

29 October, 2025

Press Release: Government approves additional 40 million NIS for ancient sites in the West Bank

The Israeli government decided on Sunday, October 26th, to allocate a further 40 million NIS for archaeological sites in the West Bank for 2025-2026. The new funds come from budget cuts across government ministries, including defence, transport, energy, justice, and education.

This decision builds on a 120 million NIS "[emergency plan](#)" approved in July 2023 for the "salvage, preservation, development, and prevention of antiquities theft" at heritage sites in "Judea, Samaria, and the Jordan Valley". That earlier plan followed a 32 million NIS allocation for the [development of Sebastia](#), a major archaeological mound near Nablus. The Sebastia plan effectively aims to sever the site from the adjacent Palestinian town and turn it into a flagship Israeli tourism destination in the northern West Bank. Following the decision, the military also issued a seizure order for an area at the summit of Sebastia. Last May, our objection to the seizure order was [rejected](#) and at the same time the Civil Administration's Staff Officer for Archaeology (SOA) commenced [excavations](#) at the site.

The 2023 allocations had come on the heels of a five-year campaign by settler regional councils, right-wing NGOs, such as Guardians of Eternity, and Knesset members who accused the Palestinian Authority of deliberately destroying what they termed "Jewish antiquities" in Areas B and C. The campaign called for full Israeli control over archaeological sites in the West Bank (Area C but also B) and resulted in additional staff positions for the SOA and as well as surveillance technology.

The new budget brings the total allocation for archaeological activities in the West Bank by this government alone to 192 million NIS for 2023-2026. The explanatory notes to the decision state that since the July 2023 decision, "large parts of the programme outlined in the decision have not yet been implemented, partly due to the challenges posed by the 'Iron Swords' war and other systemic constraints...The budget increase is required in order to prevent further damage to archaeological sites and to ensure the preservation and development of these sites," it said.

The additional allocation is the latest in a series of steps taken since the reconfiguration of the Ministry of Heritage under Jewish Power Minister Amichai

Eliyahu in 2023 to substantially increase Israeli control over ancient sites in oPt and develop them as settler-run tourist destinations. One of the central developments is the [bill to extend Israel's Antiquity Authority Law into the West Bank](#).

Presently, antiquities in Area C of the West Bank are officially managed by the SOA, operating under the Jordanian Antiquities Law of 1966. The proposed legislation would transfer authority from the SOA to a civilian body within the Ministry of Heritage, effectively replacing Jordanian law with Israeli law. If enacted, the law would constitute a de jure annexation of antiquities sites in the West Bank. The bill is still under discussion in Knesset committees following strong opposition from the Israeli archaeological community.

In another recent development, in September, we reported on an unprecedented wave of new archaeological site declarations - 60 in the northern West Bank alone (in Area C and even B). These designations form part of a wider trend that includes new settlement authorisations, declarations of state land, construction permits, and approval of new settler outposts, all facilitated by the creation of the Settlement Administration within the Ministry of Defence, under Minister Bezalel Smotrich, in 2023.

Emek Shaveh's Response:

The government decision to redirect funds from other offices to sites in the West Bank reflects the ministers' true priorities. At a time when health, welfare, and education systems have been severely impacted by two years of war and soaring defence spending, the government is diverting critical resources to advance the settlers' long-standing agenda: expanding control over territory through archaeology.

By declaring more areas as archaeological sites "off limits" to Palestinians and developing them as tourist attractions to draw mainstream Israeli visitors into the settlements, the government is instrumentalising antiquities both as a bureaucratic tool for displacement and annexation, and as a means of shaping a biblical-nationalist narrative that excludes other histories and denies Palestinian connection to the land.