



(Re)designing the City of David: Landscape, Narrative and Archaeology in Silwan

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This article concerns the role of archaeological sites in the modern (re)creations of historical landscapes. Within the social sciences the word "landscape" increasingly refers to a subjective projection cast onto an ever-contested external terrain. In contrast to our positivist forebears, who so ambitiously sought to excavate singular truths and linear chronologies from stratigraphic chaos, many scholars now

imagine each swath of geographical terrain to be embedded with the endless, overlapping stories of individuals and groups alike, a potentially bottomless receptacle of memories. Here I would like to draw this notion out a step further by examining how certain versions of these pasts come to be physically inscribed into the land, as tourist development projects seek to recreate historical landscapes. My goal is to demonstrate that the production of these new symbolic routes, connecting authenticating displays of archaeological remains, does the work of "fixing" particular histories to particular places. The wild, ungainly possibilities of the past become subsumed under a new, singular geography, "restored" with presumed originary meaning. Historical nuance is not all that is smothered, however, as the "re-discovery" of an ancient community can often prompt the displacement and erasure of a living community, as in the Jerusalem village of Silwan. We therefore must understand the practice of field archaeology not only for the artifacts and histories it produces but also for the new kinds of places that it makes.

After briefly situating my argument within wider academic discussions, I will offer some historical background on Silwan, the village where I spent the summers of 1998 and 1999 conducting the fieldwork for this project. Rather than attempting to summarize Silwan's many layers of history, I will instead offer a few select gazes which have been historically cast onto the village. These glimpses serve merely to suggest a multitude of landscapes lying beneath Silwan's surface, a physical topography which is being increasingly

subsumed by the landscape of "The City of David."

The spaces in the land which archaeology opens are increasingly understood by social scientists as "hot" sites of cultural production, where material remains are utilized to narrate history and embody national essences. Since the 1980s, writers like Neil Asher Silberman have demonstrated the centrality of archaeological narratives in the workings of nationalist ideology.¹ More recently Nadia Abu al-Haj has situated the practice of archaeology within the expansion of colonial space as well as the creation of Israeli historical imagination.² Inspired by these discussions, I wish to better understand the physical transformations effected by archaeology, paying particular attention to the new spaces it outlines, the rituals it prompts, as well as its use as a tool to sculpt land into landscape.

Silwan is a Palestinian village which stretches from the southeast corner of Jerusalem's Old City, following the Kidron Valley as it runs between the densely populated hillsides of the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion, sloping down towards the desert along the slopes of Jabal al-Mukaber. Throughout the past 150 years, settlement history in Silwan has been particularly entwined with that of

¹ Neil Asher Silberman, *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Modern Middle East* (New York: Doubleday, 1989); and *A Prophet from Amongst You. The Life of Yigael Yadin: Soldier, Scholar and Mythmaker of Modern Israel* (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994).

² Nadia Abu al-Haj, "Excavating the Land, Creating the Homeland: Archaeology, the State and the Making of History in Modern Jewish Nationalism" (Ph.D. diss., Department of Cultural Anthropology, Duke University, 1995).

archaeological exploration. Known to archaeologists and Biblical scholars as the site of the City of David, the western slope of the Kidron valley is referred to locally by a variety of aliases, and among them "Wadi Hilwe" (in English, "Beautiful Valley") seems to prevail. In 1000 B.C.E., David is held to have staged his bloodless takeover of the Jebusite city on this very hill, which was ideally located between the Northern and Southern tribes of Israel so as to enable their unification.

This Biblical story is memorialized on almost all modern western maps of Jerusalem, on which this portion of the village is labeled "City of David," with the name "Silwan" or the Hebrew "Kfar HaShiloah" set off to the east, as if the living village was limited to the slopes of the Mount of Olives. This cartographic erasure of half the village of Silwan under the "City of David" is critical to the processes of building historical landscapes, which is the subject of my research.

Ever since Captain Charles Warren of the London-based Palestine Exploration Fund conducted the first excavations here in 1867, the modern village has literally grown up around archaeological sites. In many pre-1967 photographs, the *wadi* seems as much a place of excavation as residence. After the 1967 War, however, many Palestinian refugees resettled in Silwan, and village space became increasingly filled with the construction of new homes.

