

Silwan

Biblical Archaeology, Cultural Appropriation, and Settler Colonialism

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Abstract

Archaeological excavations in the village of Silwan, southeast of the Old City of Jerusalem, began more than 150 years ago and have revealed multiple layers of civilizations dating from as early as the fifth millennium BCE until modern times. The site was identified by some European and Israeli archaeologists as the biblical “King David’s city” of about three thousand years ago, yet no significant remains from this period were unearthed. Since the occupation of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel has implemented policies aimed at imposing a Jewish demographic majority and strengthening its control over the city. Since the early 1990s, the Israeli authorities, and their satellite right-wing settler organizations, have been immersed in a large-scale project in Silwan: the establishment of a Jewish colony with a biblical-archaeological theme park for tourism in the heart of the village. The strategy to achieve this project is two-fold: to carry out extensive archaeological excavations in order to uncover structures and artifacts that are related to “biblical” times, particularly from King David’s reign; and to appropriate and demolish hundreds of homes, forcibly displace their Palestinian residents, and replace them with Jewish settlers. This article focuses on how Israel weaponizes archaeology to create an invented “biblical” narrative centered on the so-called “City of David” to justify its settler-colonial project in Silwan. This contradicts the ethics of accepted archaeological practice and presents a biased narrative of the site as “biblical” and “Jewish,” while ignoring its diverse multi-faceted history.

Keywords

Silwan; Wadi Hilwa; “City of David”; Old City of Jerusalem; house demolition; ethnic cleansing; settler colonialism; biblical archaeology; Emek Shaveh.

The Political Context—A Process of Colonization and Judaization in Jerusalem

Shortly after the occupation of East Jerusalem in June 1967, Israel declared the “re-unification” of the city and embarked on introducing a considerable number of measures with the purpose to Judaize the city and change its cultural character. These include demographic and physical changes through a series of laws and policies enacted on a municipal level that discriminate against Palestinians, and conducting extensive archaeological excavations to substantiate historical claims over the city. In 1980, it declared: “Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel.”¹ Israel’s annexation of Jerusalem was based primarily on historic claims that the city had been a capital of a Jewish kingdom that existed some three thousand years ago, and that the city is more sacred and spiritually meaningful to Jews than to Christians and Muslims. This was done in contradiction to international law and UN resolutions. It violated Jerusalem’s status as a holy city with diverse historic and cultural heritage for the world as a whole, and as a center of political, economic, and cultural life for the Palestinian people.

The municipal boundaries of the city were substantially redrawn to include the territories of twenty-eight Palestinian towns and villages, but excluding their population centers. This configuration served Israeli policy by controlling as much land as possible with as few Palestinians as possible. This process was accelerated and strengthened by the building of the apartheid “Separation Wall” in 2002, effectively isolating twenty-two villages (with a population of approximately 225,000 people) that surrounded Jerusalem and that were historically connected to the city.² A set of racially discriminatory planning laws and municipal ordinances were introduced that assisted Jewish expansion and simultaneously hindered Palestinian development. Master plans for Palestinian neighborhoods, including Silwan, were not approved, and no building permits were granted for new Palestinian homes, nor for expansion of existing ones. Such policies have caused a severe housing shortage for the Palestinian inhabitants who had no choice but to build without permits. As a result, the Israeli authorities imposed heavy fines and issued demolition orders to the Palestinian residents, in some cases forcing them to demolish their own homes themselves, and leading to forcible displacement. Although in theory these laws and policies are aimed at driving Palestinians out of the city, in effect they have compelled many of them to build without permits, turning them into *de facto* criminals who have to pay heavy fines and who have been issued with house demolition orders.³

Despite its official unification, the city remains divided, an Israeli Jewish part in the west, and, in the east, a Palestinian Arab part whose inhabitants are residents rather than citizens, and who are subject to racial discrimination in all aspects of life. This state of affairs is well-defined by Human Rights Watch in their 2021 report titled “A Threshold Crossed,” which sheds light on the activities of settler organizations within the framework of Israeli apartheid. It asserts:

In the city [Jerusalem], Israel effectively maintains one set of rules

for Jewish Israelis and another for Palestinians Beyond formal state confiscation, discriminatory laws and policies enable settler and settler organizations to take possession of Palestinian homes, evict the Palestinian landowners, and transfer their property to Jewish owners in East Jerusalem neighborhoods.⁴

What is happening on the ground in Jerusalem is a continual process of colonization that for decades has altered laws, land use policies, property rights, and configuration of urban spaces with new city planning strategies.⁵ However, in spite of all these policies and increased Judaization measures, there are many constraints on Israeli control over the city, including the resilience of Palestinians in East Jerusalem after more than fifty years of Israeli occupation.⁶ Moreover, the landscape and physical identity of the Old City of Jerusalem remain principally Arab.⁷

Silwan: Colonial Facts on the Ground

Silwan consists of a sprawl of numerous smaller neighborhoods that are built on the slopes of three valleys extending southeast of the Old City: Wadi al-Rababa, Wadi Hilwa, and Wadi Yasul (figure 1). It has a population of 55,000 Palestinians with about 2,500 Israeli Jewish settlers in their midst.⁸ Many Palestinian families have been living in the village for centuries, but the majority are 1948 refugees from the ethnically cleansed villages of Lifta, Qalunya, al-Malha, and Dayr Yasin in western Jerusalem, who have been living in Silwan since the 1950s and have papers to prove it.⁹ The neighborhoods of Silwan lack basic municipal services despite the fact that the residents pay Israeli municipality taxes.

