

"THE CAMERA IS AN INSTRUMENT THAT
TEACHES PEOPLE HOW TO SEE WITHOUT
A CAMERA."

NO SAINTS IN JERUSALEM

How religion, politics, and archaeology clash on—and under—the holy city's streets

INSIDER

By Mati Milstein

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In the plaza next to the Western Wall, excavations continue under the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque's shadow.

Text and photos by Mati Milstein

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In the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan, some of the 50,000 Palestinian residents can hear digging under their homes. Silwan is partially situated atop the popular tourist attraction known to Israelis as the City of David, the oldest part of historic Jerusalem, directly south of the Temple Mount. During the biblical and Roman periods, the Temple Mount was home to the First and Second Jewish temples (which are believed to have stood between 832 and 422 B.C. and 516 B.C. and A.D. 70, respectively), and was the center of Jewish ritual and spiritual life for millennia. Following the Muslim conquest of the city in A.D. 638, the Umayyad rulers erected the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque, two structures that are focal points for Palestinian and Muslim religious identity. There are few, if any, more valued and contested places on earth.

Recent archaeological finds in Silwan also indicate it may have been used as an administrative center by Jewish kings during the Temple periods and that some of the city's early defensive fortifications stood here. Israeli archaeologists regard the area as one of the best places to look for evidence of Jewish history. There are many excavations in Silwan, some of which are partially funded by the Ir David (City of David) Foundation, a private-interest group associated with the Jewish settler movement. And many finds are being used by those on Israel's political right to justify settlers' claims to this primarily Palestinian area in the east of the city.

Tourists enter the City of David Visitor's Center through this gate to the mostly Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan.



This kind of ideologically motivated archaeology is not confined to Silwan. In the West Bank, Jewish settlers have been spotted surveying the older quarters of some Palestinian villages looking for archaeological evidence of an earlier Jewish presence. It's also happening in the symbolic center of the city, the complex around the Temple Mount itself, where both Israelis and Palestinians are employing archaeology to bolster their claims to a part of the city that is holy to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike.

Excavations and explorations across Israel and the West Bank, many of them located a stone's throw from key Jewish and Islamic holy sites, lie at the heart of the struggle between Israelis and Palestinians. And artifacts recovered from Jerusalem's soil are being used as ammunition in the escalating—and often violent—conflict.

Each nation forges its identity from common mythology, religion, and a sense of shared history. Especially in the Holy Land, where people's historical identity affects every aspect of their lives, there is an eagerness to back up these histories with physical evidence. Both Israelis and Palestinians seek to prove their legitimacy as the rightful stewards of the land, and look for archaeological evidence of their continuous presence under almost every rock. "Archaeology in Jerusalem connects every Jew to his magnificent past. With these stones, he feels Jewish," says Rabbi Shmuel Rabinovitch of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, an organization that supervises and funds excavations and administers the underground network of tunnels adjacent to the Western Wall. Also sometimes known as the Wailing Wall, the Western Wall is often mistakenly believed to be the only physical remains of the Jewish temples. It is, in fact, a supporting structure that holds up the western side of the man-made Temple Mount plateau. The wall is also thought to be located closest to the specific location where the temples once stood and has thus become the primary site for Jewish prayer.

According to Hamdan Taha, archaeological and cultural heritage expert at the Palestinian Authority's Tourism Ministry, "The sort of archaeology being carried out in Jerusalem, specifically in East Jerusalem and the Silwan area, is motivated by hidden agendas and has nothing to do with scientific objectives. It is done secretly, without taking into

consideration international standards, and casts great doubts on the objectives of these excavations.” Mahdi Abdul Hadi, chairman of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs, agrees. “People are totally ignorant about where they are from, what they are doing, about their identity.” But he warns that empty slogans, rhetoric, and religion, rather than real education, are filling this gap. “Nobody will look at archaeology in good faith today. Everything is exploited now, because the hatred is deepening,” he says.

