Israel’s ‘National Heritage Sites’ Project in the West Bank:
Archeological importance and political significance
Introduction: The Rehabilitation and Empowerment of National Heritage Infrastructures Project

In February 2010, the Israeli government adopted the “National Heritage Sites Project.” The project’s stated goal is to strengthen the connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel through the development and promotion of two kinds of sites: historical sites from the history of Zionism and archeological sites marking the Jewish presence in the land throughout the ages. The initial proposal included some 150 sites - museums, monuments, lookouts, and more. The list includes sites from Tel Dan in the Upper Galilee to Umm Rashrash (Eilat) in the south.¹ Thirty-seven archæological sites are on the list, six of them located in the Occupied Territories.

The project’s nationalist intent is mentioned explicitly in the promotional literature: “In its dramatic five-year plan, the program’s goal is to breathe new life into Zionism. The projects listed here are no mere indulgence. They are an urgent necessity in the face of the danger of ideological and cultural decline, and in light of the loss of identity rampant among the younger generation and the public in general—a crisis that endangers national cohesion and Jewish existence in the land of Israel.”²

The program approved by the government in February, 2010 entails the rehabilitation and preparation of the project’s sites for large-scale tourism and will last for about five years, with an overall budget of approximately 400 million shekels. Alongside the rehabilitation of the sites, the project proposal suggests two tourist trails that will link them. The first trail, called “Historical Trail of the Land of Israel,” connects archeological sites such as Tel Hazor, Tel Gezer, and Beit She’an; the second trail is called “The Israeli Experience” and includes sites from the history of Zionism, such as Tel Hai, Mikveh Yisrael, and Kfar Etzion.³ After publication of the initial list, regional councils, the general public, and others were invited to propose additional sites for inclusion, and of 220 proposals submitted to the project’s management 30 are located in the Occupied Territories. Five of these sites have been approved or are in the process of being approved for the project.⁴

The National Heritage Sites Project has a blatant Jewish bias; it ignores much of the rich cultural heritage of the land, of which the Jewish history and presence is only one part. No Nabbatean sites appear on the list, no Hellenistic remains (except Tel Maresha), no Roman or Byzantine sites, no Muslim remains, and no Crusader sites. Further, the archeological sites that are included in the project are identified as purely Jewish, obscuring the many cultural layers that exist below and above the Jewish remains identified. These omissions will make it virtually impossible for the average visitor to understand the history of the land, without chronological and cultural gaps, or to recognize the rich history of the land and its peoples through the ages. Thus, the sites chosen, the trails connecting between them, and the presentation of their findings, therein, are part and parcel of a larger Israeli policy of spatial control intended to and strengthening the attachment to the land among the Jewish public. The location of several of the sites in the West Bank, and the seamless transition that is created along the two trails between the sites within and beyond the Green Line, serves to blur the distinction between sovereign Israeli territory and the

---

¹ N. Hasson, “Critics slam heritage plan for omitting non-Jewish sites,” Haaretz (February 25, 2010).
² From The Rehabilitation and Empowerment of National Heritage Infrastructure Project [in Hebrew], Introduction, p. 4.
⁴ M. Gilad, “Setting Sights on Sites” Haaretz (February 6, 2012)
Occupied Territories over which Israel's sovereignty is considered illegitimate by the international community and agreements. This document focuses on the archeological sites in the National Heritage project that are located in the West Bank. It does not include sites within the Green Line or in the Occupied Territories that belong to the category of modern Zionist history, such as Kfar Etzion.
QUMRAN

The Qumran archeological site is part of Qumran National Park, which came under the jurisdiction of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (then called the National Parks Authority) as early as 1967. Located on the northern banks of the Dead Sea, on the main road to Ein Gedi and Masada, the park includes remnants of a settlement that existed on the site primarily from the Second Century B.C.E. until the First Century C.E. The uniqueness of the site is due to the Dead Sea Scrolls, first discovered there in the 1940s in the caves of Wadi Qumran, at whose feet the archeological site is located. The scrolls are essentially fragments and range in length from a few words to complete works. Of about 800 “books” from the Second Temple Period, 30 percent are excerpts from the Old Testament; they include all the books of the Hebrew Bible except for the Scroll of Esther. The remainder are apocryphal books and works considered to be exegeses and instruction books written for the members of the Judean Desert sect.

