

# A Century of Subterranean Abuse in Sabastiya

## The Archaeological Site as a Field of Urban Struggle

Dima Srouji

### Abstract

Sabastiya, an archaeological site and living city northwest of Nablus, was excavated by Harvard University in 1908 using Palestinian labor for the purposes of supporting biblical archaeology. The excavation left scars in the city that are still felt today, both through the intergenerational trauma of the physical labor, but also through the continued Zionist interest in the site that keeps Sabastiya as a target. Today, the city is still suffering, with Israeli settlers targeting the site and its residents frequently, burning trees, dumping sewage waste in the valleys, and terrorizing the residents. The archaeological site, most of which sits within Area C, is controlled by the Israeli Archaeological Department of the Civil Administration, essentially a militarized team of archaeologists headed by the Ministry of Defense. Although a century apart, the excavation and the military and settler violence against the residents of Sabastiya, and the site itself, have a common denominator: a Zionist ideology that believes there is a valuable singular origin to the incredibly complex layers beneath and above the surface of the ground.

### Keywords

Sabastiya; deep mapping; archaeology; military; labor; museums; religion; tourism.

The archaeological site of Sabastiya is a living and breathing Palestinian village sitting atop a tell in the West Bank, twelve kilometers northwest of Nablus. The village is surrounded by

rolling hills covered by lush olive groves (figure 1). In the valleys, brightly colored wildflowers bloom every spring, where Palestinian farmers plant their plowed fields with tomatoes, lettuce, *faqus*, and squash, and tend apricot trees. Amid the olive groves on higher elevations – designated since the 1993 Oslo peace accords as Area C, the territory within the West Bank under full civil and military control of the Israeli government – archaeological monuments dot the hillsides in the west, as if the ruins came up from the ground, fragments half-emerged from the lime-dust-covered ground. The remains of the ancient city wall can be seen outlined in the rocky earth, large weathered masonry stone stacked in linear patterns poking through, hinting at the fortification that once encircled Sabastiya. The site is a complex of intertwining strata, an accumulation of multiple histories. Cisterns carved in the limestone in the deepest points exposed by excavations signal life in the area prior to the construction of monumental architecture. Above the cisterns are layers of the remnants of temple and castle walls, forums, theaters, basilicas and a stadium. The monuments date back to the Iron Age, and include Roman, Hellenistic, Byzantine, Crusader, and Ottoman construction.

The few monuments in the east, in Area B (Palestinian civil control and Palestinian-Israeli shared security control), intertwine with the denser residential neighborhoods of Sabastiya. The Palestinian homes were built on their ancestors' foundations dating back thousands of years. The layering and stacking of foundations eventually created the ground and walls of these homes. You can read the accumulation and change in strata by tracing the textures and tones of the stone elevations: as you move down the walls, the stone is slightly paler, and as you move up, the weathered surfaces harbor more dust, creating slightly darker surfaces.<sup>1</sup> The village is not separate from the archaeological site, but rather a very active and present part of the narrative, a continuation from the subterranean ground to the overground.

How the archaeological story is constructed is not under Palestinian control. Sabastiya is a highly contested site today, and is targeted by Israeli settlers and multiple Israeli government authorities such as the National Parks Authority, and the Civil Administration. The pattern of events in Sabastiya is strikingly similar to events that occurred recently in Silwan and Hebron and other significant archaeological spaces in Palestine, where settlers, with the cooperation from the Israeli military, use their archaeological narrative as a convenient cover for further land grabs and violence against the Palestinian village and its villagers.

Although Sabastiya sits on top of the tell in a powerful setting, it nevertheless suffers from fragility – by design – like many of Israel's methods of control outlined by Eyal Weizman in *Hollow Land*.<sup>2</sup> Sabastiya confronts the Israeli settlement Shavei Shomron on another hill just south of Sabastiya, across the valley. Shavei Shomron, established in 1977 by the Gush Emunim movement, was built on private Palestinian property with the purpose of establishing Jewish presence within the West Bank following the 1967 War.<sup>3</sup> Gush Emunim settlers are the radical right-wing supporters of post-1967 Zionist "redemption" who weaponize biblical myths and legends and dream of territorial expansionism. In Hebrew, Shavei Shomron is literally translated

as the “returnees of Samaria,” the ancient biblical name for the central region of the “Land of Israel.” The name of the settlement reveals the colonial mentality of the settlers and their interest in returning and recapturing sites such as Sabastiya in ancient Samaria. Today, their logo is inscribed with Old Testament words from Jeremiah 31:5, “Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria.”



Figure 1. Drone footage of Sabastiya by Alaa Daraghme.

In a recent video, the head of the Shomron Regional Council, Yossi Dagan, was seen in Sabastiya having coffee at a Palestinian-owned cafe weeks after that same cafe, near the Roman forum, had been destroyed by the Israeli Army and rebuilt by the owners shortly after.<sup>4</sup>

In an interview during my trip to Sabastiya after the destruction in the spring of 2017, the cafe owner showed me plastic-covered photos of the destruction of the cafe (figure 2). He believes that the cafe was destroyed because the children from the village love to forage for artefacts. He kept some of those artefacts in the cafe on a display shelf. The Israelis claim that the destruction was due to the cafe’s location, a few meters into Area C where Palestinians are prohibited from building any permanent construction.