One of the major players in what archaeologists on both sides see as the perversion of archaeology for political ends is the City of David Foundation. Also known as Elad, this group, established in 1986 by former Israel Defense Force commando David Be’ery, seeks to increase Jewish settlement in the Silwan area by purchasing existing homes on behalf of Jewish families. Dozens of settlers have moved, under heavy guard, into the former houses of Palestinians. Elad’s multimillion dollar budget comes primarily from fundraising efforts and, according to Israeli media reports, possibly also from the donations of wealthy Russian Jewish oligarchs who support the settlement movement in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Elad is also responsible for operating the City of David site as a subcontractor for the government’s Israel Nature and Parks Authority, and is involved with funding and selecting the locations of archaeological excavations in and around Silwan. Tel Aviv University archaeologist Israel

Finkelstein sees a serious problem here. “The official state institutions abandoned the management of the City of David site to a [private] foundation with clear political inclinations,” he says. “This is an extremely important site for us [Israeli Jews], whether you are on the right or left of the political spectrum. When you walk around there, you feel you are walking where the biblical prophets Jeremiah or Yeshayahu or the Judean kings walked. But such a sensitive and politically explosive place should be under state control, not in private hands. This is an intolerable situation.” Archaeologists are often at the mercy of donors, and funding doesn’t always come from government agencies or universities. But can they stand up to the pressure placed on them by those paying their salaries? “The question is how the dig director runs things,” explains Finkelstein. “Does he allow the donor’s cultural or political inclinations to influence his excavation?”

The Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) refuses to comment on what it sees as the political issues surrounding work in Silwan, including the influence that private interests might exert over archaeology or how Elad might be using it as a tool to strengthen a Jewish settlement presence in the neighborhood. However, John Zeligman, Jerusalem district archaeologist at the IAA, says its working relationship with Elad is exactly the same it has in the city with the Waqf Islamic religious authority (the body responsible for administering Muslim holy sites in the city), the Franciscans,

or any other body. “When the national park is being created in the City of David, that’s a joint discussion between Elad and the Parks Authority and they then come to us to see about possible development of certain areas. They can suggest sites for excavation and we can say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.’ Work on-site is carried out by IAA archaeologists, Zeligman says, and they are granted total academic and research freedom. Other archaeologists associated with recognized Israeli academic institutions are also authorized to excavate in the area in coordination with the IAA.

Important discoveries have been made in the Silwan/City of David area by well-respected archaeologists, including Doron Ben-Ami of Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology, whose excavations revealed monumental city features dating to the time of the Second Temple. Ben-Ami also found remains from the Roman, Byzantine, and early Muslim periods. In 2004, IAA archaeologist Eli Shukron and Haifa University’s Ronny Reich excavated an extensive system of underground water and sewage channels also dating to the Second Temple period. And a series of dramatic artifacts has been discovered in a parking lot adjacent to the City of David’s entrance gate, the most stunning of which is a cache of more than 250 seventh-century gold coins stamped with the image of the Byzantine emperor Heraclius. The excavators also found a 2,000-year-old gold, pearl, and emerald earring dating to the fourth century; the marble bust

of a boxer from the second or third century A.D. when the area was under Roman rule; a First Temple–period bone seal engraved with the name “Shaul,” or Saul; and a seal impression inscribed with the name “Gedaliah Ben Pashchur,” which appears in the biblical Book of Jeremiah in the same sentence as “Yehuchal Ben Shelamayahu,” a name found on a seal earlier in the same excavation. Elad has interpreted these two discoveries as evidence that the excavated structure on the site might have been used as an administrative building during the First Temple period.

But these digs are less contentious than the ones led by Israeli archaeologist Eilat Mazar of Hebrew University, who has also worked extensively in this area. Early in 2010, she announced the discovery of a massive tenth-century B.C. wall in Silwan she said was likely built by King Solomon. Mazar believes her findings provide archaeological evidence supporting the validity of a biblical passage from 1 Kings 3:1: “...until he [Solomon] had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about.” She also believes archaeological excavations in Israel go hand-in-hand with biblical readings. “I don’t believe there is an archaeologist who would excavate a site about which texts have been written without being familiar with those texts,” she says.