In 1991, the State of Israel transferred all Palestinian Absentee Property holdings in Silwan to the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which in turn leased the land to a right-wing Jewish settler group known by its acronym Elad (Ir David/City of David Foundation).¹⁰ Since then, attempts to forcibly displace Palestinian residents from their houses continue, employing various legal methods, discriminatory laws, municipal orders, pretexts of historical rights, claims of previous Jewish ownership, or simply by threats.¹¹ Yet, the land is privately owned and a number of the houses were built before 1967.¹² It has become apparent that there is a collusion, or overlapping of interests, between Elad, the municipality of Jerusalem, and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INAP) (figure 2).

Apparently, Silwan's proximity to the Old City, and its significance to various Jewish settler groups attempting to consolidate their control over it, has prompted the Israeli authorities to undertake measures to limit the growth of the Palestinian population in the area, and to embark on forcible displacement. This has been implemented using two discriminatory laws: first, the 1950 Absentee Property Law by which the State of Israel expropriates land and properties left behind by Palestinian refugees expelled during the 1948 and 1967 wars. According to this law, Palestinians who stayed in an "enemy country," or even lived in the West Bank outside the new municipal boundaries of Jerusalem, yet owned land or property inside the city, have



Figure 1. Village of Silwan, a general view of Batn al-Hawa neighborhood, on the left, and part of the archaeological site (“City of David”), on the right. Photo by author, 25 January 2013.

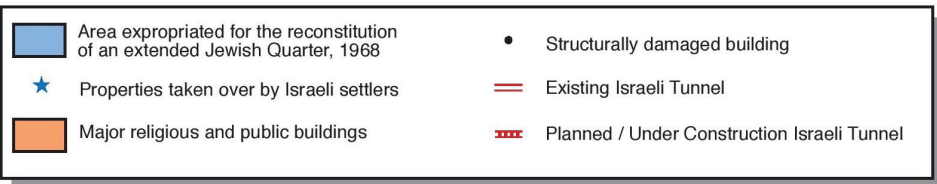
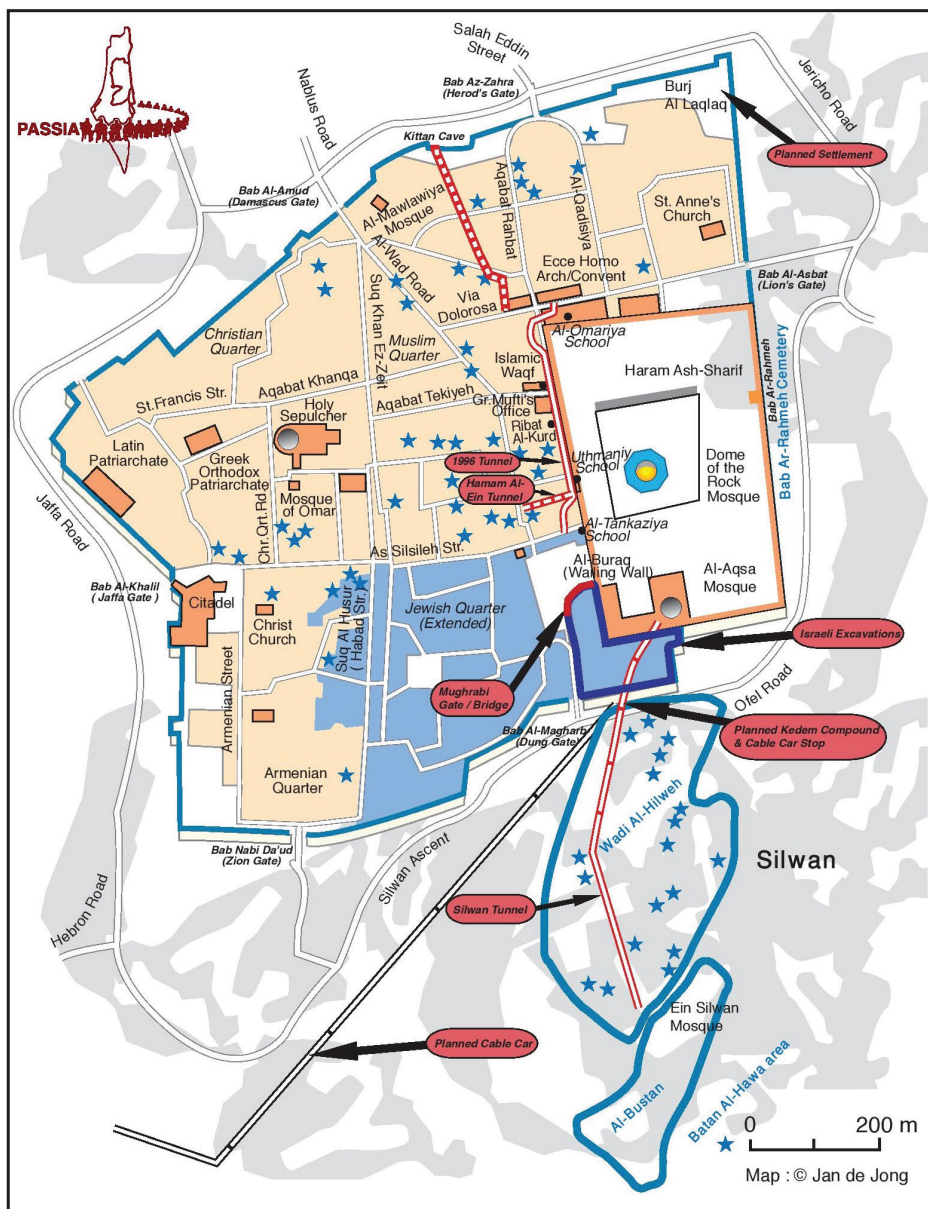