With the Oslo defined boundaries, Sabastiya sits in both Area C in the west and Area B in the east within the West Bank.<sup>5</sup> The line between the two jurisdictions runs along the edge of the basilica in the Roman forum where the majority of the archaeological

remains stand, including the Roman theater, temples, and basilicas. This is not a coincidence. The ephemeral boundaries between Areas B and C were drawn carefully, a spacio-political mechanism allowing Israeli authorities to control many of the archaeological sites, and vital water resources, within the West Bank. Archaeological sites within Area C are not accessible to the Palestinian Authority for excavation, management, or maintenance.<sup>6</sup> This has left almost the entirety of the



Figure 2. Plastic-bound prints of the destroyed cafe in Sabastiya; photo by author, 2019.

major archaeological monuments in Sabastiya under the full control of the Israeli Civil Administration, and under the specific control of the State's military archaeology unit within the Civil Administration, the Archaeological Department of the Civil Administration (ADCA). This department is essentially composed of militarized archaeologists who are funded by Israel's Ministry of Defense. The ADCA has the legal capacity to approve military intervention in archaeological sites within the West Bank.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Sabastiya was also designated as an Israeli National Park, removing any of the state's financial responsibility towards the Palestinian residents of the area.

This designation is not unusual in Palestine. According to the 2015 report on Israeli archaeology policies, "Occupation Remains,"<sup>8</sup> in 1991, the former Archaeological Staff Officer (ASO) of the ADCA, Yitzhak Magen, altered the boundaries of the archaeological site Sartaba, the ruins of a fortress above the Jordan valley, and declared the area around it a national park in 2003, named after the assassinated Israeli Minister of Tourism Rehavam Ze'evi. Tal Rumayda became Tel Hebron, a settler archaeological park, 'Ayn Fashka became Einot Tzukim. Since the publication of that report in 2015, the most prominent example of altered sites is the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan just south of the Old City, now called the City of David. Al-Jib village is being renamed and rezoned as Gibeon National Park. It is expected for other sites to follow a similar pattern.<sup>9</sup>

The rezoning, reframing, renaming, and attempt at controlling the archaeological narrative does not begin with the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The abusive relationship of settler colonialism with Sabastiya is not limited to the city's proximity to Shavei Shomron settlement. It extends back an entire century to Harvard University's excavations of Sabastiya in 1908–10. The history of biblical excavation at the turn of the twentieth century – beginning with Harvard – is critical to understanding the



larger picture of the settler-colonial project that continues today. Three other major excavations were carried out in Sabastiya after Harvard's: the Joint Expedition (British School of Archaeology, Palestine Exploration Fund, and the Hebrew University 1931–35); the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (1965, 1967); and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem (1968).

## Labor

Over the past century, Sabastiya was excavated by British, American, and Israeli archaeologists, looted, and transformed from agricultural land to a highly contested, fragile, and exposed archaeological site. Palestinian workers from the village, which included a substantial number of women and children, were used to excavate the site as seen in many of the photographs taken between 1908 and 1920 and archived in the Matson Collection at the Library of Congress (figure 3). The residents of Sabastiya, basket girls and boys as they were fondly and patronizingly referred to at the time, are seen digging at the top of the tell in 1908 in the first of four major excavations in Sabastiya.<sup>10</sup> On top of this tell, the remnants of the temple of Augustus stands, built onto the palaces of biblical kings that in turn stand on earlier remains, pools, and cisterns carved into the hard bedrock, as seen in the layered plan in figure 4.<sup>11</sup> The exploitative labor model used here and the role the Palestinian community played in the excavation, largely understudied, is consistent with much of the archaeological excavation in the nineteenth century in the region.<sup>12</sup> Rare points of reference for this include Allison Mickel's work on excavation labor that examines the Palestinian community's agency as site workers, and Zeynep Çelik's *About Antiquities*, published in 2016.<sup>13</sup> Çelik acknowledges the "blurry masses," as she calls the fieldworkers, and reveals to the reader that the faceless workers were not at all faceless as they inserted themselves, perhaps inadvertently, through the photographs documenting the excavations.<sup>14</sup> The thick descriptions below makes the blurry masses more visible by focusing on the image and the faces of those in the background. These images reveal the exploitation of the residents of Sabastiya, later resulting in intergenerational trauma that the community talks about openly in their resistance and organizing work today.<sup>15</sup>

In the foreground of figure 3, at the bottom of the site of biblical king Omri's palace or the temple of Augustus, is a girl in her early teens carrying a monolith, a large and visibly heavy rock on her head. A small pillow is used to balance the weight around her head. She looks to the ground without dropping her head too far to see where she is walking. She holds the rock with one hand and moves her clothes with the other, making sure not to trip on the bottom of her thobe. Standing above her in striking contrast is a young white woman carrying a white umbrella, shading her from the sun. Perhaps she is worried about the sun on her skin, or perhaps she is using the umbrella to protect herself from the excavation dust. Her white clothes and scarf are spotless, like the man's standing next to her. The man whose back is to the camera is most likely George Andrew Reisner, who headed the second season of the "Harvard

Expedition to Samaria,” supported by the Harvard Semitic Museum.<sup>16</sup> He began work in Palestine after a decade of work in Egypt. He would have been forty years old during this excavation. Holding a large wooden stick in his right hand, one wonders if that is a walking stick used to help him navigate the uneven ground or if he used that stick to point at findings in the ground or to the workers excavating below.

