



Information for Visitors to the City of David National Park

Background

The City of David National Park is an archaeological site identified as the place where Jerusalem first emerged as a small mountain kingdom around the 18th-17th centuries BCE (Middle Bronze Age II).

The archaeological remains at the site span 7000 years. The city has been almost continuously inhabited for the past 4000 years.

The City of David site has been excavated repeatedly over a period of 150 years. In the past two decades, most of the excavations at the site have been funded by the Elad Foundation, and carried out by the Israel Antiquities Authority, a government body. Little has been published in scientific forums regarding the excavations during the past twenty years, making it difficult to assess how the archaeologists arrived at their conclusions regarding the dating of the remains or the usages attributed to them.

The City of David is located within the Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan in East Jerusalem.

In the early 1990s, Israeli settlers from the Elad Foundation began to take over Palestinians' homes and settle Jewish families in their place. Elad's declared mission is to strengthen the Jewish connection to the site of ancient Jerusalem through various activities including settling in Palestinian Silwan. Their actions have been carried out with the approval of the courts, through property acquisition and recourse to laws regarding Jewish owned properties prior to the 1948 war, and Palestinian property from after the 1948 war. At present, there are 20,000 Palestinian residents and 500 Jewish residents living in and around the archaeological park.

The Elad Foundation funds excavations at the City of David archaeological site and runs the City of David National Park under the auspices of the Nature and Parks Authority. Elad develops the site for tourism including curating the antiquities and guiding the tours. The content of the tours is shaped by Elad's ideological agenda.



Presenting the Site to the Public

The signs, guidebooks, and tour guides at the site focus almost entirely on two historical periods: the Judean Kingdom, beginning with King David (10th to 6th centuries BCE) and the late Second Temple or Roman period (1st century BCE to 1st century CE). The focus on these periods leaves the visitor with little information about Jerusalem's long and varied cultural and religious history, and rich archaeological remains.

The administrators of the City of David archaeological park have been criticized for emphasizing the story of King David (who, according to biblical chronology reigned during the 10th century BCE), while, in fact, archaeologists are in disagreement as to whether the remains found at the site date from that period and whether they can corroborate the existence of King David's palace.



Administration of the Site

The Elad Foundation received the right to run the City of David National Park from the Israel Nature and Parks Authority in the early 2000s. The Nature and Parks Authority is entrusted with the management of national parks in Israel, and, as such, it manages the Jerusalem Walls National Park, which includes the City of David National Park within its boundaries. The fact that an antiquities site within a national park is run by a highly ideological private organization is without precedent in the country.

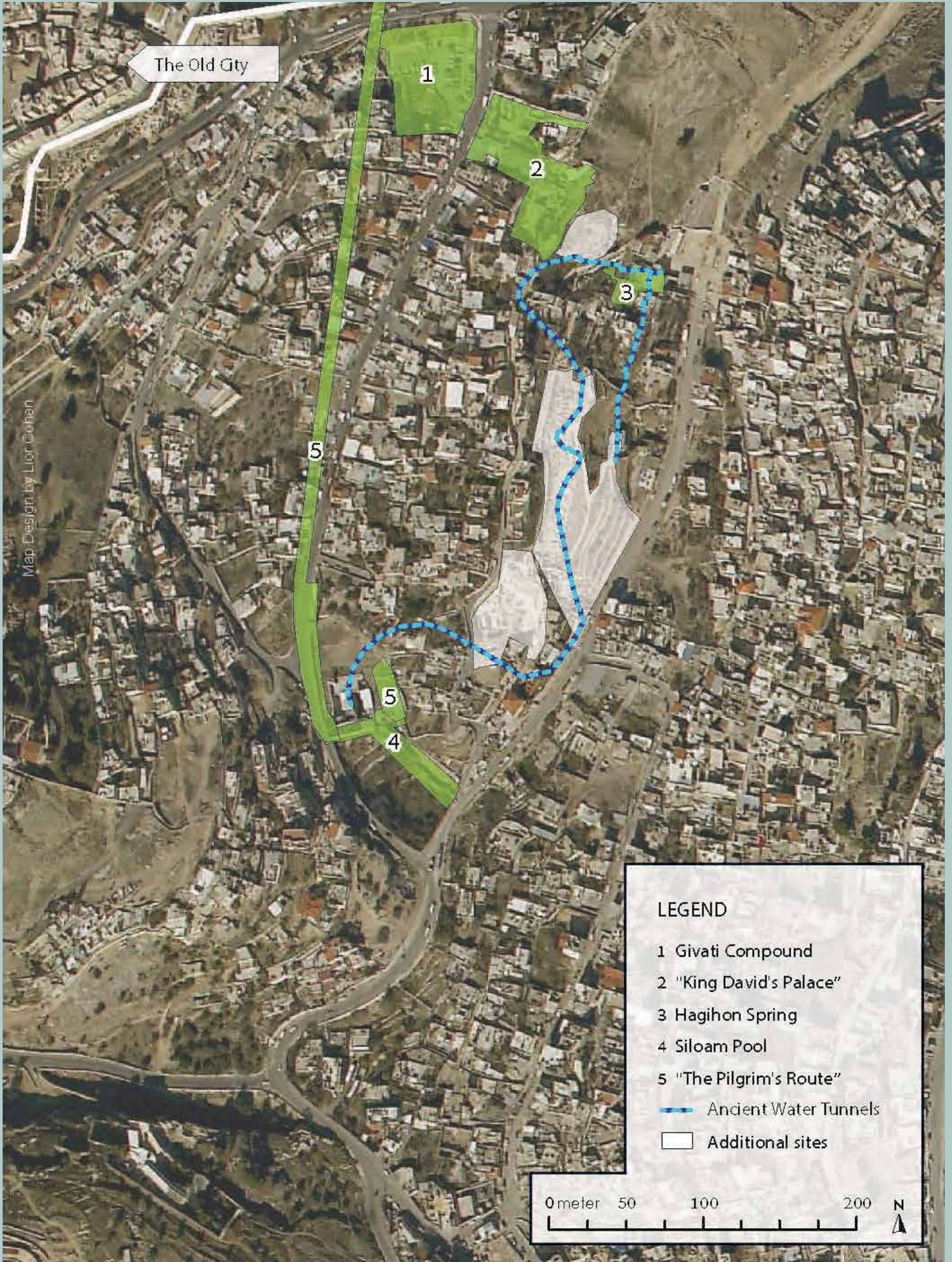
Some of the areas under excavation, or which have been developed for tourism within the City of David National Park, are public spaces that until several years ago had been accessible to and used by the residents of Silwan. These areas had been an integral part of the village life and culture. Over the past 20 years, these spaces have been annexed to the archaeological park. The hours of permitted entry are limited, and an entrance fee is charged. The Palestinian residents of Silwan have become tourists in their own backyard. At the same time, those affiliated with the Elad Foundation have been permitted to freely enter certain sections of the archaeological site, without payment and outside opening hours.