Figure 2. Plan of the Old City of Jerusalem showing settlement activity in and around old city. Photo courtesy of PASSIA (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs).

been defined as “absentees.”¹³ Second, the Administration and Procedures Law of 1970 allows Jews to reclaim properties lost prior to 1948, a right denied to millions of Palestinians who were expelled from their homes in Jerusalem and other parts of Palestine during the Nakba, including Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel. However, properties allegedly owned by Yemenite Jewish immigrants, who lived in Silwan from 1884 to 1936, were claimed through the court by settler organizations.¹⁴ In addition to using “legal” methods for taking over properties, Elad purchased houses through Palestinian intermediaries at astronomical prices. Elad moved two hundred Jewish settlers during the night and with police protection to seven of these houses in 2014.¹⁵ Numerous Palestinian families were forcibly evicted from their homes by the Custodian of Absentee Property and the Israeli courts, like the Abbasi family near ‘Ayn Umm al-Daraj in 1995 and the Ghuzlan family in 2006¹⁶ (figure 3).



Figure 3. A home in Silwan taken over by settlers. Photo by author.

Acting as a proxy or quasi-governmental body and enjoying the support of state agencies, Elad Foundation succeeded over the course of years to seize a large number of properties in the neighborhoods of Wadi Hilwa and al-Bustan. Its aim is to establish a Jewish colony in the heart of Silwan, and ultimately to drive all Palestinian residents out.¹⁷ Already by 2010, almost a quarter of the Wadi Hilwa area was controlled by Elad, bringing the total number of seized houses to forty, while all open areas were appropriated by the Jerusalem municipality and the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA).¹⁸ Various housing and development schemes are planned to expand Jewish presence in the village.¹⁹ Another right-wing religious settler organization, Ateret Cohanim, which has been involved in appropriating houses in the Old City, is seeking properties in the Batn al-Hawa neighborhood by offering large sums of money, and waging lengthy and costly legal cases against the residents who refuse to be bought out.²⁰ Relying on the Israeli discriminatory law allowing only Jews to claim property that was owned prior to 1948, the organization is pursuing a legal battle against eighty-four families who have been living in Silwan for decades, with the hope to win the cases and ultimately Judaize the neighborhood.²¹ To date, about seven hundred houses in Silwan are threatened with demolition (figure 4).

In al-Bustan neighborhood, demolition orders were issued for ninety-seven houses, the demolition of forty-nine of which was to begin in August 2021, for being built without planning permits. This act will make more than fifteen hundred people homeless, and effectively lead to the eradication of the whole neighborhood (figure 4). However, due to international pressure the Israeli authorities decided to postpone the demolitions until further notice. Residents view this as a delaying tactic with no intention to cancel demolitions. The municipality plans to turn the entire neighborhood

