of such magnitude to be built alongside the Temple Mount, Mazar concluded that this structure must have been the king’s palace.⁵ Furthermore, she claimed that the Large Stone Structure was built outside the boundary of the wall that surrounded Jerusalem before this period. Therefore, according to Mazar, the LSS indicates the extensive development processes that took place in Jerusalem following its conquest by David.⁶

¹. Since it was initially excavated, the Stepped Stone Structure has been at the heart of controversy over the extent to which the bible is an historically accurate reflection of the United Kingdom of Israel under King David’s reign. A brief overview of the controversies regarding dating this structure, may be referenced in the following source: Gadot, Y., Uziel, J.  2017. The Monumentality of Iron Age Jerusalem Prior to the 8th Century BCE. Tel Aviv 44(2): 136–137.
As noted, Mazar’s position was highly criticized by senior scholars of ancient Jerusalem. The following details the central points of their criticism:

The Jebusite fortress theory

Initial criticism was put forth by Prof. Amihai Mazar, a researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Prof. Avraham Faust of Bar Ilan University. A. Mazar and Faust accepted the assumption that the LSS and the SSS constitute one structure yet rejected Eilat Mazar’s claim that it dates back to the end of the Iron Age I and to the period of King David’s reign. They claim that the rich ceramic findings in the LSS that date back to the Iron Age I, indicate that the structure could not have been built at the end of the Iron Age I. In that light, the building may not be regarded as part of a construction enterprise that took place in Jerusalem following David’s conquest of the city. Instead, they claimed that Macalister and Duncan’s initial conjecture that the structure constituted part of Jerusalem’s Jebusite fortification system, was correct.7

Rejection of the theory that the LSS is one Structure

Further criticism of Mazar’s theory was presented by Prof. Israel Finkelstein, Prof. David Ussishkin, Prof. Ze’ev Herzog, and Lily Singer-Avitz, of Tel Aviv University. They claimed that the exposed walls of the Large Stone Structure were poorly preserved, and that their reconstruction as part of one structure is unfounded based on such facts on the ground. Moreover, the researchers claimed that many of the loci that Eilat Mazar alleged were sealed, and thus could be deemed accurately dated areas, were in fact damaged by later construction and therefore may not be considered reliable sources for accurate dating. Furthermore, the team of researchers found evidence that the Large Stone Structure and Stepped Stone Structure were not built as one complex, but rather constitute layers of fortifications built and rebuilt over the course of several hundred years, at least from the Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE) up to the Hellenistic period (332–63 BCE).

Criticism by City of David’s excavators

Two of the City of David’s excavators in recent decades, Prof. Ronny Reich of Haifa University, and Eli Shukron of the Israel Antiquities Authority, both claimed that Eilat Mazar’s dating is inaccurate and viewed her opinion that the LSS had changed the character of the city as incorrect.8 Reich and Shukron base their claims on the unearthing of walls in various sections of the City of David archaeological park which indicate the city developed substantially only in the 8th century BCE.9

Presentation of the Site to the public

As we have seen, there are multiple views regarding the date of the construction of the LSS and its use. Yet, the visitor’s guide distributed at the site and the sign hung over the LSS barely mention the debate and highlight only Eilat Mazar’s interpretation of the structure as King David’s palace. The text of the sign pays lip service in the form of a question mark after the headline “King David’s Palace?” and the sentence “other scholars contest this view” (see picture below). Yet none of the alternative interpretations for the LSS are provided.

The lack of information regarding the scholarly debate over the LSS is even more evident in the site's informational leaflet. The leaflet contains no mention whatsoever of the criticism by scholars of Mazar's conclusions. Instead, Mazar's interpretation is mentioned as the only explanation for the Large Stone Structure's identification and date of construction (see photo of sign and section of leaflet dealing with the LSS below).

2. **The Large Stone Structure: The Remains of David's Palace**

   “And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar-trees, and carpenters, and masons; and they built David a house” (2 Samuel 5:11).

In 2005, remains of what became known as the “Large Stone Structure” were discovered beneath the remains of the Byzantine and Second Temple periods. The main elements visible in the excavation are the fieldstones that served as the foundation of this large structure; its upper stories did not survive. Excavations carried out in recent years under the direction of Eliat Mazar have unearthed numerous finds associated with the structure that indicate, in Mazar’s opinion, that it was constructed in the early 10th century BCE. Based on clues from the Bible regarding the location of David’s house and on stately architectural elements found in a nearby landscape, it has been suggested that the Large Stone Structure was the palace of King David.

Two bullae (clay impressions used for sealing documents) belonging to high-ranking officials from the court of King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, were found near the structure indicating that a continued to serve the royal administration of Judah until the Babylonian destruction in the year 586 BCE. The bullae bear the names of Jehucal son of Shlemiah, son of Shobai and Gedalyahu son of Pashhur, both fierce antagonists of the Prophet Jeremiah. “Shephatiel son of Mattan, Gedaliah son of Pashhur, Zucal son of Shlemiah, and Pashur son of Malchiah, heard what Jeremiah was saying to all the people. Then the officials said to the king, ‘Let that man be put to death...’” (Jeremiah 36:14)
Alternative Proposal for the Site’s Presentation

Emek Shaveh would like to recommend changes to the information presented at the site of the LSS that would reflect the variety of existing interpretations to the structure and its significance.

Offering the multiple perspectives on the LSS could give the visitor a well-rounded understanding of the research on the LSS to date and, contrary to the current mode of presentation, would serve to highlight the many different historical eras embodied at the City of David archaeological site. In addition, by presenting the dispute over the dating of the structure, visitors would be exposed to and gain an appreciation for the processes and considerations faced by archaeologists who seek to date ancient structures and determine their original uses.

Rather than spoon feed the visitor with a one-dimensional perspective, explaining the debate over the LSS and its role in the study of ancient Jerusalem would offer a much richer encounter with the finds and a lesson in the practices and challenges of archaeological research. We at Emek Shaveh would gladly partake in such a process.