In a recent interview with a Sabastiya resident and community organizer, Zaid Azhari,<sup>17</sup> we are told that the last surviving “basket girl” from the second round of excavations during the Joint Expedition in the 1930s passed away in recent months during the COVID-19 pandemic. Azhari related that she remembered those early days with a great deal of anguish that threw an ominous shadow on the current violence engulfing the area today. She saw painful similarities between the excavation work she was led to do with the work that the young men in the community do in the construction of settlements today.

To make a point that the labor was exploitative, Hilal argues that the residents were not as aware of what they were doing and did not understand the value of the artefacts that were extracted from the ground.<sup>18</sup> However, certain notes from the archaeologists’ diaries point out that in the first excavation in 1908, there were objections to the pay scales, complaints about the damage to the olive trees, disputes over dumping areas, and severe difficulties with the local administration and the workforce.<sup>19</sup> Objecting to a pay scale suggests that the basket workers felt that the work they were asked to do was worth more than what they were being paid. Complaints about damage to the olive trees also suggests that the community was concerned with the agricultural and economic effects that the excavations would have on their land.

Over the decades, this sensibility towards the “natives” as a labor force changed only subtly over time. In his book *The Archaeology of Palestine*, first published in 1949, William F. Albright prescribed paternalistic advice to future archaeologists on how to “deal” with the Palestinians, whom he termed the “natives.”<sup>20</sup> According to Albright, they will require generosity, strict honesty, and fairness, and child laborers

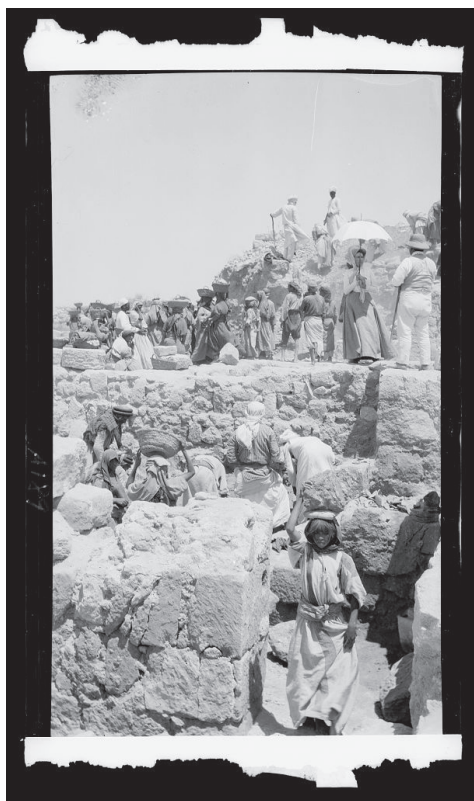


Figure 3. Palestinian women, children, and men carrying rubble and artefacts with breadbaskets on their heads. “Excavation labor on the tell.” Photo courtesy of Matson (G. Eric and Edith) Photograph Collection, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

should be treated with a softer hand, simply giving them warnings rather than the sack when they are careless in digging for fragments and remnants.<sup>21</sup> Further, he states that women might make the best archaeologists, possibly referring to Kathleen Kenyon whose first experience in excavating Palestine was in Sabastiya; he believed in their skill and abilities but, according to him, a mixed group of archaeologists in a single camp meant a great increase in expenses for maintenance and in scandals. Albright did not offer specifics about his concern over scandals, but it is possible that he was concerned about having women and men live at the excavation site without their partners.<sup>22</sup>

## Funding and Ideological Control

During the four Sabastiya excavations from 1908 to 1968, countless objects were unearthed by dusting off soil and sand with trowels and hand brushes, and then stored in wooden crates, labeled, and moved to the funding institution or to government warehouses and museums. Despite their displacement, each of these artefacts trace a historical “truth” that archaeologists aim to decipher, to let that object speak. Many of these archaeologists and their funding patrons and institutions perceived these objects with a subjective lens, as archaeological protocol funded by a state is subjectively designed to do. Those that believe deeply in a specific ideology work from that framed lens, as is commonly argued by Ian Hodder in post-processual archaeology. Post-processual archaeologists are critical of the assumption that if a truly scientific method was used during an excavation, that an objective conclusion could be made of the findings.<sup>23</sup>

We see in the case study of Sabastiya that the interests of funders and institutions, and personal biases, cannot be disregarded when excavating an area so personally connected with those interests. Because of the ideologically framed perspective, the entry point to the excavations is inherently problematic, creating an outcome of disregarded strata – a form of erasure.<sup>24</sup> For example, Gottlieb Schumacher, who led the first season of Harvard excavations in Sabastiya, was a practicing Templer, German settlers who believed that living in Palestine would hasten the Second Coming of Christ. His father Jakob Schumacher was instrumental in the founding of the Haifa Templer community, where Gottlieb Schumacher was later buried in 1925.<sup>25</sup> The Israeli state is currently renovating their home in Haifa in what is called the German Colony.