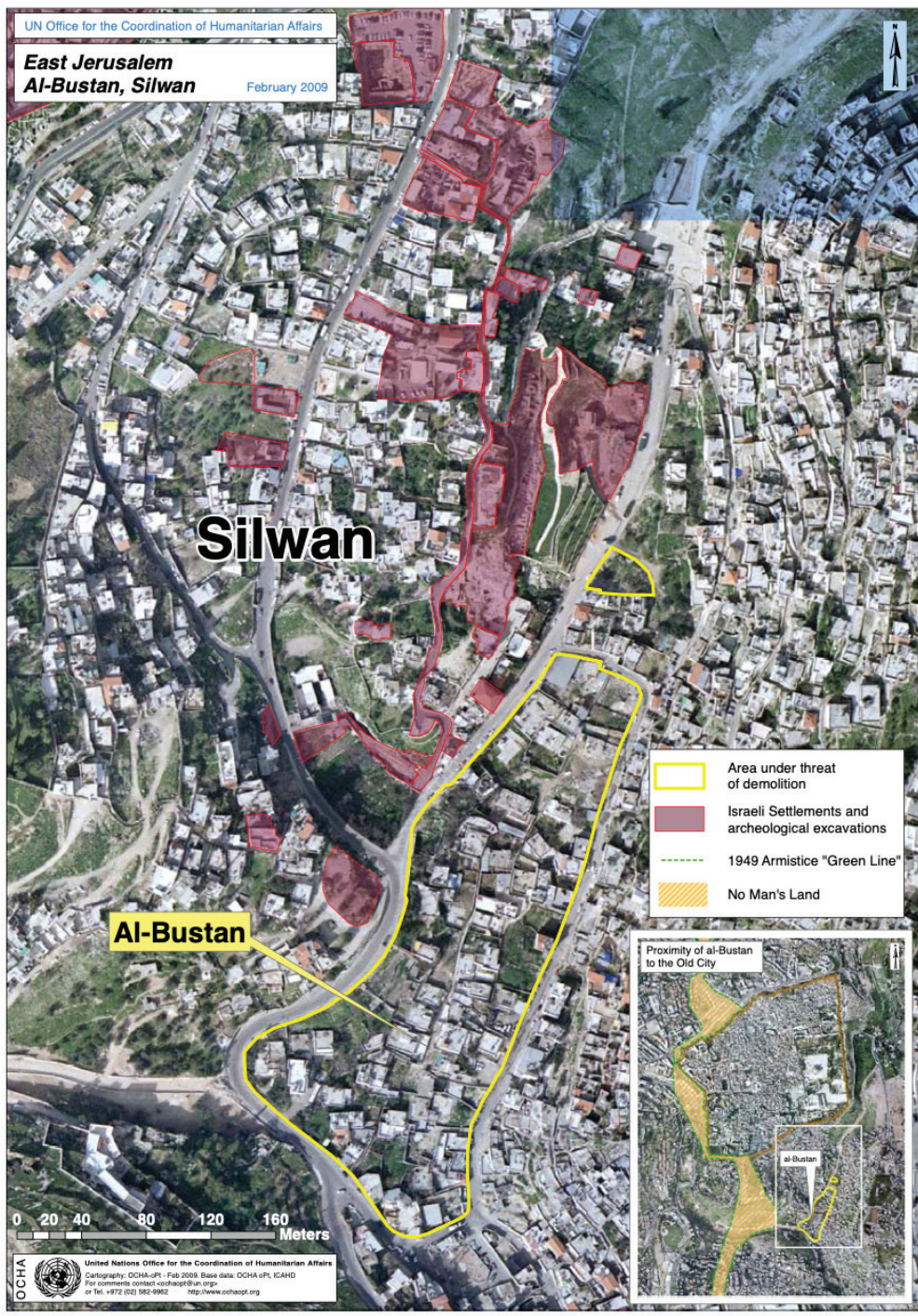


Figure 4. Map of Silwan showing Israeli settlements, archaeological excavations, and areas under threat of demolition. Courtesy of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA, 2009).

into a garden inspired by the biblical phrase “King’s Garden,” which is also identified in Arabic as al-Bustan (garden), as if such a baseless assumption was enough pretext to displace its Palestinian residents.²² The project will include conducting archaeological excavations, planting a “blooming garden,” building tourist facilities, and a new residential neighborhood for settlers.²³

As part of the Judaization process in Silwan, the Israeli authorities replaced the Arabic names of streets and landmarks with Hebrew ones. For example, a sign (in Hebrew and English) was installed on the hill opposite Silwan referring to it as Kfar Hashiloah where Yemenite immigrants lived in the nineteenth century (figure 5). Wadi Hilwa neighborhood was renamed as “the City of David,” the Wadi Hilwa Street was changed into “Ma’alot ‘Ir David,” al-Bustan neighborhood into “Gan Hamelekh,” and Wadi Hilwa Square into “Givati Parking Lot.”²⁴



Figure 5. An Israeli sign in Silwan showing the renaming of the village. Photo by author.

The reality on the ground has had a negative humanitarian impact on the daily lives of the Palestinians residing in the Silwan neighborhoods, increasing tension, violence, and arrests; restricting movement and access, particularly during Jewish holidays; and reducing privacy due to the presence of private security guards and surveillance cameras.²⁵ Despite this, the Palestinian residents in Silwan have been resisting what they view as attempts at their ethnic cleansing by the occupying authorities. Residents of the neighborhoods of Wadi Hilwa, al-Bustan, and Batn al-Hawa have begun mobilizing against their forced displacement by setting up popular defense committees, organizing protests and providing residents with legal help in Israeli courts. They have challenged demolition orders and expropriation of their properties at the Israeli Supreme Court. However, they have never won appeals against demolitions and evictions, and only achieved some delays. The Wadi Hilwa Information Center was established to build a strong, well-informed, and involved Palestinian community; it provides educational and recreational courses for young people, including tours around the village, and disseminates information about colonization activities by the Israeli authorities and settlers’ organizations.²⁶ It also launched a website providing information about colonization activities, and has an important report titled “The Story behind the Tourist Site.”²⁷ The ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from Silwan is embedded in Israeli settler colonial policies, which aim to displace the indigenous population and replace them with Jewish settlers.²⁸ This form of colonialism is based on gaining access to territory by expelling the “indigenous other” from their land or property, while the “emptied” territory is often resettled by other ethnic groups.²⁹ The settling act usually aims to undo the demographic space that was created during the cleansing and is justified through a narrative that stresses historical connection between the settlers’ ethnic identity and the cleansed space, as is happening in Silwan.³⁰

Archaeological Exploration in Silwan (Early Nineteenth Century to 1967)

Western interest in the Middle East, and Palestine in particular, increased greatly in the early nineteenth century, motivated by the colonial domination of the region, and the exploration of antiquities of ancient civilizations. Archaeological exploration in Jerusalem was begun by British, German, French, and American scholars who sought to recover the historical roots and truths of Christendom by turning the narratives of the Bible into reliable historical sources for their explorations. In 1838, Edward Robinson, an American biblical theologian, was the first to work in the village of Silwan, located on a ridge extending south of the Old City of Jerusalem, near the natural spring of ‘Ayn Umm al-Daraj. He investigated the ancient underground water system known as the Silwan Tunnel, the results of which were published in the *Biblical Researches in Palestine, 1838–52*.³¹ Charles Warren, an English Royal engineer and archaeologist, who was dispatched to Jerusalem by the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) in 1867, conducted numerous probes in the northern part of Silwan just south of the Haram al-Sharif wall (known by its biblical name as the “Ophel”), including the underground water channel systems, named after him. Raymond Weill, a French archaeologist, carried out excavations at the area of Wadi Hilwa in 1913–14, funded by Baron Edmond de Rothschild, to explore David’s city – which is the first known reference of this area by that name.³² The Irish archaeologist R.A.S. Macalister conducted excavations in the area west and above the spring in the 1920s and revealed the so-called Jebusite Ramp.³³ These were followed in 1928 by the excavations by J.W. Crowfoot, the director of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, revealing part of a residential quarter dating to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods, including the remains of a thick wall and a gate.³⁴ The renowned British archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon carried out extensive excavations at the east slope of Wadi Hilwa in Silwan in 1961–67.³⁵

