

Israeli Archaeological Narratives as an Instrument of Land Grabbing

The Control of Jerusalem

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by Beth Staton

It was a find, literally, of biblical proportions. Last week, Israeli archaeologist Eli Shukron [boldly claimed](#) that he'd discovered the legendary citadel captured by King David in his conquest of 3,000 years ago – a site that has long evaded discovery, but which is regarded as pivotal to Jewish biblical history.

Unsurprisingly, the claim is not uncontroversial. Many Israeli archaeologists, [Haaretz reports](#), are deeply critical of colleagues who “hold a spade in one hand and a bible in the other” as they scramble to verify biblical events throughout the holy land. In Jerusalem, archaeology is rarely a neutral practice – and its use has a profound impact on people’s perception of the past and their experience of the present.

The organisation behind the latest discovery – and where Eli Shukron served, until recently, as Chief Head of Excavations – has a lot invested in the battle for Jerusalem’s history. The Ir David Foundation, popularly known as Elad, was founded in 1986. It is an NGO “dedicated to the preservation and development of the biblical City of David and its environs.” But as well as uncovering the Jewish heritage of the area, it’s also committed to establishing ideological Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem neighborhoods – creating “facts on the ground” that remain among the biggest obstacles to peace in the city.



One of the groups scrutinizing this situation is Emek Shaveh, an NGO devoted to interrogating political archeology in Jerusalem. Yonathan Mizrahi, an archaeologist from the group, describes Elad as the “first organisation to really understand the power of archaeology in creating the Jerusalem narrative.” Armed with an explicit political agenda, he says, Elad is now the driving force behind much of the excavation of Jerusalem. It acts, too, in partnership with government authorities, who contract the NGO to carry out excavations and establish tourist attractions in strategically crucial areas of East Jerusalem.

Facts in the ground

On a rainy day just outside the walls of the old city, *Palestine Monitor* joined Emek Shaveh for a tour of some of Jerusalem’s key archeological sites. In Silwan, excavations are being carried out by Tel Aviv University in conjunction with Elad and the Israeli Antiquities Authority: a short walk away from that site, another major dig at the village’s Spring House

has been ongoing since 1995. So far, very little aside from ancient garbage dumps have emerged from the University's dig. But work around the spring is paving the way for extensive development: Israeli authorities have approved it as part of Jerusalem's tourist route, and in June 2012 the District Planning and Building Committee approved the construction of a tourist centre above the spring.

Have the people of Silwan benefited from this activity? Not quite. Currently, residents of Silwan cannot access the spring itself, although settlers are known to take advantage of the cool water and public space for bathing.

For Yonathan, the privileging of settlers and tourists over Palestinians is closely tied to the archeological strategy of stressing Jewish history – a phenomenon exemplified in the City of David park. The plush tourist site, also run by Elad, allows visitors to see archaeological ruins and attend tours of the archeological treasures beneath Jerusalem. The narrative provided within the 'park,' places a strong focus on the biblical past and the Second Temple Period, rather than the many hundreds of years of Muslim or Ottoman history, for example.

"The main narratives here as told by the tour guides are about David and Solomon," Yonathan says. "When we come to a site like this we know so little, but we arrive with a narrative that's tied to a bigger picture. That means archeology is using the past to ignore the present. We say the rights of the people here do not matter because of a very specific history.

"In a site like this, we could be looking at how the Canaanites developed this city, how they built it up, what happened to them, the story of the Judean people. We could be thinking about the multicultural history of Jerusalem. But we are succeeding in surrounding the old city with a Jewish presence: not settlers, but by creating a very particular historical narrative."

"Parks of national importance"

This politics of these excavations is also closely tied to the zoning and planning policies which have an even more profound impact on the lives of Jerusalemites. Most of the dig sites are in areas that have been designated "national parks" – swathes of land deemed to be of cultural or national importance. They are jointly managed by the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority and the Israeli Antiquities Authority. In these national park areas, it's almost impossible for Palestinians to secure building permits, and any development of homes, businesses or public spaces stands under the perpetual threat of demolition.

The official justification for the national parks is zoning that protects the history and heritage of Jerusalem. But their location, and the fact that organisations like Elad have been given permission to develop certain areas, could suggest a different strategy. According to Yonathan, the main reason for the expansion of the parks "is to expand the areas over which Israel has direct control." A national park, he says, "is the best tool to stop people cultivating land. It's the best tool to stop the Palestinians in this area making a claim to the city."

When we observe the zoning of these national parks, it's easy to perceive what the rationale behind their development might be. After encircling the Old City, the zoned areas spread north and east, towards the settlement of Ma'ale Adumim. It's an area known as the "Eastern Gateway," space that links the West Bank with Jerusalem. Preventing contiguity of

Palestinian property between Jerusalem and the West Bank weakens Palestinian claims on the city – as is explained in a [2010 paper](#) by the pro-Zionist Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs – and strengthens an Israeli claim to settlement land.

A seven storey settlement

Back in Silwan, the excavations are continuing. A particular hive of activity can be found at a site that's become known as the Givati parking lot, where astonishing layers of building from many different historical periods have been recently uncovered. Muslim, Byzantine and Hellenistic structures can be seen in the layers, as well as ancient mosaics and infrastructure.

The plans for the development of this site are almost as ambitious as the dig itself. Elad intends to build a seven storey structure atop the excavation site – a move they say is for the purposes of tourism, but which Mizrachi argues is more strategic. Such a conspicuous building, he says, makes a clear connection between the Jewish holy sites of the Western Wall and the Jewish find of the city of David. From there, the path continues to the spring in Silwan, through the other areas of the national park and, eventually, the vast landscapes stretching out into the West Bank.

In the eyes of Emek Shaveh, the territorial claim around these key areas is closely linked to an attempt to create a solid historical Jewish claim to the land of Israel. "99% of people see Jerusalem as the center of Israeli identity, so there is a far greater stress on a few hundred years of Jewish heritage than 1300 years of Muslim heritage," Mizrachi says. "It's all about creating a narrative. The interest of the Israelis is very much based on our insecure sense of belonging here. There is a great need to emphasize Jewish history here, and Israeli society is doing more than anyone else to stake a claim to this land."

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