

# DEEP DIVISIONS

Archaeologists are unearthing remarkable finds in Jerusalem. But the digs have sparked an argument over who should run the site and present the results to the public. **Haim Watzman** reports.

In the ancient heart of Jerusalem, the one-kilometre-square walled area known as the Old City contains some of the most sacred sites for three religions, and as such it is no stranger to religious and political conflict. Yet some of the latest disputes are centred just outside the massive walls, in a Palestinian village known as Silwan that is now a neighbourhood within greater Jerusalem.

Here, archaeologists are battling over the interpretation of major ongoing excavations. The site, known to Israelis as the City of David, lies under part of Silwan and is operated by a Jewish settler organization. Some Israeli archaeologists are openly critical of this organization's aims, while many Palestinians claim that the digs are damaging their property. At the heart of the debate is the question of who should be allowed to control the site, oversee excavations, and present the findings to the public.

The part of Silwan that lies on top of the site contains some four dozen homes of Palestinian Arabs, and 20 homes of Israeli settlers. The houses stand on the ruins of centuries of Muslim and Byzantine habitation, which in turn cover the Jerusalem that was sacked and burned by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and before that besieged by the Assyrians in 701 BC. Farther down lies evidence that might help confirm — or refute — the Bible's account of a prosperous united Israelite kingdom in the tenth century BC, ruled by the kings David and Solomon. And deeper still are the remains of an even more ancient city that prospered around 1800–1700 BC, during the Middle Bronze Age.

So it's hardly surprising that archaeologists have been excavating here for the past 140 years. Digs are now under way at several sites in Silwan — both between and beneath the homes of the village's inhabitants. Each month, busloads of Israeli schoolchildren and Israeli and foreign tourists flock to see the unearthed finds.

But to some, the way in which these finds are presented and explained to the visitors is a major cause for concern. The visitors' centre

at the site is run by a non-profit foundation called Ir David (which means 'City of David' in Hebrew). The group was established in 1986 to promote excavation and tourist development of the site, and is popularly known by its Hebrew acronym, Elad. The foundation often helps to organize funds and support for archaeological excavations at the site.

But Elad also has another goal: promoting Jewish settlement in the village of Silwan. To that end, it has reclaimed formerly Jewish houses, evicting the Palestinian residents and replacing them with Jews, and has purchased Palestinian houses — sometimes using means that its Palestinian and Israeli critics charge are legally questionable. Renovation of these homes and development work for residential and tourist purposes have necessitated salvage excavations that have inconvenienced the Palestinian residents and sometimes caused damage to their property.

**"We can't run any site if the residents don't want us."**

— Yigael Ben-Ari

Elad's members and supporters are nearly all nationalist Orthodox Jews who believe that Jewish settlement in the territories captured by Israel in the Six-Day War of 1967 is God's will and a precondition for the arrival of the Messiah.

Although archaeologists digging at the site say that Elad has not pressed political interpretations on their work, some of them have raised concerns that the organization's religious and political goals are incompatible with the role of running a national park containing an important archaeological site. Indeed, they charge that Elad is using its position to promote a distorted version of history — merging myth and legend with archaeological fact.

This apparent conflict of interest has prompted a group of archaeologists to initiate legal moves to get the Israeli government to take control of the site from Elad. "They are taking over public land," says Rafi Greenberg, an archaeologist at Tel Aviv University who is one of the organizers of the initiative.

But Ronny Reich, an archaeologist at the University of Haifa who has excavated at the City of David, notes that Elad does not try to dictate who can work there. "I don't think anyone can tell a group of people that wants to participate in the excavations that they can't," he says.

Excavations near this ancient tunnel have revealed fresh details about how the Gihon spring was used.

M. RICHARDSON/CITY OF DAVID



Just below Jerusalem's city walls stretches a hill that is home to the archaeological remains known as the City of David.

Elad's spokesman refused *Nature's* request to interview a representative of the organization and asked that questions be submitted in writing. When they were, the spokesman failed to provide answers, despite repeated promises to do so.

### Fact or fiction?

One way to experience the Elad view of the City of David is to tour the site with an Elad-trained guide. It is possible to visit the excavations on your own or with a guide you've brought yourself. But the default option for tourists and school groups is to hear the narrative that asserts the Jewish claim and historical connection to the site, say Greenberg and his colleagues.

