

The use of archaeology in Jerusalem as a political weapon

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Early in May of this year, Israeli archaeologist Eli Shukron announced that he had discovered the citadel captured by the biblical King David during his purported conquest of Jerusalem around 1000 BCE. This is only the latest of many claims made by archaeologists relying on biblical accounts who claim to have unearthed sites related to the history of King David, whose actual existence has yet to be sufficiently evidenced by modern-day scientists and historians.

The actions taken by such archaeologists and the powerful organizations to which they belong have been heavily criticized for using a selective view of history in order to marginalize local Palestinian communities. In addition, the methods and practices utilized by these groups aim to create a limited heritage that caters to wealthy financial backers overseas and excludes these local residents who are systematically being brushed aside in favor of the establishment of ever-grander tourist attractions. Those Palestinians who remain face severe overcrowding and slum-like conditions due to the dubious and extra-legal actions of the heritage organizations in obtaining land.

Shukron, like many biblical archaeologists working in Jerusalem, works as a guide for a tourist industry that has seen a great boom over the past decade. According to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013 was a record-breaking year for tourism, with 3.5 million visitors. Some 75 percent passed through Jerusalem, with the leading countries of origin being the United States, Russia, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

Archaeologist tour guides like Shukron have come under sharp criticism for their methods and practices, in particular their use of the Bible as their primary, and often only, tool of reference during their guide sessions. Another tour guide and archaeologist operating in East Jerusalem is Asher Altchul, who explained to a *New York Times* journalist that "our guide book is the Bible." Altchul trains all of the "official" tour guides in this part of the city and justifies his required use of Hebrew Bibles by asking, "Why are people here? They are not here because of the archaeology. This is important because of the Bible."

The period focused on by Altchul and his cohorts has been essentially limited to the reigns of King David and King Solomon, an incredibly narrow selection of the region's rich history, spanning only about one century between the years 1040 and 931 BCE, the estimated birth of David and death of Solomon, respectively.

Jerusalem, one of the oldest cities in the world, has much more to tell its visitors about history and the events that have shaped our existence. These lessons are far from limited to a religious character. Artifacts found in the region date to the Copper Age (around the fourth millennium BCE), and archaeologists have found ample

evidence to show that a permanent settlement existed as long ago as 3000 BCE, during the Bronze Age.

Prior to the Biblical period, Jerusalem acted as the capital of an Egyptian vassal city-state that later became part of Canaan. This period was critically important due to the geopolitical convergence of the Egyptian, Hittite, and Assyrian empires in the region. All of these groups played important roles in the development of modern humanity.

Following the short span targeted by Altchul comes a long history of political strife and cultural development in the area. After the death of Solomon, all or part of the city was occupied by various national and ethnic entities and polities including the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians under Darius, the Macedonians under Alexander the Great, the Romans, the Byzantines, Muslim Arabs, European Christian crusaders, returning Muslims under Saladin, the Holy Roman Empire, the Tartars, the Mamluks, the Ottoman Turks, the British Mandate of Palestine following World War I, the State of Jordan, and finally the modern State of Israel.

The amount of historical material that could potentially be provided to tourists in Jerusalem is staggering and should be carefully analyzed and elaborated by any serious archaeologist or historian concerned with the legacy of this region. According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the world's leading heritage preservation organization, both cultural and natural heritage considered to be of outstanding value to humanity should be protected, conserved, and appropriately presented so that it may be transmitted to future generations in accordance with modern scientific methods.

The emphasis on using the Bible as a primary tool of interpretation smacks of Zionism, an ideology and national movement that seeks to establish a Jewish homeland in the former Palestinian mandate, considered by its proponents to be the "Land of Israel." Throughout the lifespan of this tendency, Zionists have used religious texts and traditions as tools to keep Israelis and Palestinians separated into their respective national categories, fostering violent and deadly opposition over many decades of strife.

The undeniably unscientific methods of Shukron and Altchul are not limited to tours of the ancient city alone. The former employer of Shukron, the Ir David Foundation, also known as "Elad," the main financial arbiter of archaeological field work in the city, shares this fixed view of history. In addition, it has been responsible for many underhanded land deals that have further impoverished an already struggling Palestinian population in East Jerusalem.

A spokesperson for Elad, Doron Spielman, told *Time* that "the Muslims have Mecca; Jerusalem is the Jewish Mecca, and Elad was

formed to purchase as much of this land as possible with the idea of both rejuvenating it with life and also excavating beneath the surface.” Mecca, of course, has become an enormous tourist operation for the Saudi elites in recent years, drawing an average of 12 million visitors and a government commission of \$17 billion every year.