Israeli Excavations since 1967

The Israeli regime’s political agenda after the capture of East Jerusalem in 1967 was to enhance Jewish presence in the Old City and permanently change its political and cultural character. Large-scale archaeological excavations in and around the Old City were carried out by various institutions and universities, supported by the state. By using the past to legitimate Israel’s presence, these excavations aimed at revealing the city’s exclusive “biblical history,” in a deliberate effort to achieve its “Jewish-colonial-nationalist project” and the physical colonial transformation of Jerusalem.³⁶

Extensive archaeological excavations were carried out in the area southwest of the Haram al-Sharif (1968–1977) and aimed to unearth remains associated with the First and Second Jewish Temples. However, these resulted in revealing ruins dating to the Roman and Byzantine periods, and the remains of monumental palaces dating to the Early Islamic Umayyad Period (eighth century).³⁷ Further excavations in the

area in later years led to the establishment of the “Jerusalem Archaeological Park – Davidson Center,” which hosts exhibitions and virtual model panoramas.³⁸

Other extensive excavations were carried out in the Jewish Quarter with a declared aim to Judaize it, following the 1967 forced displacement of most of its Palestinian residents and the expropriation of their homes, many of which were demolished.³⁹ These excavations revealed the remains of ancient fortifications and domestic architecture from the Roman period, described as “Jewish secular architecture in the Second Temple period.”⁴⁰ What followed was a scheme where archaeology and restoration and urban planning intertwined to achieve political and ideological aims.⁴¹

Archaeological excavations and restoration works were also begun at the Citadel of Jerusalem, just south of Jaffa Gate, aimed at transferring the fortress into a museum, to be called “the Tower of David Museum for the History of Jerusalem.” The main focus was on the early Hellenistic (“Hasmonean”) and Roman (“Herodian”) remains of fortifications at the site.⁴² However, the Citadel as it stands today is a remarkable monument of medieval Islamic military architecture, and an example of appropriation of Palestinian cultural heritage.⁴³ The presentation of the history of Jerusalem at the museum is biased and privileges the “biblical period” over earlier and later Islamic periods.⁴⁴

In Silwan, large excavations were carried out on the southeast ridge of Wadi Hilwa, the site of which became referred to as the “City of David,” by Yigal Shiloh on behalf of the Hebrew University (1978–1985). These excavations revealed ancient remains dating from the Bronze and Iron Ages, (from the early second millennium

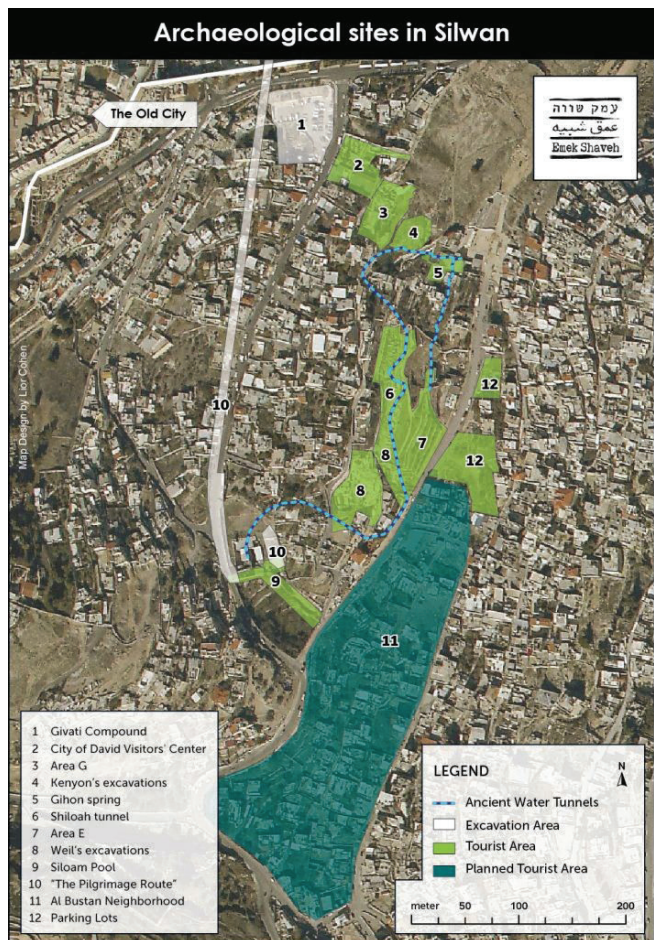


Figure 6. Plan of archaeological excavations and tourist areas. Photo courtesy of Emek Shaveh.

until the middle of the first millennium BCE), including an underground water system of channels and tunnels⁴⁵ (figure 6). No remains from the time of David and Solomon (tenth century BCE) were uncovered.⁴⁶