During my interviews many older Palestinian Jerusalemites recalled Silwan as a lush agricultural valley where women congregated around the spring, collecting water and laundering, and families

recreated in the orchards throughout the valley during festivals. This image is further reflected in many historical accounts, among them the Old Testament, which describes elaborate irrigation projects through the Kidron Valley. The most famous of these undertakings is the extant Siloam Tunnel, commissioned by Hezekiah (727-698 B.C.E.) to divert the waters of the Gihon Spring (Ein Silwan) to the Pool of Siloam, thus sealing access to Jerusalem's water supply. Since its rediscovery at the beginning of this century by archaeologists, the tunnel has drawn many a visitor down its winding, watery path and is by far the most dramatic of Silwan's tourist attractions.

During the Intifada, Palestinians from Silwan were often seen on the front line, prompting Israelis to imagine the village as the archetypal breeding ground for stone throwing youth and terrorist inductees. The subsequent plummet in City of David tourist traffic frustrated municipal efforts. On 4 September 1995, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin took a big step in the Israeli reclamation of Silwan, kicking off the Jerusalem 3000 celebrations in a roped-off ceremony staged in the recently opened "City of David Archaeological Park." The number 3000, after all, counts from David's reign, making the site of his city a potent place to celebrate national sovereignty. Begin and Netanyahu similarly made high-profile appearances in the village, orchestrated in sync with settler land-acquisition initiatives.

Ahmed Karayn remembers these parliamentary visits well. During the first of my many stops at his restful café, Mr. Karayn invited me to eat grapes with his

family on their patio from which the whole village could be viewed. Directing my attention to the southeast, Ahmed pointed to the left of Jabal al-Mukaber, his birthplace, beyond which we could glimpse a sliver of desert. "He came from there, from Saudi Arabia, with his servant and a camel," Ahmed explained, responding to my inquiries regarding the origins of the village. I quickly recognized the story, the arrival of Omar ibn al-Khatib, as it had been recounted to me variously by residents throughout the village. In Ahmed's rendering, however, the caveat comes as the villagers notice the approaching Caliph walking on foot while his servant rides the camel! So impressed were the Greek proprietors of Jerusalem by the humble majesty of this cavalier visitor that al-Khatib is presented with the key to the city. Ahmed's telling of village origins concludes with the Caliph granting this *wadi* to "Khan Silowna," an agricultural community of cave dwellers living around the valley spring.

As he spoke, I gazed across the *wadi* and the archaeologist in me attempted to arrange the view of houses into a coherent chronological sequence, trying to unravel the hodgepodge of buildings phase by phase so as to imagine an earlier landscape of troglodytes. But the jumble prevailed, confounding all such reductive endeavors. In fact, the material multiplicity of the village has mystified many an archaeologist, as generations of stones intermingle in the ongoing re-circulation of building material. For 5,000 years Jerusalemites have dismantled ancient structures, turned over graves, and excavated down to the bedrock to recycle

the worked stones of their ancestors. This ancient practice has made the village of Silwan the infamous architectural mishmash it is today.

The sight of trash heaps spilling down the tomb-hewn ridge reminded me of the distaste expressed by Western travelers in their accounts of the village. By the time of the nineteenth-century proliferation of Holy Land travel literature, impressions of Silwan had coalesced into a powerful trope of Orientalist disgust, so incongruent did it seem with the biblical imagery which had lured western visitors here—to the Holy Land, to Jerusalem, to the place of the City of David. Silwan is experienced as the East of the East, viewed as a violation of even local social and hygienic convention. By 1927, Harry Emerson Fosdick concluded in his travelogue *A Pilgrimage to Palestine* that "Siloam long has been well known, unlovely enough now and needing all the gifts of the imagination to reconstruct its meaning to the ancient city."³

Indeed, I contend that the ongoing tourist development in Silwan attempts to reconstruct that meaning, incorporating archaeological sites into an imagined historical geography that transforms Silwan into "(the Period of) the City of David."

