

How Israel Weaponizes Archaeology

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From the Zionism's earliest days in the late 1800s until the present, Israel's battle has always been about land, but for some the issue goes much deeper—literally. What is underground is as valuable as what is above ground, and the battle has been raging for years.

The battle is over ancient artifacts, from Jerusalem to Gaza to Qumran.

The “Jewish State” prioritizes anything that might boost its legitimacy as rightful owner of Holy Land real estate, and has appropriated the science of archaeology to help create its narrative.

The goal is to highlight the ancient Jewish presence and discount all other communities, whether historic or current. The Israeli narrative assumes, for example, that Christians may have been present for a short time, but only as visitors, leaving virtually no trace; the same goes for any Muslim presence.

In order to back up this version of history, Israel has found it necessary to destroy villages, demolish ancient sites, appropriate historic areas, [rewrite textbooks](#), [redraw boundary lines](#), and more. With the illusion of an ongoing, dominant Jewish presence, Israel can assert that it is simply “re-claiming” what is rightfully theirs, instead of taking what belongs to others.

Facts Under the Ground

It is no surprise that Israel/Palestine is an [archaeological gold mine](#): ancient trade routes crisscrossed the region; it was the historic home of the Philistines and Crusaders; a stone's throw from the early civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Phoenicia; part of the Roman, Greek, Persian, and Ottoman empires, to name a few; and the dwelling place of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

In fact, Palestine is home to the oldest archaeological organization in the world, the [Palestine Exploration Fund](#), founded in 1865. Here excavators have feasted on a [dizzying array of strata](#), ranging from Upper Paleolithic (about 40,000 BC) to late Ottoman (19th century AD), and everything in between; their findings have led to the advancement of the science of archaeology itself. No wonder archaeologists from around the world have been assembling for at least a century and a half to unearth and study Palestine's ancient cultural riches.

When Israel created itself in 1948—and even before this date—the “Jewish State” worked to take control of archaeology, and thus, of the region's history. It toiled to erase footprints of

the numerous civilizations that had preceded the Jewish presence, as well as the peoples that have come afterward.

“Hand to Hand”

The claim to the land is based on a very small window of time, as **Illene Beatty** [pointed out](#) in *Arab and Jew in the Land of Canaan*:

“The extended kingdoms of David and Solomon, on which the Zionists base their territorial demands, endured for only about 73 years... Then it fell apart... [Even] if we allow independence to the entire life of the ancient Jewish kingdoms, from David’s conquest of Canaan in 1000 B.C. to the wiping out of Judah in 586 B.C., we arrive at [only] a 414 year Jewish rule.”

The Israeli narrative pushes the window open a few hundred years more: history (at least, *relevant* history) supposedly “[started with King David](#) and ended with the destruction of the second temple [70 A.D.], restarting with Jewish settlement in the nineteenth century.” Some Greek and Roman presence and a “[smattering of early Christianity](#)” are tolerable. But ancient Philistines, Arabs, and Muslims are never acknowledged as part of the region’s history. They would impinge upon Jewish interests.

The official explanation, according to an introductory film that is shown to tour groups in Jerusalem, is simply, “For two thousand years, the city passed from hand to hand.” The “righteous return” and the settler agenda are the only account to which visitors are exposed. On Palestine, there is only silence.

As Israeli author and activist [Uri Avnery reminds us](#), the Zionist claim to the land of Palestine, based as it was on the Biblical history of the Israelites, requires proving that the Bible is true. Almost all of the founders of Israel were professing atheists, but they gritted their teeth and gave their orders.

During the early years of Israel’s existence, bulldozers removed Ottoman and Mameluke remains, Arab and Crusader artifacts, Byzantine and Roman and Greek and Persian remnants—in order to find “pay dirt”: biblical Hebrew artifacts. The search is ongoing. (Read [this](#) and [this](#), for example.)

And over the years, the narrative has been pieced together for a single purpose: to manufacture “legitimacy.”

“I Told You So”

This explains why, for example, **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** [rushed to social media](#) when a coin was found recently in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank (Palestine). Preliminary identification classified the coin as a 2,000-year-old half shekel. The Prime Minister posted on Facebook that the artifact was “evidence of the deep connection between the people of Israel and its land” (mind you, the item was found in Palestine, not Israel). Several days later, the coin was more accurately identified by the Israel Museum as a replica, a souvenir, circa 2000 A.D. The Facebook post was removed.