There is some truth to these claims, as a *Nature* visit to the site suggests. The tour guide provided by Elad was well-spoken and knowledgeable, but mixed myth and fact in her presentation. For example, she asserted that the reason David chose the site for his capital is that it lies just below the Temple Mount, which is identical to Mount Moriah, the site where, according to the Bible, Abraham took his son Isaac to offer him as a sacrifice to God. Although the identification of the Temple Mount with Mount Moriah is well-established in Jewish tradition, there is no archaeological evidence for Abraham's presence on the site — or indeed for the existence of Abraham and Isaac.

In fact, a handful of archaeologists go so far as to say that David and Solomon may also be largely mythical characters. This view is rejected by most experts on the period — they tend to agree that it is likely the two ancient rulers did reign in Jerusalem. But many scholars argue that the evidence discovered so far — both at the City of David and at other sites in the region — indicates that the biblical description of the extent

and wealth of their kingdoms is exaggerated.

Furthermore, the Elad guide made no mention of Byzantine and Muslim settlement, giving the impression that the site is solely a Jewish one. But this may not be too surprising, given that she had only about an hour to explain the site and that her audience consisted of Israeli Jews, including a number of easily bored children and teenagers. Under those conditions, the presentation of any archaeological site would no doubt be geared more towards storytelling than to the detailed technical facts of what the archaeologists have found and how they interpret the evidence.

Few dispute that this complex site has yielded some major discoveries in recent years. Near the top of the hill in Silwan is an ongoing excavation led by Eilat Mazar of the Hebrew University and sponsored by Elad, the Shalem Center (a Jerusalem-based research institute), the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Society for the Study of the Land of Israel and Its Antiquities. In early 2005, Mazar's team uncovered a large stone structure, and dated pottery found inside the structure to early in the Iron Age IIa

period (around 1000 BC), which corresponds to the time of King David. So far, several large rooms have been uncovered, as well as walls two to three metres wide. In March, Mazar announced the discovery of another 20-metre section of the structure's outer wall, further evidence of its huge size. She believes that the massive nature of the structure indicates that it must have been an important public building.

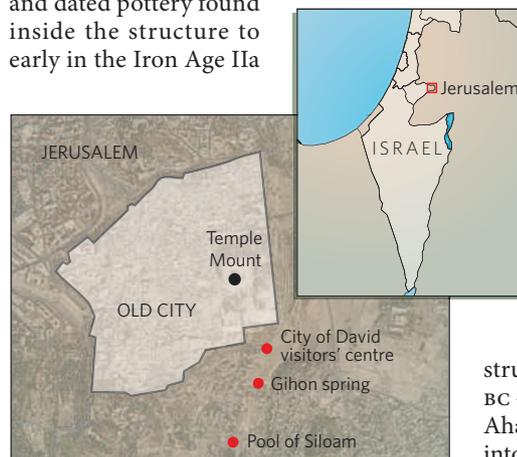
And because it is located close to the Temple Mount and at a commanding position in the city, she believes that it is the palace that, according to the Bible, David built after conquering Jerusalem and making it his capital in the early tenth century BC<sup>1</sup>.

### Age concerns

But some archaeologists dispute her dating and interpretation. Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, for example, is a leading proponent of the view that many archaeological remains throughout Israel dated to the early tenth century BC — the time of David and

Solomon — are actually nearly a century younger. On the basis of his later dating of the artefacts in question, and of the lack of references to a large Israeli kingdom centred in Jerusalem in the records of near-Eastern cultures, he argues that the rulers of Jerusalem were not significant players on the international stage until much later. "Mazar has done fine and important work," he says, "but interpretation is another matter. The structure she found can't be dated unambiguously."

Finkelstein thinks that the large stone structure instead dates to the ninth century BC — the period in which Omri and his son Ahab organized the northern Israelite tribes into a powerful kingdom. He argues that the





Palatial digs: Eilat Mazar (inset) believes the large building she uncovered in Silwan in 2005 is the palace of King David.

influence of the more powerful kingdom to the north, to which the rulers of Jerusalem were probably vassals, may have been the spur for major construction. Or perhaps, he suggests, the collapse of Omri's dynasty in the mid-eighth century BC may have created a power vacuum that the kings of Jerusalem were able to fill.

Another collection of artefacts, found in 2005 near the Gihon spring at the bottom of the Silwan hill, also touches on this debate. Reich and Eli Shukron, who conducted salvage excavations for the Israel Antiquities Authority around the spring, discovered a large number of bullae — clay seals placed on ancient letters. The researchers dated the bullae to the late ninth or early eighth century BC. The figures on some of the seals are Phoenician, a sign that Jerusalem was trading with the coast at the time. Further evidence is provided by some 10,000 fish bones found with the bullae — around 90% of which come from saltwater fish.