Her methodology is indicative of a renewed—and controversial—trend among some archaeologists to interpret the Bible literally. Some, such as Finkelstein, have likened her to 19th-century scholars who would walk with the Bible in one hand and a spade in the other. “This approach is based on reading the Bible like you read the daily newspaper,” Finkelstein says. “The Bible is a complicated, confusing text that requires a very high level of professionalism in its interpretation. You can’t simply read ‘David went down,’ and then go out and find a trail that goes downhill. It’s a joke and an insult to the Bible. It’s connected to money and these archaeologists’ need to ‘feed’ their donors with all sorts of bombastic announcements.” As evidence, Finkelstein also points to Mazar’s 2005 discovery in the City of David of what she said were likely the remains of King David’s palace. This came to be known as the “Large Stone Structure” to distinguish it from remains found earlier that were dubbed the “Stepped Stone Structure.” The new find was dated to the tenth or ninth century B.C. and Mazar associated it with 2 Samuel 5:17: “When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to search for David. But David heard of it and went down to the stronghold.” The excavation was funded by conservative American businessman Roger Hertog, who was also involved in founding the Shalem Center, a research and educational institute in Jerusalem, where Mazar is a senior fellow. Despite several opportunities, Mazar categorically refused to comment

on anything related to her approach and wouldn't explain why. She would only say, "All our work is conducted on behalf of the Hebrew University. From the scientific perspective, there is no connection to any other body."

Palestinian residents of Silwan say they have been kept in the dark as excavations pop up around them, roads are altered, and the walls of homes in the Givati and Wadi Hilweh sections of the neighborhood crack, allegedly because of tunnels dug under their foundations. And though Elad plans to build an archaeological park in the al-Bustan section of the neighborhood that would reportedly entail the demolition of 88 homes, Palestinian residents say they have not been included in any of the planning process—from deciding where to dig to where they will live next. "We don't know if they are going to remove us or let us stay. Perhaps they have a development plan but they don't take us into consideration," says Baha Jubeh, a Silwan resident who works for the Palestinian Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation, based in Ramallah. Jubeh says residents see a clear connection between Elad's archaeological work and its settlement activity. "I think this is the view they have of the future—[archaeological] gardens without any people. They say they want to reconstruct the city as it was 2,000 years ago, but they would have to empty it of its residents if they want to develop it in that way," Jubeh says. "As an archaeologist, I know how people should excavate—layer by layer from the top to the bottom. This

destroys the site but you document everything in the process. But what's happened in Silwan is very strange. They are digging tunnels and they call it an archaeological excavation."



Excavations in the Givati parking lot site (foreground) have produced evidence from periods throughout Jerusalem's history.

Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Naomi Tsur takes strong exception to Jubeh's statements. "That's nonsense," she says. "The residents have been fully included in all the planning in Silwan. You will always find somebody who has been left out, but hundreds have been involved." According to Tsur, there are some 300 illegally constructed structures on the hills of Silwan, most built in the mid-1990s. She says the plan for the area calls for the demolition of 22 of them. Five hundred new housing units will be built for those affected. Tsur adds that archaeological development in Silwan would benefit local residents economically thanks to increased tourist traffic.

At the moment, Elad operates a visitors' center that attracts several hundred thousand people a year, and almost exclusively emphasizes Jewish history in the City of David area. (Though it is important to note that the site was largely used during the Muslim periods as agricultural land and there are therefore almost no archaeological remains from this time, which includes the rules of a series of Muslim Caliphates, interrupted by Crusader rule, and ending with the Ottoman period.) For their part, local Palestinians have established a committee that works to bring public attention to the situation in Silwan, via an on-site information tent with maps and city plans, chances to speak with residents, and an informative website.