Back at the café conversation shifted to those ministerial visits, as Ahmed Karayn directed my eyes to the streams of garbage spilling down the slopes of the Kidron valley below the first line of houses. His endless personal appeals to the Kollek and Olmert municipalities have done nothing to

³ H. E. Fosdick, *A Pilgrimage to Palestine* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

reverse the decades of infrastructural neglect and lack of public services which typify the Housing Ministry's "Arab Sector" policy of underdevelopment and containment. Like their Ottoman and Jordanian predecessors, Israeli city planners have utilized the Kidron Valley as a waste drainage basin, and the *wadi* now collects sewage from the Old City, Wadi al-Joz, Silwan, Abu Tur and parts of East Talpiot to be deposited untreated in the desert.⁴

Just up the slope from Ahmed Karayn's café is the "El-Ad Visitor Center" where earlier that day I was invited on a tour of the "City of David" organized for a group of nine-year-old boys from the West Bank Jewish settlement of Beit El. El-Ad is a Hebrew acronym for "To the City of David," and since 1991 the group has led an aggressive campaign to settle Jewish families in Silwan. Although El-Ad members patiently synchronize their terrorizing nighttime takeovers with favorable fluctuations in the political climate, some Palestinian residents I spoke with estimated that Israeli Jews owned a majority of homes in the Wadi Hilwe neighborhood of Silwan.

The tour guide was an armed religious settler himself, hired by El-Ad to lead groups through the area's archaeological sites. He invited our boisterous group up onto a wooden platform commanding a broad view of the *wadi* below. Although only a few steps up the hill from the Karayn café, this new vista seemed to

narrate a totally different Silwan. Looking down I noticed that the tower on which we were standing seemed to rise out of an ancient stone mass exposed in an archaeological site just below. This is Kathleen Kenyon's much visited area G, and the large stone stepped structure she unearthed represents the only real monumental remains discovered which are conventionally attributed to the time of David's "Upper City." Building their center adjacent to the entrance of this established tourist route, El-Ad arranged the scene with care: the sprinklers, sliding glass doors, shaded picnic tables and inflatable baby pools evoke the security of suburban leisure, while a scattering of ancient-looking pottery marks the site with the signs of local authenticity. From up on the tower I watched an El-Ad member exit the mini-greenhouse, rubbing his face with a portable electric shaver as he strolled across the compound. Behind him a large group of young soldiers streamed one by one out of an ancient cistern, where they had listened to a historical lecture on the first stop of their army-sponsored "City of David" trip. Above this scene rose the jungle gym tower peaked with an Israeli flag, lifting us above the ruins and completing the scene in a victorious declaration of propriety and redemption.

As I experienced on the tour, the lull in tourist traffic felt since the Intifada has begun to subside, as the City of David is once again becoming a rite of passage for many Israeli youth. Our guide asked the group why David might have chosen this place for his city. Before I began contemplating an answer, a trumpeting chorus around me retorted, "Security!" By

⁴ Michael Dumper, *The Politics of Jerusalem Since 1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 151.

the time we were waist deep in water somewhere in the middle of the winding Siloam tunnel, the effect of this historical adventure had clearly taken hold on these young hearts more than any trip to Disney World ever could. As we approached the end of the watery shaft, the entire group suddenly broke into an impassioned rendition of "Yerushalayim shel zahav" (Jerusalem of Gold), holding their flickering candles high. It was then I realized the potential narrative power of such a viscerally exhilarating tourist itinerary.

Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs and Paul Connerton, Thomas Abercrombie recognizes such journeys through historical space as critical practices of social memory. In his 1998 *Pathways of Power: Ethnography and History Among an Andean People*, Abercrombie illustrates how an Inca community remembers itself along ritual pathways, construing "social time and space as a sequence of places and moments along pilgrimage itineraries."⁵ This notion of travel as social memory provides a useful way of thinking about the impact of expanding tourist routes in places like Silwan.