A major political shift with regards to Israeli colonization and archaeological activities in Silwan occurred in the mid-1990s when Elad Foundation embraced archaeology as a primary method to achieve its goals.⁴⁷ In 1997, Elad consolidated its power when it was entrusted with the management of the “City of David Archaeological Park.”⁴⁸ This was marked by a dramatic increase in archaeological excavations, motivated by “political and religious initiative.”⁴⁹ Excavations beneath the Abbasi family house near the Umm al-Daraj spring were started in 1995 by the Israel Antiquities Authority and revealed large fortifications and a hewn water channel system, both dating to the Middle Bronze Age.⁵⁰ Archaeological excavations at Wadi Hilwa Square (“Givati Parking Lot”) began in 2003 and continued to date, revealing multiple layers dating to Islamic, Byzantine, and Roman times, which were removed to reach earlier “biblical” layers, a familiar practice which obliterates the rich and diverse history of the site⁵¹ (figure 6, number 1). Elad is planning to build a multistory visitor center with a car park at the site.⁵² A petition against the plan was presented to the High Court by local residents and the Israeli Peace Now Movement in 2008, but was rejected. An excavation under the “City of David” visitor center was begun in 2005 by Eilat Mazar to investigate a large stone structure interpreted by British archaeologists



Figure 7. Remains of the “Large Stone Structure,” claimed by excavator as “King David’s Palace.” Photo by author, 4 July 2021.

Macalister and Duncan in 1923 as the remains of a Jebusite fortress. Mazar claimed the structure was “the palace of King David”⁵³ (figure 6, no. 2; figure 7). Her claim was rejected by a number of Israeli archaeologists, who argued the structure was rebuilt several times over the course of several hundred years.⁵⁴



Figure 8. Excavations at Wadi Hilwa Square (“Givati Parking Lot”). Photo by author, 4 July 2021.

Since 2013, underground excavations have been conducted along Wadi Hilwa Road revealing a stretch of a stepped street (350 meters long and 8 meters wide) and a drainage channel underneath it. The excavators believe the street dates to the Roman period (first century CE), and extends from the Pool of Siloam in the south to the west of the “Western Wall” in the north⁵⁵ (see figure 8). The clearing of the street and the channel using tunneling requires the construction of a formidable support structure built with cement and steel pillars resembling that of an underground metro, and probably at huge cost (figure 9). An official inauguration ceremony of the street, which has been named the “Pilgrims’ Road,” took place in December 2016 with the participation of Israeli official figures.⁵⁶

Archaeology Recruited in the Service of Settler Colonialism

Site Management

Through archaeology and heritage management, Elad’s ultimate aim is “to strengthen Jewish settlement in Palestinian neighborhoods of Silwan and reviving ‘the biblical pilgrimage to the Temple Mount.’”⁵⁷ This is a case where heritage management of a public archaeological site is handled by a private right-wing organization to implement its ultra-nationalist colonization project, in collusion with a state authority (the Israel Antiquities Authority).⁵⁸

Elad’s headquarters are located at the Visitors’ Center at the City of David Archaeological Park, which has become a tourist attraction (figures 10 and 11). Visitors are offered guided tours and videos, films and lectures. Tourist packages of shows, tours, and attractions can be booked online, through an interactive website, in multiple languages, titled “The City of David, Ancient Jerusalem Where It All Began.”⁵⁹ Many public areas around the site have been integrated into the tourist park and effectively become off limits to the local Palestinian residents.

The financial resources available to Elad are vast and derive from a variety of sources: public funding from myriad Israeli authorities and donations from private local and international donors. Among the donors is the Russian-Israeli oligarch



Figure 9. Excavations of the Roman Street (“Pilgrimage Road”). Photo by author, 23 November 2021.



Figure 10. Entrance to the “City of David” visitor center. Photo by author, 4 July 2021.



Figure 11. View of “City of David” visitor center above archaeological site. Photo by author, 4 July 2021.

and billionaire Roman Abramovich, famous for being the former owner of Chelsea Football Club in London, who donated one hundred million dollars to Elad.⁶⁰

Archaeological Practices

Israeli excavations at Silwan are fraught with various legal and ethical issues. They are carried out in contradiction to international law, particularly The Hague Convention of 1954 that prohibits excavations in captured territory by an occupying nation, reiterated by the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1999.⁶¹ The removal and transfer of archaeological artifacts and finds from an occupied territory violates the basic principles of the UNESCO Convention.⁶² In addition, these excavations are part of the military occupation enforced by the Israel regime that has devastating consequences for the Palestinian residents, and are used as a means for Judaization and justifying exclusive Jewish claims.⁶³ The Israeli authorities’ claim that the vast majority of excavations in Silwan are “salvage” excavations – possibly intended to avert international criticism – is farcical since construction works are prohibited by the municipality in an area that has been designated as an “archaeological park.”⁶⁴ Moreover, these excavations are carried out in densely built-up neighborhoods and beneath private homes, without the Palestinian residents’ consent, and often causing structural damage to houses, public buildings, and roads.⁶⁵ They are concealed from the local Palestinian residents by high fences, surrounded by “themed” metal screens, and subject to heavy security measures with surveillance cameras and armed guards. They also pose constant harassment and inconvenience to the lives of local residents.⁶⁶ In addition, it must be said that the

Once the “salvage” excavations come to an end, the finds are to be taken by the archaeologists for analysis and study, and potential publication. Then the site is entrusted completely to Elad to interpret and present it to the public, often without reference to the archaeological data collected during excavations. For example, a water cistern that was unearthed in the excavation is presented as

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Figure 12. A presentation sign showing clay seal with biblical text presumably found at the excavation. Photo by author, 4 July 2021.