One of the most important findings is the full text of the Book of Isaiah, discovered in 1947. Another major text is the Copper Scroll, discovered in 1952, which describes in detail the contents (though not the location) of a buried treasure. The discovery of these scrolls, buried deep in the desert, not far from the Dead Sea, and their dating, which overlaps with the early Christian period in the Holy Land, has made Qumran a destination for thousands of researchers and millions of visitors from around the world over the last few decades. In 2010 alone, more than 400,000 people visited the site, making it the ninth most visited tourist site in Israel.

Qumran is a small archeological site that includes a system of cisterns and the scattered remains of humble structures. On the face of it, nothing distinguishes the archeological remains at Qumran from those found at many more impressive sites from the same period, but the combination of the desert landscape, the enigma of the identity of the inhabitants of the place, and the buried scrolls, today housed at the Israel Museum, provide the visitor with an extraordinary experience.

There is no unequivocal answer to the question of who were the inhabitants of Qumran. Possible answers range from radical Jewish sects, such as the Essenes or the Zealots, to early Christians.

The Israeli public in general identifies Qumran as part of Israel, and few think of it as being located in the West Bank. The majority see Qumran as an inseparable part of the history of the Jewish people, and the question of sovereignty over the site in a future political agreement is seldom discussed. Circumstances that have led to this perception among the public include (1) the location of the site in the desert, far from any Palestinian settlement; (2) its location on the road to Ein Gedi and Masada—two key sites in modern Israeli national consciousness; (3) the buried scrolls—the oldest extant texts of the books of the Bible, from more than two thousand years ago, and their importance to Judaism, to Christianity, and to the history of monotheism in general; and (4) the dating of the site in the Second Temple Period, a period that is considered a golden age of Judaism following the destruction of the Kingdom of Judea and the Babylonian exile. The inclusion of Qumran as a national heritage site will probably not affect its already significant public status or the number of visitors.

---

View from Qumran towards the Dead sea

Qumran site and the Judean desert hills
SUSYA (SUSIYA)

The Susya archeological site is located about one km north of the Israeli settlement of Susya and one km west of present-day Palestinian Susiya. The site is under the jurisdiction of the Hebron Hills regional council and was declared part of the settlement of Susya. Until 1985 the Palestinian village of Susiya contained the archeological remains within its boundaries. Following the decision to annex the area into the settlement and to create the tourist infrastructure of the site, the Palestinian residents were transferred about one km from the site—where they live to this day.7 The region also includes the Jewish settlements of Maon, Carmel, Beit Yatir, and others. Most of the Palestinian residents of the area are concentrated in the village/city of Yatta and in smaller villages such as Khirbet Ma‘ein, Karmil, and Tawana, as well as in tents and temporary structures. Other sites of antiquities in the area include Carmel and Eshtamoa (Samoa).

Archeological excavations conducted in Susya beginning in 1970 exposed reliefs of menorahs, ritual baths (mikvehs), and graves that apparently reflect Jewish burial practices. Susya’s central structure is a public building with a mosaic floor that features inscriptions and a menorah, all of which have led archeologists to identify it as a synagogue. The synagogue is dated to between the Fourth and the Eighth Centuries C.E., and the main period of the ancient settlement there apparently dates from the Second to the Eighth Centuries C.E.8 Although the name Susya is not mentioned in ancient Jewish literature, the discovery of the synagogue, the menorah reliefs, and other remains have led scholars to conclude that this was indeed a Jewish settlement. The site is currently presented to the Israeli public as an ancient Jewish settlement from the period of the Talmud (parallel to the Byzantine period).

The establishment of the Jewish settlement of Susya in 1983, and the expulsion of the Palestinian inhabitants of Susiya in 1983, facilitated the illusion of Jewish continuity on the site from ancient times to the present. This consolidation of the Israeli-Jewish connection to the site is all the more blatant given that Palestinian residents of Susiya are prohibited from entering the site even if they purchase tickets at the visitors’ center. (It is needless to note the irony of buying entrance tickets to a place that was once one’s home.)9

A visit to Susya today provides almost no information about archeological layers or remains that indicate anything other than the Jewish presence. For example, in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries, a mosque was built on the remains of the ancient synagogue. The presence of the mosque on top of the synagogue raises interesting questions, none of which are addressed in the visit or in scholarship. Questions such as whether the population of the place changed, whether it became Muslim, and whether the mosque was built by force or voluntarily, could greatly enhance a visitor’s understanding of Susya’s place in the cultural and social space of the South Hebron Hills.