After the 2015 discovery of an ancient jug with Hebrew inscription, Israel’s minister of education, **Naftali Bennett**, [posted on Facebook](#),

“This is yet another example of the many facts on the ground that tell the story of the Jewish state that flourished here in this land 3,000 years ago... A nation can not occupy its own land.”

Moral of the story: *Archaeology—when massaged properly—is proof positive that there is no occupation.*

Palestinian Villages Evaporate

As part of this effort, Zionist forces wiped out [400-600 Palestinian villages](#) in the 1940s—some were destroyed in the war, but many were depopulated and razed even before the war began; others were demolished in the three years or so following the war.

According to *Just Past? The Making of Israeli Archaeology*, [“remnants of the Arab past](#) were considered blots on the landscape and evoked facts everyone wanted to forget” (everyone except the Palestinians). Many of these lost villages [were themselves ancient](#), or contained ancient building materials. This assisted forgetting, essentially “Nakba denial,” is undoubtedly the greatest theft of Palestinian history. Today, in place of those lost villages are Israeli towns, farms, and orchards.

Hundreds of historical monuments and places of worship (primarily mosques) were also targeted for demolition after the 1948 war. A few Israelis pleaded with the Israeli Department of Antiquities to preserve these sites, but they were for the most part unsuccessful.

[Raz Kletter wrote about the situation](#), of which he as an archaeologist was ashamed:

“I don’t think this village landscape belongs to us—it belongs to the people who lived here—but still, there is longing for that lost landscape. We cannot bring it back, but at least we should be aware of the truth and not lie to ourselves.”

Cartographers were sent out to make a [new map](#), renaming cities, villages, rivers, etc. with Israeli/Hebrew names to erase all vestiges of Palestinian presence.

This effort has continued for decades, down to even renaming parks and streets.

Appropriating Archaeological Sites and the Dead Sea Scrolls

The 1995 Oslo Accords II assigned 60% of the West Bank (Palestine) to full Israeli military control by designating it [“Area C.”](#) This was meant to be a temporary arrangement, but has lasted over twenty years to date. Israel maintains authority over all land-related civil matters, which includes the Jewish-only settlements on Palestinian land (with a current population of about half a million) and [almost all of Palestine’s archaeological sites](#).

According to [international law](#), artifacts found on Palestinian land— whether Area A, B, C, Gaza, or East Jerusalem—belong to Palestine and should remain inside Palestine. UNESCO Accords, UN Security Council resolutions, and the 1954 Hague Convention all [indicate](#) that “when ownership of an antiquity is vested in a nation, one who removes it without permission is a thief, and the antiquities are stolen property”— this according to **Patty Gerstenblith**, DePaul professor and author of a 2016 Department of Justice [guide to](#)

[cultural property law](#).

The appropriation of archaeological sites and their artifacts is, by definition, illegal, but Israel has a [great deal of experience in flouting international law](#) and getting away with it. This crime does not need to be covered up.

Witness the famous Dead Sea Scrolls: discovered by Palestinians before the founding of Israel, in the Qumran Caves which are located in the West Bank of Palestine. Because Qumran is in Area C of the West Bank, Israel controls the archaeological site, the tourism, and the conversation. The scrolls are now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Their official [website](#) does not contain any mention of Palestine.

Area C designation enables Israel de facto control over not only excavation and the distribution of artifacts; but decisions about when to stop digging and start building new structures—or parks or parking lots—on top of a site.

Palestinian towns and neighborhoods that are close to or part of East Jerusalem are subject to particularly exasperating treatment: the 1980 Jerusalem Law [essentially annexed East Jerusalem](#) (most of the world does not recognize the annexation), declaring all of Jerusalem “the complete and united capital of Israel,” and promising to “provide for the development and prosperity of Jerusalem and the well-being of its inhabitants.” Israeli domination ensued, and for Palestinians it feels like an elaborate land grab.

Case Study: Silwan

The East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan, whose families have owned their lands since Ottoman times, has been [living under this cloud of Israeli authority](#) since 1967.