Archaeologists selected sites for excavation in Palestine based on a series of variables, one of which was the attraction of the biblical and mythical popularity of the ancient site, or its archaeological impressiveness.<sup>26</sup> More importantly, the personal interest of the funders, in many cases early Zionists and supportive institutions, played a significant role in deciding which ruins to excavate. Although early Zionism, as Nur Masalha notes in *The Bible and Zionism*, was established by founders who were primarily atheist or religiously indifferent, they exploited the biblical narrative as a vehicle for international support.<sup>27</sup>

The Harvard dig was funded by a Zionist, Jacob Henry Schiff, who was a Jewish community leader in New York and a well-known Wall Street banker. Schiff was also the financial founder and benefactor of the Semitic Museum of Harvard University, recently renamed the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, to be more inclusive according to the current director Peter Der Manuelian. Schiff's philanthropic efforts completely changed how archaeologists perceived Palestine: he is credited for the rise of biblical archaeology in the United States, influencing ideologies and funders toward excavations in the Middle East.<sup>28</sup> Schiff's major financial contribution in Sabastiya, almost single-handedly funded, was unusual during that time. Although archaeological explorations are commonly thought of as being poorly funded, and financially difficult to maintain support and to raise funds for, the excavations in Sabastiya were heavily funded for five years from 1905 to 1910 with about \$1.5 million in today's currency, including \$150,000 to the Ottoman officials for the initial application and permission to excavate on Ottoman land.<sup>29</sup>

Not only was this an extraordinarily well-funded effort by Schiff, it was also the first American excavation in Palestine and one of the earliest American missions to Ottoman Palestine. It opened doors for generations and decades of biblical archaeology, and for building Zionist/Israeli-sponsored archaeological narratives on the ground, where the proof of a biblical narrative contributed to the legitimization of a Jewish state. According to Charlotte Hallote, "This represented a firm break from previous academic perceptions of ancient Jews as subjects unworthy of study, and modern Jews as outsiders to the elite world of scholarship and its patrons."<sup>30</sup> American academic apathy towards early archaeological missions in Palestine had been due to the associations of Christianity and the Bible to the land, the academic world being more interested in secular archaeology. But when a Jewish funder heavily supported the Harvard mission in Palestine, American academics took note. The rise of antisemitism in the academy at the time, as well as the significant funding that the Jewish community was able to provide, led American academics such as David Gordon Lyon, Harvard theologian and friend of the Harvard Semitic Museum, to fully support the Sabastiya excavation. Lyon openly presented the work at Samaria as in the interest of biblical science.<sup>31</sup> According to Peter Der Manuelian, Jacob Schiff eventually lost interest in the excavations as the institution was unable to claim the artefacts from its excavations given the Ottoman restrictions on the export of artefacts at the time. There was also disagreement between Schumacher and Lyon about the ownership of the "scientific diaries." Schumacher was not willing to provide Lyon with any information about the excavation before officially publishing the reports with Harvard.<sup>32</sup>

In a 685-page red-and-brown leather-bound register, Gottlieb Schumacher noted, numbered, and labeled each find throughout the excavation of 1908. Some pencil drawings and sketches illustrate those findings in minute detail. The excavation amassed a gargantuan collection of thousands of artefacts, 4,913 pieces to be exact.<sup>33</sup> Scattered all over the world as a network of displaced forms, these artefacts, regardless of their destination, created a glossary of fragmented histories, a broken archive, and a mark of imperial presence.<sup>34</sup>





stealing oranges from the moving train, waiting for their parents to return from a trip to the city, and their field games making a pause as the train approached. The station was an active and key urban connection for the region until it was deactivated as a transportation hub in 1948.

According to Sabastiya resident Zaid Azhari, the land of Mas'udiyya, which intersects Burqa, Sabastiya, and Ramin villages, is now managed independently with its own local authority, separate from the three municipalities, and considered shared space by the three villages. In recent years, this joint authority planned and constructed minor interventions to support local tourism, such as a small cafe in Area B, an organized park for campers, and public toilets in Area C. Although the park, tents, and public toilets are not considered permanent construction, the Israeli authority destroyed the facilities five days after their completion, including the cafe in Area B and a house in Area C.

The harassment of landowners in the area began shortly after the end of the 1973 war, when a group of young Zionist women, led by Daniella Weiss, who later became secretary-general of Gush Emunim, met with Prime Minister Golda Meir. They asked Meir for government permission and assistance in establishing a small settlement in the Mas'udiyya station. Meir initially declined as the station was well outside of the government's Allon Plan that focused on occupying the Jordan Valley and the areas around Jerusalem. The movement, however, had the support of Defense Minister Shimon Peres, and the location had been strategically recommended by Ariel Sharon, who at the time had just left his military career to begin his political rise. Meir's refusal was followed by eight further attempts by settlers to illegally establish a permanent settlement over the following three years.<sup>36</sup>

A news clipping from 1975 reveals to us the extent to which the movement was supported by government officials:

"The truth is that the controversy is not over a principle but rather a policy, not on the vision but rather on the timing, not on an area but rather on a specific place, not on volunteering but rather on law," Peres said. His remarks were enthusiastically received by religious MKs [Knesset members] who ardently support the militantly Orthodox Gush Emunim who contend that the West Bank belongs to Israel by divine right.<sup>37</sup>

During that time, Gush Emunim set up tents, a makeshift synagogue, and a medical clinic in the station while army units lingered in the area, making no attempts to



Figure 5. Mas'udiyya Station, in *Sebastia*, a film by Dima Srouji.

remove the settlers, allowing the movement to expand and supplies to be brought in. After negotiations, twenty-five Gush Emunim families were given the right to permanently settle in what became known as the Kedumim settlement, facilitating the establishment of more settlements in the northern West Bank, including Shavei Shomron, the closest settlement to the station. The core of the argument to build the settlements in the area was a religious one, arguing that the movement had a divine and God-given right to establish a community on biblical land solely for their religious entitlement. This made biblically significant archaeological sites such as Sabastiya, key to the strategies of state-supported occupation.