With an ancient synagogue at its center—the most elaborate in the South Hebron Hills—Susya meets the criteria set down by the program as a Jewish heritage site and was indeed on the original list of proposed sites. The projected investment for preparing the site for massive tourism and marketing it as a central tourist attraction in the area is in line with activities already undertaken by the regional council to promote tourism. Its inclusion on the list of national heritage sites further strengthens the widespread perception among the Israeli-Jewish public, who are familiar

7 T. Dressler, “Not neighborly: Palestinians from Susya Struggling for their Land”, Ynet (February 5, 2007)
9 D. Rosenberg and Y. Gross, “Susya” (a 15-minute film)
with the archeological site and the settlement without hearing a thing about the Palestinian inhabitants who were expelled from the place or about any non-Jewish layers of the history of the site and its surroundings.
**HERODION (Jebel al-Fureidis)**

Herodion, one of the main archeological sites in the West Bank, was declared a national park in 1985. At the center of the site stands a magnificent fortified palace, identified as Herod’s fortress from the First Century B.C.E. Like many constructions attributed to Herod, Herodion was built according to a deliberate plan and inspired by Roman architecture. Mount Herodion is a round artificial hill that stretches like a rampart along a lower natural hill. Three of the four corners of the site, which is surrounded by a double wall, are fortified with three semi-circles, while its eastern corner is enclosed by a circular tower. Tunnels lead from the top of the fortress halfway down into the mountain.

At the foot of the mountain, in the area known as Lower Herodion, a large pool (46 m x 70 m) was exposed, surrounded by colonnades and a garden. Taken as a whole, this magnificent construction testifies to the technological achievements of Roman monumental architecture. At the time of the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans, between 66 and 70 C.E., groups of Jewish zealots entrenched themselves in the site. In the Second Century C.E., the site served as temporary shelter for the fighters of Bar Kochba’s revolt (132–135 C.E.), after which it was abandoned until the Fifth Century C.E. The findings from the Byzantine period (Fifth to Seventh Centuries C.E.) indicate the presence of Christian monks, and perhaps also a settlement. In this period some of the castle’s rooms were converted into residences, and three churches were built at the top of the hill. Lower Herodion includes many findings from this period.¹⁰ In the Seventh Century C.E. the site was abandoned, and it stood empty until the 20th Century, when the Palestinian settlement of al-Fureidis was established in and near the site.

Because the First Century Jewish historian Josephus Flavius noted that Herod was buried in Herodion, extensive archeological excavations have been conducted at the site for the past thirty years. In 2007, the excavation team at Herodion announced the discovery of an ornamented sarcophagus, which they identified as Herod’s tomb.¹¹ The discovery and proposed identification (still not definite) served to heighten the importance of Herodion as a central tourist site in the Gush Etzion area. Second only to Qumran, Herodion is visited annually by 70,000 people. The site has been allocated large budgets, among other things for the reconstruction of the model of Herod’s tomb and the reconstruction and preservation of the bathhouses. The proposed budget for the development of the site is also apparently among the highest in the National Heritage Sites project, amounting to about 16 million shekels.¹²

In January, 2012, on the recommendation of the chief excavator, the late Prof. Ehud Netzer, a model of Herod’s tomb was placed at the site. The model is based in part on architectural fragments found at Herodion and on similar Roman-era royal tombs. Due to the paucity of actual findings at the site, this model cannot be considered a positive reconstruction, and to date it remains a guess.¹³

The visit to the site focuses on the history of King Herod and the Jewish revolts against the

---

12 T. Avital, “Kalkalist Exclusive: 400 million shekels to go to 150 heritage sites” [in Hebrew], Kalkalist (February 19, 2010)
13 Pictures of the model can be found on the website of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority: “A model of Herod’s Tomb at the Herodion National Park.”
For the residents of Gush Etzion, the site is significant for staking their historical claim to the place. Thus, for example, upon the discovery of the compound identified with Herod’s tomb, the former head of the Gush Etzion regional council, Shaul Goldstein (today Director General of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority) said, “The location of Herod’s tomb in Herodion, one of the most fascinating structures of the ancient world, is further proof of the direct connection of Gush Etzion to the history of the Jewish people and Jerusalem…”

This embrace of Herod is interesting; until recently his Judaism was not accepted by Orthodox Jewry because he was of Edumite origin. His grandfather converted to Judaism in the Second Century B.C.E. Furthermore, the halakhic literature of the Second and Third Centuries C.E. widely criticizes Herod for his cruel harassment of the Jews. The change in attitude towards Herod is surely connected with nationalist political motives.