The roots of the land crisis in East Jerusalem reach all the way back to the First World War, when a secret agreement was made between the British and French governments to divide up the Middle East following the war in view of the impending collapse of the Ottoman Empire. This, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, was used as a template when the League of Nations created the mandate system during the 1920s, giving the newly carved-out land of Palestine to Great Britain. At the same time, the British government had issued the Balfour Declaration, which promised support for a Jewish national home in Palestine in order to placate British Zionists.

In the wake of the Second World War and a rapid growth in the Jewish population of Palestine, a war erupted between the Arab and Israeli residents of the region. This action resulted in the withdrawal of the British from Palestine and the declaration of an independent State of Israel in 1948. The outcome left the western half of Jerusalem in Israeli hands while East Jerusalem fell under the rule of the Kingdom of Jordan.

This division remained until 1967, during the Six Day War, when Jordanian troops attacked West Jerusalem but faced defeat on the Temple Mount, after which the Israel Defense Forces captured East Jerusalem. Although East Jerusalem is not recognized as Israeli territory by the majority of political powers today, its law and jurisdiction in the area remains a stark fact for its residents.

Nearly 400,000 Palestinians still live in East Jerusalem, where a neighborhood known as Silwan has become a target of Elad’s operations over the past several years. Its latest project has been to bring about the demolition of 88 homes housing about 1,500 people in Silwan, where Elad claims to have found the location of King Solomon’s garden, the alleged place where he wrote the “Song of Songs.” No archaeological evidence has been presented to substantiate these assertions.

One of the residents who is in danger of losing his home is Fakhri Abu-Diab, who has described to many different journalists the faulty legal system that prevents the Palestinian population of East Jerusalem from building homes legally. Anyone wishing to erect or repair a home must first obtain a permit from the Jerusalem municipality, but Palestinians are refused year after year, forcing them to build illegally. Elad is using the illegal construction of houses in Silwan as an excuse to bring in bulldozers, a threat that terrorizes the daily lives of Abu-Diab’s family and others.

“My kids ask, ‘What will happen to us if they demolish our house? What will we do?’” he explained. “I try to avoid this question, and I lie to them because I don’t want them to live under the stress and fear of demolition.” Abu-Diab also told reporters about the long history of his family in this area. “I was born in my house, and my house was my father’s house, and before that, my grandfather’s house. I can still smell my mother in the room where I was born.”

The refusal of the municipality to issue construction permits has resulted in many of the Palestinian homes sitting on the verge of collapse in Silwan. The overcrowding is horrendous, reported Abu-Diab, who lives under one roof with 13 other people, including 5 grandchildren. Most of his neighbors face similar conditions.

If one takes these facts into account when considering the words of Elad spokesman Spielman, his “rejuvenation” of East Jerusalem

translates into destroying the homes of thousands of Palestinian families and replacing them with the best historical attractions money can buy. Elad is not concerned with where these people will go or how they will survive following their dispossession.

One of the most outspoken critics of Elad has been Israeli archaeologist Yonathan Mizrachi, who offers alternative tours to those willing to listen to a different version of history. He has written numerous articles explaining the political situation in East Jerusalem, which he calls very complex. Here he asserts that although archaeological remains seem an “unlikely flashpoint for conflict,” both sides (Israeli and Palestinian) have used “remains of the past to legitimate their claims for sovereignty over Jerusalem.”

Between 1996 and 1999, for example, the Jerusalem *Waqf*, an Arab trust that has managed Islamic sites in Jerusalem since the twelfth century, removed approximately 400 truckloads of topsoil from the Temple Mount during a construction project. Beginning in 2005, an organization called the Temple Mount Salvage Operation, has been working to sift through the debris in search of artifacts that may have survived the disturbance.

To date, the operation has recovered artifacts ranging from ancient coins to architectural fragments, some dating from as far back as 600 BCE. The team is still sifting through this debris today, exposing the fact that Palestinian authorities have also shown disrespect to the cultural history of the city.

Mizrachi states succinctly in one of his interviews that both sides are “using the past to ignore the present.” He writes further that “despite its preoccupation with the study of past cultures, archaeology is practiced in the present day...the authorities responsible for researching the past...can and must include the residents who live in and around the site in their excavation plans, share with them the results of their research and conduct themselves in a way which demonstrates a consideration for the local community’s own heritage and culture.”

Ultimately, the biggest problem facing historic interpretation in East Jerusalem is the fact that the site is managed by a private settler organization with narrow political interests that are bound up with those of wealthy financiers overseas. Elad’s efforts to convert East Jerusalem into a tourist resort geared toward a specific religious group are both deplorable and unethical. The livelihood of local residents should not be placed in jeopardy so that a single group’s heritage can be used to rake in billions of dollars for investors.



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