Moreover, the broad and diverse history of the Palestinian village of Silwan is completely absent, particularly during the late Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods.⁶⁹ The excavation methodology applied at the site has often chosen to remove the layers of later periods in order to reach the earlier “biblical” strata, which prevents the excavated remains from telling the multilayered story of the site with its different periods and cultures. In addition, the entire development of the site makes the local Palestinian residents invisible to the ordinary visitor. Tourist routes have been designed to keep away from the roads frequented by the residents, instead using underground galleries where only the ruins of “Jewish history” can be seen and heard.⁷⁰ Talks and tours through the archaeological remains, above and underground, including the water channel systems, with frequent references to “King David, Israelite king of Judah,” are also available on YouTube. One video shows a “City of David virtual tour in Ancient Jerusalem” focusing on the excavations.⁷¹ In another video, titled “Soldiers Visiting the City of David,” a commentator asserts: “It’s part of their cultural day, to learn about what they’re fighting for . . . they are not only fighting for today, they actually represent the return of the Jewish people to Israel after thousands of years.”⁷² In another video, pointing to an excavated section of fortifications dated to the Middle Bronze Age (about 1850 BCE), an interviewer remarks: “Abraham saw this in his own eyes.”⁷³

Conclusions

The principal motivation behind archaeological exploration and excavations in Silwan over the past 150 years is to reveal the physical traces of the biblical narrative, especially with regards to kings David and Solomon (eleventh and tenth centuries BCE). However, the lack of material remains that can be dated to this period has triggered considerable controversies, and reinforced the notion that the biblical account is mythical.⁷⁴ In one case, it transpired that the results of the excavation under the Abbasi family house near Umm al-Daraj spring in Silwan refuted the biblical account that King David conquered Jerusalem from the Jebusites by entering the city through the water system, known as Warren’s Shaft.⁷⁵ The excavators concluded that the shaft was only accessible two hundred years after the presumed conquest, and the water system was defended by massive fortifications built by the Canaanites during the Middle Bronze Age, long before King David’s time. But despite the main focus on early periods and the lack of interest with post-Byzantine remains, the significance of the discoveries with regard to the biblical narrative is limited, if not completely absent.⁷⁶

The issue of the politics of Israeli archaeology is discussed within the Israeli discipline by numerous scholars.⁷⁷ While the main debate has centered on the disciplinary practice, and the resemblance between state ideology and the content of archaeological knowledge, no scholar has critically tackled the scientific epistemology. However, many critical works have focused on how archaeology played a pivotal role in the formation of Israel’s colonial imagination, and in producing “facts on the ground” to substantiate historical claims and nationhood building.⁷⁸ As Nadia Abu

El-Haj argued in her important book *Facts on the Ground*, in the context of Israel/Palestine, archaeological practice was utilized in the formation of a secular Jewish Israeli colonial-national identity and served to substantiate the historical claims to territory as “the national home.”⁷⁹ In other words, archaeology played a dual role: one within nation state-building, and the other within the dimension of settler colonization in Palestine. It was in Palestine under British colonial rule that the new Hebrew nation, with its settler-colonial society and ideology, developed. And in this context, the indigenous Palestinians were prevented from achieving their independence because Britain promised Palestine to the Jews as their national home.⁸⁰ More recent research focuses on the notion that the “Zionist deployment of the past is settler-colonialist,” and that “archaeology and heritage conservation emerge as part and parcel of perpetration of settler-colonial violence.”⁸¹

International law stipulates that those Israeli archaeological excavations in Silwan are unlawful. This law requires Israel, as an occupying power, to protect and preserve the cultural heritage in the occupied territory, including archaeological sites and finds, and prohibits it from making long-term and irreversible changes. Furthermore, Israel’s control of the archaeological sites, and artifacts found there, enables it to physically exclude Palestinians from these sites, and allows it to interpret and present them as it wishes. Ultimately, Israel will be able to manipulate the historical narrative of the site by emphasizing and elevating its religious and cultural importance for the Jewish people; in contrast, it minimizes the role of other peoples and cultures in its history, in particular dispossessing the Palestinians from their sites and appropriating their history and cultural heritage.

While Elad’s narrative in Silwan focuses exclusively on biblical history, it is actively involved in the erasure of Palestinian heritage and contemporary urban life. It articulates the archaeological site as a colony in which new Jewish settlers’ homes become an integral part of the story of the heritage management.⁸² In other words, Elad considers its settlement activity as a renewal of the biblical narrative in terms of the architectural and urban development of the site, which is referred to as “residential revitalization” and “Where It All Began . . . and Still Continues.”⁸³ Elad’s ultimate aim is to promote mass tourism and Jewish “pilgrimage” to Silwan. The plan is to create an underground circuit that links the “City of David” in Silwan and the “Western Wall” near the Jewish Quarter, accessed through tunnels.⁸⁴ A projected cable car network will transport Israeli and international tourist groups from West Jerusalem directly to the Kedem Center, above the excavation of Wadi Hilwa Square (“Givati Parking Lot”), as seen at the start of the video “City of David “Where It All Began.” This is probably intended to discourage visitors from going through the Old City with its bustling Palestinian markets and Islamic and Christian monuments with their splendid architecture. A likely itinerary, to be named “Pilgrimage to the Temple Mount,” will begin at the Siloam Pool near the southern tip of the “City of David” in Silwan, ascending through the underground stepped Roman Street, and through another underground tunnel leading to the southwest corner of the Haram al-Sharif and the “Western Wall.”