Herodion itself is a unique compound from the early Roman period, which teaches us a lot about the architectural style that was widespread in the Roman world in general and in our region in particular in the First Century C.E. In many respects, Herodion can serve as a case study for the connection between the dominant Roman culture in the Mediterranean basin during the period and the particular local culture. To assert that it belongs exclusively to the Jewish heritage of the place therefore distorts its importance for the understanding of the cultural complexity of life in the land in the First Century C.E. Its inclusion in the list of national heritage sites stems from the political need to present a central site in Gush Etzion as part of the Jewish heritage, and accords with the widespread identification by the Israeli public of structures from the early Roman period as belonging exclusively to the Jewish culture of the Second Temple Period.

Herodion National Park is also an example of the exploitation by Israel of a potential financial resource for the Palestinian West Bank. Visitors are directed to restaurants and businesses in nearby settlements, such as Teqoa and Qedumim, while the tourism development plan does not include the Palestinian villages of Teqoa, al-Fureidis, Za’atara, Khirbet al-Deir, and others near the site.

A model of “Herod’s tomb” at the entrance to the Herodion site

14 Herodion National Park on the Israel Nature and Parks Authority website.
Herodion behind the houses of Za’atara

Lower Herodion and the village of al-Fureidis
TEL SHILOH

Tel Shiloh was not on the original list included in the government’s announcement of the National Heritage Sites Program in February, 2010. Of the 220 sites proposed subsequently by regional councils, public bodies, and private individuals to be added to the project, the committee chose 30, among them Tel Shiloh.17 Today the site is run jointly by the Mishkan Shiloh Association – “The Center for the Study and Development of the Cradle of Settlement in the Land of Israel” -- and the Binyamin regional council. In 2012, 5 million shekels from the government’s budget was allocated to the site for excavations and development, along with 10 million shekels from other sources.18

The site is located in Southern Samaria, between Ramallah and Nablus, north of the Palestinian village of Turmus Iyya and west of the Jewish settlement of Shiloh. The first layer of settlement there is dated to the Middle Bronze Age IIB (18th-16th Centuries B.C.E.).19 The next layer dates to the Iron Age I (11th Century B.C.E.). After that, the settlement was destroyed. The site also includes remains from the Roman and Hellenistic periods (Second Century B.C.E. to First Century C.E.). Most of the remains on the site are from the Byzantine period and from the early Islamic period. Four Byzantine churches with mosaics, residential structures, workshops, and more, have been discovered on the site. In the Byzantine period the place was identified as the location of the biblical Tabernacle and declared sacred. In the early Islamic period and in the subsequent Muslim period, mosques were built on the remains of the churches.

According to the biblical story, Shiloh was the location of the Tabernacle—the home of the Ark of the Covenant and the spiritual center of the tribes of Israel. Archeological research cannot find evidence of the location of a temporary structure such as the Tabernacle—in essence a tent made of leather strips. The question of the location of the Tabernacle is a religious-spiritual one that cannot be answered by archeology.

In recent years, the site has undergone intensive development that includes the resumption of excavations and its promotion as a tourist site and an events venue. The goal of all these activities has been to bolster its image as a key tourist site among the settlements in the center of Samaria. Furthermore, Tel Shiloh was included on the Education Ministry’s list of school trips after Education Minister Gideon Sa’ar visited the site and declared that schoolchildren should come there to strengthen their national identity.20 Much of the guided tour at the site is based on biblical accounts. For example, one focuses on the estimated site of the Tabernacle. In another the remains of a Byzantine structure are identified as “maybe a synagogue,” even though this hypothesis lacks any scientific or archeological basis.

Recently a lookout tower was put up at the highest point in the center of the site, overlooking the region “all the way to the city of Ariel.” The location and height of the tower testifies clearly to the connection between control over the space and control of the historical narrative.21 In March, 2012, the tower was rebuilt as a more massive concrete structure, its concrete

---

17 Hadashot 2, “Netanyahu: Tel Shiloh is a national heritage site” [in Hebrew], Mako (February 14, 2012)
18 Government decision no. 4306 (TAMAR 2), February 14, 2012 (ratified on February 23, 2012)
20 Statement made during the Education Minister and his entourage’s visit to Tel Shiloh on December 14, 2011.
21 See the website of ancient Shiloh.
base damaging the findings beneath and around it. The accepted view in the archeological community—in Israel and in the world—is that there should be no construction whatsoever on top of archeological tels (multi-layered sites). As an example, we should recall that leading archeologists expressed across-the-board opposition to construction in Tel Rumeida in Hebron.