Silwan sits within the boundaries of the "Holy Basin," the Old City of Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings. At its center sits the Temple Mount, known to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary, the epicenter of religious life in the city now as it was in antiquity. In the 1967 Middle East war Israel captured East Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank from Jordanian forces, but a decision was made at the time to leave the Islamic holy sites on the Temple Mount under the administrative control of the Waqf. Although this is the most important archaeological site in the region, in deference to both Jewish and Muslim religious sensitivities, there has never been an orderly and scientific excavation on the Temple Mount. But the status quo changed in the 1990s when the

Waqf built a new mosque in the compound known as el-Marwani Mosque or Solomon's Stables. This triggered the formation of the Israeli Committee for the Prevention of Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount by a coalition of cultural and political leaders, and prominent archaeologists including Mazar and Bar Ilan University's Gabriel Barkay, who were interested in salvaging any items of archaeological value from the site.

The construction project included a massive excavation operation carried out by the Waqf between 1996 and 1999. But according to Barkay, it was not done in a scientific manner. By 1999, Waqf bulldozers had moved in and stripped away layers of earth, forming a large pit in the southeast area of the Temple Mount. Four hundred truckloads of earth were dumped about a third of a mile away in the Kidron Valley.

In response to the Waqf activity, Barkay established the Temple Mount Antiquities Salvage Operation to sort through the transferred earth and save whatever artifacts might be found. The ongoing project is sponsored by Bar Ilan University and receives financial support from Elad. "The earth was ripped from its archaeological context," Barkay explains. "We don't know from what depth they removed it or what was situated around it. We have no details. But even if ninety percent of the information is lost, you still have ten percent, which is more than zero percent." Five and a half

years of sorting Temple Mount spoil have produced tens of thousands of artifacts from every period of human activity in Jerusalem. There are coins dating to 538 B.C. and the return of the Jewish community from Babylonian exile, and to the Persian, Hasmonean, Herodian, First Jewish Revolt, Roman, Byzantine, and early Arab periods. Barkay's team also found one of the largest-ever collections of Crusader-era coins in the discarded soil, as well as jewelry, arrowheads, amulets, a section of a marble column believed to date from the Late Roman or Byzantine period, and large quantities of Bronze Age ceramics.

Many Israelis are highly critical of the Waqf 's own construction and renovation work on the Temple Mount itself, and maintain that valuable archaeological evidence has been lost as a result of the Islamic body's heavy-handed approach. Barkay and other archaeologists condemned the Waqf 's activity on the Temple Mount as "barbaric" and likened it to the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. "Excavations need to be carried out with appropriate scientific supervision and meticulous work, not bulldozers," Barkay says. "But of course, there is a certain ideology that stands behind this act."

Finkelstein, often seen as an ideological rival of Barkay by both colleagues and the media, nevertheless supports his view. "What is happening on the Temple Mount is

disgraceful,” he says. “If this happened anywhere else, the entire world would shout and go crazy. If Israel were to do such a thing, they would say Israel is brutal and fascist. But when the Waqf did this in Jerusalem, most of the world kept their mouth shut.” (Ironically, most of the antiquities that have been harmed as a result of this activity are from the Islamic period to 1917, when the British conquered the region in World War I.)

Palestinians say excavations funded by Jewish pro-settlement groups are also being carried out underneath homes adjacent to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif zone. Some Palestinians claim there are even digs under the Temple Mount itself, a contention flatly denied by Israelis, regardless of their political or ideological leanings. There have been underground excavations along the length of the Western Wall, and these digs have thus far revealed a Herodian road that ran alongside the Temple Mount, water cisterns, an aqueduct from the Hasmonean period, and construction from the Muslim period. In 1996, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu opened a new access to the subterranean tunnel along the western supporting wall of the Temple Mount, allowing visitors to exit the site at its northern end, near the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, rather than having to retrace their steps south through the nearly 1,500-foot-long tunnel. This triggered violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians, who feared the tunnel’s new exit

was a prelude to a Jewish settlement effort in the Muslim Quarter. Some 80 people were killed in the violence.