### Tunnel vision

Ironically, although the Gihon spring was long the city's sole source of water and is mentioned in the Bible, it attracted relatively little archaeological attention until Reich and Shukron began digging there. Reich thought it so unpromising that he initially resisted being assigned to dig there by the antiquities authority, his employer at the time.

"Eleven or twelve years ago Elad received a permit from the municipality to build a visitors' centre by the spring," says Reich. "The head of the antiquities authority, Amir Drori, told them that, by law, they had to fund a salvage excavation at the site before building."

Reich and Shukron's work on the spring allowed them to work out that a tunnel dug by King Hezekiah in the eighth century BC to bring the water safely into the ancient city was used in a different way from that previously supposed by archaeologists. In addition, they uncovered a pair of massive towers dating from the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries BC

— demonstrating that the city was large and wealthy at that time<sup>2,3</sup>.

The bullae came from a new salvage excavation near the spring, this one initiated by the need to unblock the sewerage line that dumps the Old City's waste in the Kidron riverbed. In 2005, the pair made another major find — the Pool of Siloam, mentioned in later Jewish sources and the New Testament.

This excavation ran up against the site's political and legal complexities. The excavation goes into the hill and under a mosque and a kindergarten, whose walls have cracked. The Palestinians say that the excavations were carried out without regard for their property and caused the damage.

Yigael Ben-Ari, district manager for the Israel Nature and National Parks Protection Authority's central region, says that the damage is unrelated and rejects the charge of indifference to the Palestinians and their property. "We agreed in advance to take care of any damage that the sewerage work and excavations would cause," he says. "An engineer we brought to examine the damage said there is no connection between our work and the cracks in the mosque. The work has turned up a find of worldwide importance." Ben-Ari says he and his staff have met with the Palestinian residents of Silwan and will help to repair the damage. "We can't run any site if the residents don't want us," he says.

Meanwhile, Greenberg and his colleagues maintain that the extent of the salvage excavations has been dictated in part by Elad's desire to create tourist attractions to present to the public. They argue that the site should be run by the parks authority or some other national body that is subject to public oversight and does not have a political or religious agenda.

In fact, Greenberg's group claims, such a transfer of authority was supposed to happen in 1998, when a group of 33 archaeologists petitioned Israel's Supreme Court to cancel the permit that allowed Elad to operate the site. The suit was withdrawn after the state attorney told the court that Elad's permit had been cancelled.

But in 2002, under legal circumstances that are still unclear, Elad resumed managing the park. This has spurred Greenberg and his group to prepare to renew the 1998 suit. According to Greenberg, the petition has been delayed for technical reasons but will be filed with the Supreme Court in the near future.

For his part, Reich says he disagrees with Elad's politics and belongs to the group of archaeologists who think that the evidence on the ground fails to support much of the Bible's narrative. But he has not joined Greenberg's efforts to remove Elad from involvement. The digs and the resulting tourism have provided employment for the Arab residents, he notes. Unlike many other archaeologists, Reich has not used student volunteers, and instead employed 20–30 local Palestinian residents — whose salaries were paid by Elad. "It's the residents' luck that they happen to live here," he says. "So they should live off the site as well."

The excavations could not be accomplished without the money and sponsors Elad brings in, Reich maintains. He says that the group does not impose its politics or religion on him or other archaeologists. Furthermore, Elad has been willing to pay for the kind of unexciting, but crucially important, technical work for which it is difficult to find national and academic funding. For example, Elad has helped Reich to find a private funder to pay

a draftsman to copy the marks on the bullae, so that they can be analysed and compared.

Greenberg and his associates are still in the process of preparing their court petition. In the meantime, the conflict between science and politics at this most sensitive of archaeological sites has not affected either its interest to scholars or its attraction for tourists. Excavations continue in the City of David and the archaeological park is filled with Israeli and foreign visitors. And whatever the final decision on who runs the site, that is likely to continue. ■

**Haim Watzman is a writer based in Jerusalem.**



Rafi Greenberg wants to see different management at the City of David site.

1. Mazar, E. *Biblic. Archaeol. Rev.* **32**, 16–27, 70 (2006).
2. Reich, R. & Shukron, E. in *New Studies on Jerusalem, Proceedings of the Fourth Conference, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 1998* (ed. Baruch, E.) 5–16 (1998).
3. Reich, R. & Shukron, E. *Biblic. Archaeol. Rev.* **25**, 22–32, 72–73 (1999).