Today, the station is still frequently occupied by the settlers in the area. Settlers from Shavei Shomron, the settlement closest to Sabastiya, intrude into the station regularly, and to Sabastiya itself with the protection of Israeli military forces and settlement guards who answer to the military.

## Tourism

Sabastiya, designated as an Israeli national park under the name Shomron [Samaria] National Park, is given biblical significance due to the presence of the foundations of royal palaces reputedly built by biblical kings Ahab and Omri. Frequent trips and tours to the park are organized by the settlers from Shavei Shomron with the protection of the Israeli military. The focus on Omri and Ahab is a strategy to claim archaeological sites such as Sabastiya that historically would not have been religiously significant to the Jewish community. Israeli archaeologist Yone Mizrahi of Emek Shaveh, an Israeli NGO working to prevent the politicization of archaeology, is critical of the settlers' attempts to "rehabilitate" kings Omri and Ahab, "just like they re-appropriated Herod, who murdered thousands of Jews and became the great builder, they're now whitewashing Omri."<sup>38</sup> Re-appropriating Omri and Ahab gives the settlers a potential entry point into a very popular tourist attraction that could support the settlers economically, give them access to more land appropriation, and more importantly, fulfill their divine fate "to return to Samaria."

Upon arrival to Sabastiya, settlers, with the cooperation of the Israeli military, use the archaeological monuments such as the Roman amphitheater to perform a biblical narrative wearing biblical costumes (figure 6).<sup>39</sup> The audience, mostly right-wing families and their children from illegal settlements within the West Bank, listen to the performers tell stories of their rootedness to the archaeological site. History is censored and slimmed down to a single narrative with a message of ownership and power that are strong undertones to the tour.

The buses park in the Roman forum, now used as one of the only public spaces for the Palestinian residents where wedding ceremonies are held, children play football, and families take their evening strolls on a cool summer night. The forum was initially excavated during the Harvard Expedition in 1908. In 1931, the Joint Expedition reappraised the previous work and estimated that a Corinthian colonnade originally enclosed the large esplanade, still partially exposed. Currently only the

floor of the basilica, its columns, and one row of columns belonging to the forum porch are visible. The area, originally used by the present farmers of Sabastiya as a threshing ground, where the community gathered to harvest the grain, continues to be used as a public space. When the Israeli military is not blocking the site from Palestinians entering, restaurant owners around the forum extend their seating into the archaeological site, allowing the site to be used the same way it was historically, as a community gathering space and as the core of village life.

On days when Israeli settlers have planned visits to the archaeological site, entry to the village is blocked by Israeli military vehicles and guarded by armed soldiers, changing the entire atmosphere of the archaeological site from a Palestinian public space full of life, to one that resembles a military camp.<sup>40</sup>

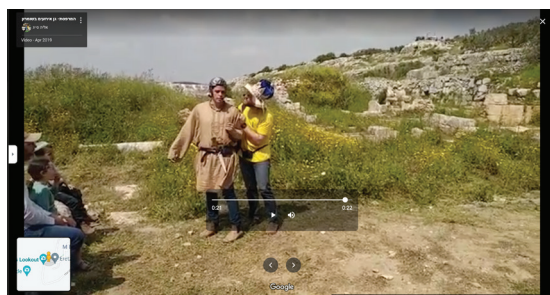


Figure 6. A biblical enactment and costume performance in Sabastiya in Tel Shomron.

## Agricultural Intimidation

Military presence in Sabastiya is not restricted to the presence and guarding of the settlers in the Roman forum. Sabastiya farmer Ahmad al-Kayid filmed a Shavei Shomron guard carrying a machinegun in hand and threatening the farmers (figure 7). The guard refused to let them work their land, land that they privately own.<sup>41</sup> This act of refusal, a gesture of control and authority, is a reminder of the issues of land rights under occupation and the hierarchy of power between the Palestinian farmers and the settlement guards. In the video, the guard, unaware that he is being filmed, mentions that he reports directly back to the Israeli military. This is telling evidence that denying Palestinian farmers access to their own land is a strategic and military decision made from the highest echelons. The farmers were there to water their trees, and were in no way a threat to the settlers across the valley.