In late 2000, opposition leader Ariel Sharon paid a visit to the Temple Mount under heavy guard. Many say this move ignited the second Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, that eventually cost the lives of about 1,000 Israelis and 5,000 Palestinians in street clashes, terrorist attacks, and open warfare.

Of course, it is not only scholars and politicians, but also religious leaders, who have a stake in the excavations in Jerusalem. “When archaeology and history are infused with values, they are much stronger and more meaningful,” says Rabbi Rabinovitch of the Western Wall Heritage Foundation. “Excavations in Jerusalem prove the Jewish people didn’t first arrive in the city in 1967, but rather that their evolution into a cohesive nation began there. There was the First Temple, the Second Temple, the binding of Isaac, Abraham.”

The leader of Israel’s Islamic Movement-Northern Branch, Sheikh Raed Salah, has bolstered his influential position among the Palestinian public across the country by declaring himself the defender of al-Aqsa mosque and denying any historical Jewish connection to the site. “The Western Wall—all its various parts, structures and gates, and all the names these parts, structures, and gates are called—is an

inseparable part of the al-Aqsa compound,” the Israeli Ynet news website quoted Salah as saying. “He who says that the Jews or the Israeli establishment has any right to al-Aqsa, even to just one stone, this is an abominable attack, a falsehood, completely baseless. He among Palestinians, Arabs, or Muslims who accepts this is a traitor to Allah and his Prophet.”

Bar Ilan archaeologist Barkay slams Salah. “Those who blame Israel for having political intentions in archaeology have their own political intentions,” he says. “Since the 1990s, we have been hearing all kinds of ridiculous claims that there was never a Jewish temple on the Temple Mount. This is a contemptible and cynical exploitation of history for political goals.” Repeated requests to arrange interviews with Islamic Waqf officials in Jerusalem went unanswered.

Official Palestinian Authority archaeologists are decidedly absent from Jerusalem. Israel now administers the city and decides what does and does not happen there, despite the fact that many believe this area of the city should serve as the capital of the future Palestinian state. Government bodies belonging to the Palestinian Authority, which was established in 1994 in accordance with an interim Israeli-Palestinian peace accord, are forbidden from operating in Jerusalem. A Palestinian parliament building was constructed in the eastern neighborhood of Abu Dis, but it sits empty; the seat of

government is located slightly north of Jerusalem in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Palestinian officials declare that they have an inclusive view of archaeology but, as their own Antiquities Department is prevented from operating in Jerusalem and large areas of the West Bank, this approach has little influence. “Our official policy is that we respect all cultural and historical layers regardless of which period,” says Palestinian Tourism Minister Khuloud Deibas, whose office is responsible for archaeology in the West Bank. “We believe the sites of the three religions—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—are part of our history and should be open for anyone to come and enjoy or pray in.”

Debate is fierce over who will control the holy city in a final peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians. Many believe the two sides will never reach an agreement. In late June, the Jerusalem municipality approved Tsur’s plan to demolish Palestinians’ homes in Silwan and build a park surrounded by restaurants, stores, and art galleries where the houses are now located. The city’s decision triggered international condemnation and led to protests by both Palestinians and supporters from the Israeli left. Street clashes ensued between local Palestinian residents and Israeli security forces, with casualties on both sides. And with

the city proposing to knock down dozens of more homes, the tensions in Silwan are rising every day.

While diplomatic negotiations founder, archaeologists continue digging in the Holy Basin, pulling up new evidence and inevitably adding fuel to the political fire. “There is a sort of thinking that one side is right and the other is wrong,” Finkelstein says. “But, in my opinion, there are no saints in Jerusalem.”

Mati Milstein is [Archaeology](#)'s Middle East Correspondent.