According to Israel's Law of Antiquities, no new construction can proceed without building sites first being checked for archaeological remains. Consequently, construction of settler homes and tourist infrastructure has prompted numerous salvage excavations throughout the valley. Some of the finds from these digs have

been quite dramatic, and one such discovery in the summer of 1998 aroused particular public interest. Archaeologist Ronny Reich and his team discovered a massive city wall roughly dated to 1500 B.C.E., 500 years before David is held to have taken his city. The notion that a large scale urban center pre-existed David and Solomon seemed at first to be a scandalous suggestion. The subject dominated the Friday evening news, as archaeologist Reich was engulfed in a sea of international press, ever eager for controversy.

After Reich and others quelled national concerns, insisting that the discovery in no way contradicts the Biblical narrative, the hullabaloo quickly subsided. I visited Reich later that week at the Gihon spring, where the expansion of a settler home along with a new tourist center parking lot has prompted continual archaeological investigation. When asked about the impact of settlers on archaeology in the village, Reich lamented their destructive presence while recognizing that his own reputation will be built on these recent discoveries. Anyway, the days of nationalist Israeli archaeology are over, he informed me, concluding that scientific method has all but subsumed earlier biases.

Many in the discipline have noted a new breed of Israeli archaeologists distancing themselves from Biblical and Zionist historical narrative, echoing the reversals of the New Historians in their asking of new questions to fill out the gaps in the patchy Israeli historiography. Nadia Abu al-Haj has suggested that this new pluralism might be read for its "otherizing" effect, as the artifacts of "foreign" cultures are more prominently displayed, although

⁵ T. A. Abercrombie, *Pathways of Power: Ethnography and History Among an Andean People* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 318.

often as outside influences enriching the Israeli national fabric.⁶

Many Israeli archaeologists I spoke with who have worked in the village openly express their dislike of the settlers, taking care to note their warm relations with local Arabs. One senior digger did admit that he would like nothing more than to bulldoze the whole hill, thus preserving Jerusalem's archaeological tel for scientific study. As many local Palestinian residents will tell you, the bulldozers do come, but usually to demolish unlicensed homes.

Archaeologists like Ronny Reich would prefer to steer clear of demolitions, settlers, and Tourist Ministry officials alike, proclaiming an objective distance from such ideological conflicts. This professed neutrality, however, ignores the role of archaeology in the service of tourist development, which in the case of Silwan is transforming a living village into a place called "The City of David." The antiquities produced through archaeological research in Silwan are being arranged to narrate the much contested Biblical story of David conquering the Jebusite City. Beyond re-inscribing the village with this new symbolic meaning as "Jewish space," the practice of archaeology is physically reshaping the village, having in several cases paved the legal path for Jewish settlement expansion.

Far across town in his Talbiye home, the architect contracted to design the park revealed to me that the City of David is but a piece of a much larger plan. He unrolled a map of the Old City and its environs, and my eyes tried to take in the hundreds of

dots plotted across nine or so neighborhoods. Each dot represents a historic site, he explained, to be incorporated into a large open-air museum stretching south from the citadel, around Mt. Zion and Silwan, north through the Kidron Valley, and up to the Rockefeller Museum. Each area will be designed to represent different historical periods, and I was not surprised to hear that Silwan will serve as the First Temple Period.

I hope that these few angles on Silwan suggest the intricate spectrum of historical narratives projected onto this village. I argue that despite this multifarious legacy, it is the Biblical story of the City of David which Silwan is being shaped to represent. This historical landscaping takes place through the excavation and selective display of archaeological remains. We must pay particular attention to places like Silwan where historical narrative and archaeological practice operate on the front lines of an ongoing struggle. Given the austere political landscape in which Israeli land confiscations and house demolitions consume Palestinian space on a daily basis, it is important for us to be sensitive to other ways in which these erasures occur. The use of archaeological sites to reshape the land into historical landscapes assists Israel in its co-optation of places like Silwan in ways that bulldozers never could.

After completing his BA in Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Jeffrey Yas worked as a field archaeologist for several years in the Jerusalem environs. During that time he regularly volunteered at the Alternative Information Center and was a founding member of the Hebron Solidarity Committee. Currently on leave from New York University Department of Middle Eastern Studies, he now serves as the art director at a Manhattan graphic design studio.

⁶ "Excavating the Land."