One of the main critics of archaeological practices in Silwan is Emek Shaveh, the Israeli NGO working against the politicization of archaeology in Israel. It articulates its approach as follows: “Archaeological sites cannot constitute proof of precedence or ownership by any one nation, ethnic group or religion over a given place.”⁸⁵ On the practical level, it monitors the activities of right-wing Jewish settler groups in East Jerusalem, including archaeological activities, taking legal measures against the abuse of archaeology for “religious or nationalist interests.” It also promotes a pluralistic discourse with regards to “diversity of the cultural heritage” and the “shared heritage of all communities and peoples living in this land.”⁸⁶

No doubt, Emek Shaveh plays an important role in opposing the settler organizations’ activities and supporting the local Palestinian residents of Silwan, especially in their legal battles against settlers’ schemes. However, their achievements on the ground remain limited because of their power imbalance with settlers’ groups, who are far more generously funded and enjoy the full support of the Israeli authorities. At the same time, Emek Shaveh’s approach does not tackle the root causes of the reality on the ground: the illegal military occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem, the prohibition of archaeological excavations by international law, the nature of settler colonialism and ethnic cleansing perpetrated in Silwan, and an inclusive understanding of Palestine’s history and cultural heritage. It appears that Emek Shaveh considers the Israeli occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem as a *fait accompli*, in contrast with their opposition to the occupation of the West Bank. They also regard archaeological excavations in Silwan as a done deal, and seem to accept their definition as “salvage excavations.”⁸⁷

Another anomaly of archaeological excavations at Silwan is the bias of data collection, which typifies Israeli archaeology elsewhere, although some improvements can be noticed in recent years. The preferred practice is the recovery of larger architectural structures and artifacts, representing significant “biblical” or “Jewish” historical events that can be labeled “First or Second Temple” (Iron Age to early Roman). Such periods often receive a more thorough recording compared with remains that are commonly termed as “later periods,” a euphemism for Ottoman, Medieval Islamic, as well as Byzantine, and late Roman periods.⁸⁸ This anomaly has been exaggerated by the frequent use of bulldozers and mechanical diggers on archaeological sites that are employed to remove top layers of earth in order to get down to the desired earlier strata as quickly as possible. This inevitably results in the total destruction of “later debris” that consists of multiple archaeological layers that complete the entire history of the site. In contrast, proper archaeological practice normally involves using slower digging techniques, such as trawling and sifting earth in search of finer artifacts and environmental remains, in order to reconstruct various aspects of ancient daily life. In light of this anomaly, particularly the breach of archaeological ethical and scientific practices, the call by Emek Shaveh for more inclusive archaeology under these diabolical circumstances in Silwan will remain a cliché and impossible to achieve.⁸⁹ New archaeological excavations with an entirely different approach and methodology, free from ideological, religious, and

nationalist agendas are required so that a more inclusive reading of history can be accomplished.

Archaeology is often assumed to be a neutral scientific endeavor, a practice of excavation that serves to reveal clues about past civilizations. Obviously, the excavations in Silwan abuse the fundamental ethics of archaeological practice, despite the claims that excavations are of “high caliber.”⁹⁰ This presumed high quality archaeological work is absent in the interpretation and presentation of the site. Instead, what is on display is mainly interpreted and presented as “biblical” or “Jewish.” While such practice has been criticized by Emek Shaveh because it “privileges one narrative or one history over another,”⁹¹ it raises a number of questions. Are there two different histories for two peoples in Israel/ Palestine – one Jewish-Israeli history and another Palestinian-Arab? Why is the same criticism not leveled against the IAA’s presentation at sites, such as Jaffa, Caesarea, ‘Akka, or Hazor in Israel? The answer to the above questions lies in placing the history of ancient Palestine as a subject in its own right, outside the confines of biblical studies that has excluded the vast majority of the population of the region in search of the roots of modern Israel in the past. Keith Whitelam discusses in his landmark book *The Invention of Ancient Israel* the theological and political assumptions that have shaped research into ancient Israel by biblical scholars, and contributed to the vast network of scholarship that Edward Said identified as “Orientalist discourse.” He concludes:

It will be necessary to expose the political and religious interests, which have motivated the invention of ancient Israel within the discourse of biblical studies. It will also need to create its own space, in order to produce its own contested narrative of the past, thereby helping to restore the voice of an indigenous population which has been silenced by the invention of ancient Israel.⁹²

Palestine has a history that goes back many millennia, comprising multiple periods of regional and imperial dominations. The population of Palestine consists of myriad ethnic and religious communities with diverse traditions, languages, customs, but with many shared aspects of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Native Jewish communities were part of the ethnic and religious composition of the indigenous population of Palestine. It is only due to the rise of Zionism as a settler colonial movement in the early twentieth century and the ensuing political conflict in Palestine that indigenous Jews were separated from the main body of the Palestinian people to join the newly emerging “Hebrew nation” and the Jewish State. The history of ancient Palestine continues to be shaped by the biblical rhetoric reinforced by Israeli scholarship and modern Zionism, which denies the indigenous people the right to have its own history. It remains imperative that a more evidence-based, inclusive, and unbiased narrative for the history of Palestine is created, one that is based on reviving the rich cultural heritage of ancient Palestine that attests, through its material culture, to the accomplishments of its many peoples.

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