Silwan used to be almost completely Palestinian and Muslim. After the 1967 annexation of East Jerusalem, a plan was announced to shift the population to 75% Israeli. As one of the [settler/archaeologist spokesmen explained](#), the objective was “to get a [Jewish] foothold in East Jerusalem and to create an irreversible situation in the holy basin around the Old City.” (This is called “ethnic cleansing.”) This has been accomplished through evictions and home demolitions—over half of the houses in Silwan are under demolition orders—sometimes using forged documents.



Palestinian women in Silwan watch as settlers move into homes in the neighborhood

One of the main ways Israel got a “foothold” in Silwan was through the 1950 [Absentee Property Law](#). This insidious regulation states that if a piece of Palestinian property has been uninhabited for three years, or ownership documents could not be produced, the land would revert to a Custodianship Council, which could then distribute the property for military or settlement use.

The Absentee Property Law had worked handily when Palestinian refugees were refused the right of return: after three years, their land was confiscated and they had nothing to come back to anyway. Those few who did get back, and whose homes were still standing—[only seven villages were left intact](#)—often found their deeds missing or destroyed, and new, Jewish tenants in place. According to the *Israel Government Yearbook, 5719*, almost 60,000 homes and 10,000 businesses were appropriated during Israel’s early years.

A large number of properties in Silwan have been appropriated through this law.

The small number of green spaces in Silwan have also been claimed as archaeological sites, forbidden to Palestinians. Hundreds of closed-circuit TV cameras are used to insure compliance.

Having appropriated swaths of Silwan, the work of appropriating swaths of history began [“with bulldozers](#) clearing huge areas in haste and multiple levels being dismantled in a race to get to ‘Jewish’ bedrock.” Where they couldn’t find what they needed, settlers built houses on top of excavation sites.

Silwan’s Palestinian residents used to take pride in the archaeological riches of their land, but since Israel’s land grab, things have gone from bad to worse. The heavy machinery and deep digging are beginning to compromise structures: Palestinian homes are [showing large cracks](#), making their owners nervous and angry.

One resident, **Jawad Siyam**, created a petition to end the destructive digging, and filed it with the Israel Supreme Court. The result: Jawad and all of those who signed the petition were imprisoned or put under house arrest for “disturbing the peace and causing damage to property.”

Adding insult to injury, the Jerusalem municipality replaced a number of Arabic-named streets in Silwan with biblical Hebrew names—yet another daily reminder to Palestinians of who is in charge.

Antiquities in Gaza

Not surprisingly, the situation in Gazan archaeological sites is even worse—though its location as a seaport makes it wildly rich in ancient treasures. Gaza’s Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities oversees digs and artifact preservation to the best of its limited ability: its offices, as well as many historical sites, have been [damaged by Israeli bombs](#).

In addition, the equipment and chemicals needed to carry out work are forbidden for “security reasons” under the decade-old blockade. Guest archaeologists can not get in to help, and local archaeologists can not get out for training. Oddly, many of Gaza’s most valuable artifacts have turned up in Israeli museums.

Needless to say, there is little funding for the work in Gaza, what with the [highest unemployment rate in the world](#), [electricity shortages](#), and [clean water crisis](#).

Israeli Tourism

Anyone familiar with the region knows that [tourism has been almost completely appropriated](#) by Israel—and this is another sore spot for Palestinians in archaeologically rich areas. For example, the City of David National Park (built on Silwan’s land—see above) welcomes hundreds of thousands of [tourists](#) a year, each of whom pays an \$7 entrance fee, and most of whom buy food and souvenirs from Jewish Israeli settlers. Not only are all of the profits pocketed by Israel and Israelis, the Palestinians of Silwan and their connection to the land are completely and intentionally disregarded.

This tourism income may be small change to Israel—it receives [over \\$10 million a day from the US](#) alone—but it would make a huge difference to the people of Silwan and other towns that are casualties in the antiquity war.

A great irony in the saga of Israel’s quest for legitimacy in the land is this: no one, Palestinian or otherwise, denies an ongoing Jewish presence since ancient times. The pilfering of archaeology has been unnecessary and unbecoming from that standpoint. The rising consensus worldwide of [Israel as a pariah state](#) and the [increasing popularity of the Boycott, Divestment, & Sanctions movement \(BDS\)](#) indicate that Israel’s strategy is not helping in legitimacy efforts.

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