The construction of the tower and its location may stem from the site management’s desire to discount the Christian narrative, which locates the Tabernacle in one of the Byzantine churches at the site, and to support the Jewish tradition, which locates the Tabernacle to the north of the tel. This is one of many examples of the use of an archeological site to strengthen a particular ideological belief instead of openly exposing all the findings and remains found there. When one examines the findings at Tel Shiloh, it seems that there is no justification for such a massive investment, and certainly not for building a concrete tower that damages the archeological tel. Tel Shiloh is a small site (about 35 dunam) whose most impressive remains are of Byzantine churches. Yet its location in the heart of Samaria in the West Bank contributes to the government’s desire to use it for strengthening settlers’ historical claim to the region.
Looking for the Tabernacle... or imagining its location

Tel Shiloh and the Lookout tower
MODI’IN ILIT – QIRYAT SEFER/KHIRBET BAD-IZSA

The Qiryat Sefer archeological site is located in the heart of a built-up area, in one of the open spaces in the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Modi’in Ilit. In 2007, the Israel Supreme Court ruled that the settlement was built in part on the private lands of the Palestinian village of Bil’in. Archeological excavations at the site exposed an agricultural settlement dating to the Hellenistic period (Third Century B.C.E.) that was abandoned in the early Islamic period (Seventh Century C.E.). The site was not occupied continuously; its main period of settlement is attributed to the First and Second Centuries C.E. until the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 C.E.). Settlement was renewed at the site in the Third and Fourth Centuries C.E. At the center of the site excavators found a structure identified as a public building, which in their opinion should be seen as a synagogue from the Second Temple Period (1st Century C.E.).

In the original plan of the National Heritage Sites Project for 2011, the site of Khirbet Bad-Izza (Modi’in Ilit) was included. Approximately four million shekels was allocated for preservation and development of the site, along with an additional million shekels from other sources. Those in charge of the project see the site as a means for bringing the ultra-Orthodox community of Modi’in Ilit closer to archeological research, and to the connection it reveals between their settlement and the ancient Jewish settlement in the region. They believe that presentation of the site as an ancient Jewish settlement strengthens the Jewish claim for the right to settle even on private Palestinian lands.

B’Tselem, “The Separation Barrier: The Supreme Court accepts the petition of the Bili’in council head against the separation barrier which was built on the village’s lands” (Report of September 2007).


THE BIAR AQUEDUCT

The Biar Aqueduct is located in an agricultural area in the foothills of the settlement of Efrat, in the western part of Gush Etzion, to the west of Bethlehem. Although it is not included in the list of national heritage sites, it is mentioned in the original program as part of the “Historical Trail of the Land of Israel”.

The Biar aqueduct originates at Ein Biar and runs for about 4.7 km; most of it is a man-made waterworks made of narrow covered tunnels. The aqueduct has not yet been excavated, and archeologists’ estimation that it originates from the 1st Century B.C.E. is based on historical sources and archeological surveys. It was in use up until the British Mandate period. It is impossible to walk the entire aqueduct, though the spring and an underground section of about 100 m were prepared for hikers and can be used during the spring and fall. Despite uncertainty as to the dating of the aqueduct, it is presented as belonging to the early Roman/Second Temple period and as being a water-tunnel leading to Jerusalem and to the Temple. Thus it serves to emphasize the importance of the entire region as a vital source of life in the golden age of Jewish Jerusalem.

THE JERUSALEM WALLS NATIONAL PARK AND THE CITY OF DAVID

The area of this site includes the walls of the Old City and the City of David National Park, located in the Palestinian village/neighborhood of Silwan. It also includes Mount Zion and its slopes. The Jerusalem Walls Park is run by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, while the City of David is operated by the Elad settler organization. It comes as no surprise that the City of David should be included as one of the national heritage sites; it suits the government’s goals of supporting archeological sites that testify to the Jewish-Israeli identity of the area around the Old City. The NGO Emek Shaveh has published several articles about the political use that is made of the City of David site and its effect on the Palestinian residents of Silwan. (You can read those publications here, here and here.)

