

January 17, 2020

Ancient Sites Recruited in Battle Over Area C Summary of Developments in 2020

Over the last few years, we've been witnessing an organized campaign by the settlers focusing on what they claim to be damage by the Palestinians to archaeological sites in area C of the West Bank. This has been accompanied by growing pressure on the Staff Officer for Archaeology at the Civil Administration to increase oversight and stop theft and destruction as well as galvanizing members of Knesset and the government to allocate funds and resources. Multiple private or semi-private organized activities by settlers monitoring, documenting and complaining about damages to archaeological sites have been encouraged and consolidated by a new offshoot of Regavim (an NGO dedicated to safeguarding lands for the Jewish people) called "Guardians of the Eternal". As this document shows, these initiatives are now being formalized as part of a widespread strategy by the settlers' regional councils, NGOs and members of Knesset from the Likud and Yemina parties to crack down on Palestinian construction, agricultural activity and the development of heritage sites. In the past few weeks, we have seen how regional councils are being officially designated to patrol and monitor Palestinian activity and are receiving budgetary allocations to this end.

Prior to the official allocations, the results of the campaign have been evident in the focus on minor sites such as Tel Aroma (see below) and the [162% rise](#) in demolition orders (2017-2019) for dwellings built on antiquity sites across area C. In this context it should be noted that in the West Bank, virtually every Palestinian village is built on, or next to, an antiquities site (and has been for hundreds of years) and living in proximity to such sites is integral to the life of a Palestinian villager.

Several events in 2020 are worth paying attention to (in Chronological Order):

Tel Aroma south of Nablus in Area B is an ancient fortress from the Hellenistic and Roman period. Some archaeologists and settlers identify the place with the Hashmonites (the site was surveyed but never excavated). In February 2020 a Palestinian flag was raised on the site which prompted a settlers campaign against

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the Palestinians in which they were accused of damaging the site (and the Jewish heritage embodied within). As part of the campaign various groups such as the "Guardians of the Eternal" and the Samaria Regional Council organized a tour to the site which they titled "liberating Tel Aroma". The visit was accompanied by clashes with the local residents and ended with [a death of 15 years old Palestinian boy](#).



Ad on the Samaria Regional Council website inviting people to Tel Aroma titled "Returning to the Fortress. Guarding our Heritage."

Tuqu' – In July, the Civil Administration [entered the Palestinian village of Tuqu'](#) near Bethlehem and confiscated a Byzantine-era baptismal font from near the mayor's house which is in area B of the West Bank. The font was probably part of an elaborate church discovered in the ancient mound of Teqoa which abuts the village, but is in area C, and was apparently stolen in 2000 by antiquity thieves. It was eventually retrieved by the village of Tuqu'. Emek Shaveh regards Tel Teqoa as an integral part of local heritage of the village of Tuqu'. The font was safeguarded by Palestinian professionals and was accessible to the villagers and to tourists wishing to visit the find. The operation follows increased complaints by the settlers that the Civil Administration is not doing enough to prevent what they claim is systematic and ideologically driven antiquities theft. The settlers have been claiming that traces of a

Jewish past in the area are being destroyed and that all antiquities sites should be placed under Israeli control.

In late July, the Knesset's foreign affairs and defense committee met to discuss Area C with archaeology as one of the topics at the behest of the right-wing Shiloh Forum. The session was titled "[Government Activities to Stop the PA's takeover of land in Area C](#)". Materials presented to the committee by the ultra-conservative organization Shiloh forum were based on an unpublished report by the new group "Guardians of the Eternity" (belonging to "Regavim") who had previously made unfounded claims about Palestinian acts of destruction at antiquities sites. To that session Emek Shaveh submitted an opinion arguing that the sites are used as a pretext for an increased destruction of dwellings in and around archaeological sites and reminded the committee of Israel's duty under international law to safeguard the sites for the benefit of the local population. During the meeting, the MKs called for the authorization of regional councils to organize the monitoring of Palestinian activity as well as requesting the establishment of a government body dedicated to preventing the Palestinian takeover of Area C.

In September, expropriation orders were issued for the sites of [Deir Sam'an and Deir Kala'](#) northwest of Ramallah. Both sites are located on privately-owned Palestinian property and next to settlements. The expropriation orders state that the sites are being taken for the purpose of preservation and safeguarding archaeology. The site of Deir Sam'an is adjacent to the settlement Leshem and is owned by the residents of the village of a-Dik. The Deir Kala' site is next to the settlement Peduel and belongs to residents from Deir Balut. Both sites feature impressively preserved archaeological findings from the Byzantine period. This was the first time in 35 years that archaeological sites in the West Bank have been expropriated from their owners.

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Deir Sam'an



Deir Kala'

Earlier this month, [we sent an update](#) about the decision by the Minister of Heritage Rafi Peretz to allocate 24 million shekel for additional inspectors to join the team of the Staff Officer for Archaeology and for the improvement of

surveillance mechanisms for archaeological sites located near or on Palestinian land. The announcement was made together with Yossi Dagan, the head of the Samaria Regional Council, at Sebastia, an archaeological site where, for a number of years, settlers have been pushing for greater Israeli involvement in its operation and for extricating it from under Palestinian control. The archaeological site of Sebastia is identified with Samaria, the capital of the Kingdom of ancient Israel in 9-8 BCE. The site also features ruins from the Hellenistic, Roman and later periods. The village of Sebastia is situated within Area B while the site itself is located mainly in area C. Over the past few years, the Samaria Regional Council has been organizing tours to the site, particularly during the school holidays. Several times this year, the Civil Administration has removed a Palestinian flag from the village and the site. In the most recent incident, a flag was raised following renovation works funded by the Belgian government. In their response the regional council [blamed the Palestinians](#) for destroying a site central to Jewish history and UNESCO for supporting the Palestinians. Sebastia is on the tentative list of World Heritage sites in Palestine.



Sebastia

Peretz' allocation will no doubt formalize efforts to lay claim to sites (major and minor) in the West Bank, including those in Area B (where the Palestinians retain authority for civil affairs). It follows shortly after an announcement [in late December](#) by the Ministry of Settlement Affairs inviting regional councils to apply for funds for monitoring "unauthorized" Palestinian construction and is clearly part of the bigger battle over Area C.

In summary, the integration of ancient sites into an organized strategy designed to weaken Palestinian hold on Area C is worrying. The formalization of this approach is likely to result in a steep rise in actions over ancient sites and structures, from water cisterns found in many villages, to major sites such as Sebastia. The justification for preserving and developing ancient sites familiar to us from East Jerusalem is now being applied wholesale to hundreds of places in the West Bank to the detriment of the Palestinians living near the sites and to the multilayered heritage inherent in the ruins which will be distorted for political ends.

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