Since the establishment of Shavei Shomron in 1977, Palestinian farmers have been subjugated to settler violence, including burning of their olive groves, cutting down hundreds of apricot trees, and polluting the valleys with wastewater from settlement factories.<sup>42</sup> The two Israeli factories within the Shomron Region dispose of their



chemical waste in the valley, polluting the fields and the subterranean natural water sources, the water table used to irrigate the fields.<sup>43</sup> The Sabastiya residents are predominantly farmers; the land is the source of their livelihood. Attacking their space of production is a direct attack on their livelihood. Beyond the frequent refusal of entry to their own agricultural properties, Palestinian farmers are also denied permission to build infrastructure, water wells, public toilets, and so on, and are constantly harassed by the Shavei Shomron guards who report to the Israeli military. Palestinian-owned farms are being gradually confiscated and annexed to Shavei Shomron. The expansion of the settlement was recently approved, a benefit of then U.S. president Donald Trump's support of settlement expansion, giving the council land to build an additional 152 housing units in Shavei Shomron.<sup>44</sup>

Settler violence in Sabastiya affects more than the crops. According to Ahmad al-Kayid, tourism suffers when settler violence is on the rise. The odor of the sewage from the valleys is not a pleasant welcome for visitors to the hilltops of Sabastiya. With the unresolved issue of sewage in mind, it is even more baffling that the Israeli National Parks Authority designated Sabastiya as a national park, supposedly a framework for protection. In the context of the West Bank, sites are not designated national parks for purposes of preservation or conservation as is advertised on the authority's website, but as a financial strategy. Categorizing archaeological sites within the West Bank and East Jerusalem as "national parks" removes the financial liability for the state to pay the owners of the land. Under this zoning designation, a "national park" becomes a way for the state to pursue national interests and further land expropriation and confiscation with zero liability. This categorization automatically entails that authority is transferred from the local to the national level, and power and agency is transferred to the National Parks Authority (NPA), which has no liability towards landowners under Israeli law.<sup>45</sup> This plan of dispossessing Palestinians, using the NPA plan, is not only prevalent in Sabastiya; it is also used in several other sites such as Silwan in Jerusalem, and Area C territories, like Sabastiya, that contain archaeological sites of importance.

## Militarized Archaeology

The links of archaeology to the state extend beyond Israeli military "protecting" tourists and settlers during their intrusions into Sabastiya, and beyond the designation of the site as a National Park. The militarization of archaeology statewide is a system

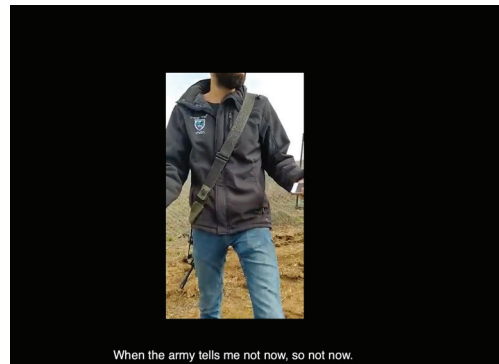


Figure 7. Shavei Shomron guard approaching Ahmad al-Kayid, video footage courtesy of Ahmad al-Kayid.



of control by design. A report published by Emek Shaveh and the Israeli human rights activist organization Yesh Din outlines how the Archaeological Department of the Civil Administration, the Israeli Authority in control of archaeological sites in Area C of the West Bank, is directly linked to the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Education, and the Israel Antiquities Authority.

As mentioned earlier, the Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration (ADCA) is the archaeology unit within the Civil Administration, the Israeli colonial authority that governs the West Bank. The Civil Administration falls under COGAT, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, a unit in the Israeli Ministry of Defense that engages in coordinating civilian issues between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The Staff Officer (SO) of the ADCA, essentially its director, is appointed to administer all issues relating to archaeology and antiquities in the West Bank. The SO is employed by the Israeli Ministry of Education. The SO Hananiya Hizmi reports back to the Israel Antiquities Authority, the ministry with authority over archaeological sites in the rest of Israeli territories that unofficially recognizes the ADCA as part of its own organizational structure. This unofficial adoption of the ADCA, therefore, is a conceptual annexation of all archaeological sites within the West Bank as being under the Israeli government's control. The interwoven links of authority are further complicated with the ADCA Advisory Council which includes a top military commander.<sup>46</sup>

The ADCA responsibilities include: 1) assessing the impact of building on archaeological sites and approving construction initiatives; 2) granting excavation and survey licenses together with the advisory council and supervising archaeological excavation; and 3) preserving and protecting archaeological finds and sites, as well as developing archaeological sites. Despite the conservationist attitude in the description, the ADCA has done much damage to the Palestinian cultural heritage and antiquities landscape.<sup>47</sup>

According to Zaid Azhari, Ariel University, a settler institution that is the largest Israeli public college, and located within Ariel settlement thirty-five kilometers from Sabastiya, published an international open call in 2016 seeking volunteers to excavate Sabastiya. Working with the ADCA, the university arrived to prepare the site for the volunteer excavation, but the Palestinian residents protested this initial work. For a period, the preparation work was stopped as a result of the protests, but the ADCA and Ariel University responded by hiring Palestinian residents to do the work, a nuanced form of forced labor not different from the work done for Harvard a century before. In this case, they hired Palestinian men over the age of sixty that were unable to find work elsewhere given the lack of work possibilities from tourism, and the loss of agricultural land. According to Azhari, an average salary for a Palestinian working in the town is fifty dollars a day, whereas this job opportunity would pay double.