THE CAVE OF THE PATRIARCHS AND RACHEL’S TOMB

In the government’s 2010 session, when the National Heritage Sites Program was instituted, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that the program would include Rachel’s Tomb and the Cave of the Patriarchs. International criticism followed his statement; development in the West Bank, it was said, upset the status quo and would change the negotiation towards a final status agreement. The prime minister’s announcement apparently stemmed from pressure put on him by the Yesha council and government ministers, who demanded inclusion of the Cave of the Patriarchs and Rachel’s Tomb in the list of national heritage sites. However, after reevaluation it was decided not to include the two sites on the list.

Rachel’s Tomb and the Cave of the Patriarchs are under the jurisdiction of Israel’s Ministry of Religious Affairs, while the National Heritage Sites Project is under the Prime Minister’s office. The removal of these tombs from the heritage sites may stem from a dispute between the Prime Minister’s office and the Ministry of Religious Affairs over the management of holy places. After Rachel’s Tomb and the Cave of the Patriarchs were removed from the heritage plan, right-wing Knesset members and the Yesha council renewed their demand. The settlers continue to declare their intention to work toward the inclusion of additional sites in Judea and Samaria, such as Joseph’s Tomb, Mount Eibal, and the ancient city of Samaria, on the list of national heritage sites.

---

26 S. Grossman “Yesha Council: Add Rachel’s Tomb to the Heritage Sites”, Ynet (February 18 2010)
27 MK A. Eldad in his speech at the Knesset assembly on the heritage sites list (February 14, 2012).
28 T. Shalev, “Facts on the Ground: Tel Shiloh to be declared a national heritage site” (In Hebrew), Walla (February 14, 2012)
SUMMARY: HERITAGE SITES AND CONTROL OF SPACE

Archeological sites in the Occupied Territories have a double political significance: spatial control and influence over public consciousness. The sites of Susya, Tel Shiloh, Qumran, Herodion, and others, are presented as part of the past of the Jewish people. Visits to these sites and the display of their archeological remains (including those whose origins are disputed) are meant to imbue visitors with the feeling that they are standing amid an integral part of the past of the Jewish people. For the most part, the guided tours and explanations in the sites mention nothing, or very little, about other peoples or cultures who live or have lived in the region. In some sites, such as Susya, the Palestinian inhabitants were even physically expelled from their houses in order to make room for visitors. Claiming these sites as part of the Israeli national heritage, while ignoring the Palestinian villages and residents in the area, is aimed at strengthening the legitimacy of the settlements within the Israeli consensus.

Most of the Israeli public is not aware of this conscious omission of the influences of other cultures—whether they be Roman and Byzantine, Samaritan, Muslim (early and late), or other—in the history of the land. In the eyes of many in Israeli society, these cultures are only secondary to the Jewish heritage in the history of the land of Israel, and the stories told at the archeological sites both within the Green Line and in the West Bank fit this perception. From these half-truths it is easy to justify the settlement project in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. The promotion of tourism to archeological sites in the Occupied Territories does not appear to be the work of radical Israeli Jewish groups, but it is coopted into the Israeli consensus and the Israeli historical and national consciousness. The archeological sites in the territories are used to maintain control over the physical space, not through massive construction or military presence but by bringing in hundreds of thousands of visitors who identify each place as an inseparable part of the Jewish people’s history and heritage in the land.

Archeological sites in the territories are generally run by private bodies or regional councils that are associated in one way or another with the settlers. For example, the South Hebron Hills Regional Council is responsible for the Susya archeological site; the Mishkan Shiloh Association runs Tel Shiloh; the Bier Aqueduct is under the jurisdiction of the Gush Etzion Development Company and the Gush Etzion Field School; the archeological site in Qiryat Sefer is under the jurisdiction of the Modi’in ilit municipality. This reality, of archeological sites and heritage sites run directly by settlers or settler associations, is comparable to the operation of the City of David National Park in East Jerusalem by the Elad organization, whose aim is to increase Jewish settlement in the village of Silwan. For this reason the Israeli public largely perceives the archeological sites as a legitimate part of the settlements and has no knowledge of any claims the Palestinians may have to the land.

The declaration of Israeli national heritage sites in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem facilitates the government’s efforts to blur the cognitive distinction among the general public between Israel and the Occupied Territories. The decision to include archeological sites in the Occupied Territories among the list of national heritage sites testifies to the government’s desire to legitimate in public opinion the annexation of some or all of the territories to Israel. Once the mainstream Israeli public assimilates the view that these areas are part of the Israeli landscape and history, any public opposition to their annexation will subside. On the contrary, any opposition to annexation will be seen as an attempt to harm Jewish identity and heritage.