Initially thirty men accepted this offer, but the younger generation, their children and neighbors, refused to accept the exploitation of their fathers. After the younger generation passionately protested the excavations, the number of workers eventually diminished. Despite the very visible and tangible impact, or damage, the ADCA has

made in Sabastiya and the rest of the West Bank over the years, settler organizations are calling for the unit to expand, and for the government to take more control of Area C.<sup>48</sup>

Shomrim Netzach (Guardians of Eternity) is an Israeli “coalition of organizations for the protection, preservation and development of antiquities and heritage sites in Judea and Samaria.” This coalition is led by right-wing Israeli settler and archaeologist Adi Shragai, and collaborates closely with the Shiloh Forum, a right-wing research and policy institute that works to enrich knowledge and support for Jewish settlement in the West Bank.<sup>49</sup> The forum is led by chairman Benzi Lieberman, an Israeli lawyer, former government official, and director of the Israel Land Authority, and former settlements chairman of the Samaria Regional Council (now led by Yossi Dagan).<sup>50</sup>

According to Azhari, it is quite possible that many of the unofficial excavations and settler tours that are organized in Sabastiya are in fact led by organizations such as Shomrim Netzach who are mobilizing to call the government to take more direct action in archaeological sites in Area C. This call to action by settler lobbies in the Israel Knesset is of concern. Palestinian residents of Sabastiya already hear rumors that there are plans to construct a paved road that will lead to the archaeological site from the west, in Area C, avoiding any contact with the Palestinian residents. If these plans are approved, it is a sign that plans to create a state-run tourist attraction is very likely to follow. Such a plan would be disastrous for the Sabastiya community, seeing Silwan as precedent, where Israeli archaeological tourism was the scapegoat for dispossessing area residents of their homes.

## Restitching

Biblical narratives and archaeological strata have been more highly valued over the local narratives of the Palestinian residents for more than a century, as the case study of Sabastiya illustrates. The erasure of other narratives and the focus on the Zionist myth of territorial emptiness became necessary prerequisites to the formation of an expanding Zionist state – creating a politics of invisibility, as Edward Said demonstrated in *The Politics of Dispossession*.<sup>51</sup>

Despite these coercive practices, powerful resistance is taking place within the Palestinian community. Within these difficult times a future generation is rising of highly active and resilient Palestinians willing to take on the struggle to reclaim their history and to continue to spread awareness and knowledge about the misuse of archaeology, and the critical condition of these sites and their artefacts.<sup>52</sup> Young men and women in Sabastiya organize weekly activities to voluntarily clean up the archaeological site, plant wildflowers in the valleys, plant trees around the periphery of the archaeological site, and help landowners farm their land when accessible. They organize alternative tours within the archaeological site and the surrounding area in an attempt to activate the Palestinian-owned agricultural land and restitch the neighboring villages through walking paths and tours.

Perhaps this younger generation of Sabastiyans impressively organizing and refusing to collaborate with Israeli institutions such as the ADCA and Ariel University is a sign of

coming change. This generation has heard stories of their great-grandmothers carrying rocks on their heads, extracting artifacts for Harvard University, and have seen the pain of their fathers making difficult decisions about whether or not to excavate today to provide for their families. It is unclear what the future of Sabastiya holds, or what the archaeological site will look like for future generations, but what is clear is that the impact of a century of biblical archaeology has irreversibly changed family structures, the right to land, and the visibility of the Palestinians and their history on the ground and beneath it. The village on the hill and its values are clearly at risk, intentionally targeted for a century by biblical archaeologists, Zionist settlers with biblical commands to return to Samaria, and an army not only supporting those settlers but spearheaded by the archaeologists as well. The case study of Sabastiya is one of multitudes that could be and should be analyzed in a similar fashion. There are over three thousand archaeological sites within Area C of the West Bank. Almost all are surrounded by settlements and under the full control of the Israel Archaeological Department of the Civil Administration, an authority that is likely to expand in the coming years.

*Dima Srouji is an architect exploring the ground as deep space. She is currently the Jameel Fellow at the Victoria & Albert Museum and is leading the MA City Design Studio at the Royal College of Art in London.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Osama Hamdan and Carla Benelli, "Conservation and Enhancement in the Old Core of Sabastiya (Nablus)," online at (academia.edu) [bit.ly/3wLjaQk](https://bit.ly/3wLjaQk) (accessed 24 May 2022).
- 2 On Israel's methods of control, see Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso, 2017).
- 3 B'Tselem, "By Hook and By Crook: Israeli Settlement Policy in the West Bank," Jerusalem, 6 July 2010 (Excerpts)," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 198–205, online at [//doi.org/10.1525/jps.2010.xl1.1.198](https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2010.xl1.1.198) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 4 See videos of intrusions into Sabastiya at "The Evidence Archive," Depth Unknown Collective, online at [depthunknown.com/the-evidence](https://depthunknown.com/the-evidence) (26 May 2022).
- 5 For jurisdiction boundaries, see Geomolg, "the first-ever integrated spatial information system in Palestine" at [geomolg.ps](https://geomolg.ps) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 6 Diakonia IHL Resource Centre, "Occupation Remains: A Legal Analysis of the Israeli Archeology Policies in the West Bank: An International Law Perspective. (Stockholm, Sweden: Diakonia, 2015), online at ([apidiakoniase](https://apidiakoniase.bit.ly/3RsmY12)) [bit.ly/3RsmY12](https://apidiakoniase.bit.ly/3RsmY12) (accessed 25 May 2022).
- 7 COGAT Archaeology, online at [gov.il/en/departments/Units/archeology\\_unit](https://gov.il/en/departments/Units/archeology_unit) (accessed 13 August 2022).
- 8 Diakonia, "Occupation Remains."
- 9 Diakonia, "Occupation Remains," 29.
- 10 Kathleen Kenyon, *Digging Up Jerusalem* (London: Book Club Associates, 1975), 274.
- 11 George Andrew Reisner, Clarence Stanley Fisher, and David Gordon Lyon, *Harvard Excavations at Samaria*, vol. II, "Samaria Buildings on Summit Plan 2" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).
- 12 Zeynep Çelik, *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016), 135.
- 13 Allison Mickel, "Essential Excavation Experts: Alienation and Agency in the History of Archaeological Labor," *Arch* 15 (2019): 181–205; and Çelik, *About Antiquities*, 135–73.
- 14 Çelik, *About Antiquities*, 137.
- 15 Zaid Hilali, author interview, 8 September 2019.

- 16 Ron Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria: A Story of Twists and Turns in the Opening Season of 1908," *Buried History* 52 (2016): 3–30.
- 17 Zaid Azhari, author interview, 8 September 2019.
- 18 Dima Srouji, *Sebastia*, 24 min. (Palestine: E-Flux and Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2020), online at (e-flux.com) [bit.ly/3wL8TUp](https://bit.ly/3wL8TUp) (26 May 2022).
- 19 Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria."
- 20 W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949), 48.
- 21 Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine*.
- 22 Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine*.
- 23 Ian Hodder, *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 24 Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine*, 10.
- 25 Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria."
- 26 Albright, *Archaeology of Palestine*, 8–22.
- 27 Nur Masalha, *The Bible and Zionism: Invented Traditions, Archaeology and Post-Colonialism in Palestine-Israel* (London: Zed Books, 2007), 135.
- 28 Rachel Hallote, "Jacob H. Schiff and the Beginning of Biblical Archaeology in the United States," *American Jewish History* 95, no. 3 (September 2009): 225–47, online at [jstor.org/stable/23887932](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23887932) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 29 Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria."
- 30 Hallote, "Jacob H. Schiff and the Beginning of Biblical Archaeology."
- 31 Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria."
- 32 Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria."
- 33 Register of antiquities found at Harvard archaeological excavation, Samaria, 1908. Samaria, 1908–1910. (The Semitic Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA)
- 34 Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 170.
- 35 Yiru Quan, *Underground Palestine*: MA City Design Studio at the Royal College of Art, 2021–2022.
- 36 Weizman, *Hollow Land*, ch. 3.
- 37 JTA Daily News Bulletin, "Illegal Settlers in Sabastiya since Sunday Encouraged by Peres' Views," Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 5 December 1975, online at (jta.org) [bit.ly/3cD3IEG](https://bit.ly/3cD3IEG) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 38 Hagar Shezaf and Nir Hasson, "West Bank Archaeological Site Is at the Center of a Passionate Jewish-Palestinian Struggle" *Haaretz*, 14 September 2021, online at (haaretz.com) [bit.ly/3AFDZxV](https://bit.ly/3AFDZxV) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 39 shomron18, "Tel Shomron-part 2," 16 October 2006, online at [youtube.com/watch?v=ihEPJ-IFw4E](https://youtube.com/watch?v=ihEPJ-IFw4E) (accessed 26 May 2022). The clip is described as follows: "Film in Hebrew describing the history of the Biblical Tel Shomron/ Sebastia and it's [sic] importance. Filmed on location by Midreshet Shomron."
- 40 Srouji, *Sebastia*.
- 41 Srouji, *Sebastia*.
- 42 "Israeli Settlers Steal Olive Harvest from Palestinian Land, Uproot Hundreds of Saplings," Palestinian Return Center, 12 October 2021, online at (prc.org.uk) [bit.ly/3ecCCPN](https://bit.ly/3ecCCPN) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 43 Derek Oakley, "West Bank Diary. Sebastiya: How Palestine's Trees are Being Poisoned," *Ceasefire*, 15 February 2013, online at [ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/west-bank-diary-sebastiya/](https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/west-bank-diary-sebastiya/) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 44 Foundation for Middle East Peace, "Settlement & Annexation Report: January 22, 2021," online at (fmep.org) [bit.ly/3Q8pnNb](https://bit.ly/3Q8pnNb) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 45 UN Habitat, "Right to Develop," 2015, online at (unhabitat.org) [bit.ly/3q1vRD6](https://bit.ly/3q1vRD6) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 46 Emek Shaveh and Yesh Din, "Appropriating the Past, Israel's Archaeological Practices in the West Bank," December 2017, online at (emekshaveh.org) [bit.ly/3R8WB0i](https://bit.ly/3R8WB0i) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 47 Emek Shaveh and Yesh Din, "Appropriating the Past."
- 48 Tovah Lazaroff, "80% of Archaeological Sites in W. Bank Damaged – Report," *Jerusalem Post*, 25 April 2021, online at (jpost.com) [bit.ly/3czvRqz](https://bit.ly/3czvRqz) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 49 See posts by Shomrim Netzach activists, online at [twitter.com/shomrimnetzach](https://twitter.com/shomrimnetzach) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 50 Shiloh Forum website, online at [shiloh.org.il/about](https://shiloh.org.il/about) (accessed 26 May 2022) and "The Battle for Area C," online at [shiloh.org.il/the-battle-for-area-c](https://shiloh.org.il/the-battle-for-area-c) (accessed 26 May 2022).
- 51 Edward W. Said, *Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969–1994* (New York: Vintage, 1995).
- 52 Diakonia, "Occupation Remains."