As the administrator at the City of David National Park, the Elad Foundation has been able to present itself as an objective and apolitical body engaged in archaeological research. The foundation uses archaeology to present itself as an ostensibly official, professional entity, separate from its settlement activity in Silwan and other areas of East Jerusalem.

The Elad Foundation exploits archaeology in Silwan, with the support of the government, in order to justify Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and in so doing undermines efforts to reach a political solution to the prolonged conflict over Jerusalem.

As a result, visitors to one of the most significant historic sites in Jerusalem have become de facto supporters of the settlement enterprise. Today, more than ever before, tourism in Jerusalem has become a political act.





Excavations at the Givati Parking Lot (the future location of the Kedem Compound) (No. 1 on the map)

In the past decade, the Givati parking lot has become the largest excavation site in the Old City basin. The archaeological data discovered in the course of the excavations shed new light on the history of Jerusalem through various periods including the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and early Islamic periods.

A six-floor, 16,500 sqm. visitor center called the "Kedem Compound," is slated to be built on top of the archaeological remains. The construction of this compound will damage archaeological remains, thus achieving the opposite of its declared goal of protecting the antiquities found at the site. The placement of the artifacts in the basement of the building is not the kind of presentation they deserve. Despite broad public opposition, following personal intervention by former Minister of Justice, Ayelet Shaked in 2016, the planning commission approved the construction of the Kedem Compound.

The dimensions of the planned Kedem Compound stand in complete contradiction to the building regulations for the Jerusalem Walls National Park. The compound will clash with the architectural character of the Historic Basin and obstruct the view of the Old City walls.

A plan is underway to build a cable car station on top of the Kedem Compound at the level of the Old City walls. The cable car is part of a larger undertaking to link East Jerusalem to West Jerusalem. If the cable car plan is implemented, it will be extremely damaging to the historic landscape.



The Large Stone Structure beneath the visitors' center, the remains of 'King David's palace'? (No. 2 on the map)

The ruin known as the "Large Stone Structure" is located nearby the visitors' center. The site's excavator, Eilat Mazar, claims it was built in the 10th century BCE. She believes these are the remains of the palace built for King David after he conquered the site from the Jebusites.

Among archaeologists there is serious disagreement over the dating of the Large Stone Structure to the 10th century BCE. Some believe the building was built in the Late Bronze Age (1500-1200 BCE) by the Jebusites as part of the city's defenses. Others have suggested the possibility that not all the walls discovered are part of the same architectural unit.



The Gihon Spring (No. 3 on the map)

The Gihon Spring is holy to three religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. However, in the wake of the excavations at the site and its integration into the City of David National Park, free access for Palestinians who wished to immerse in the spring was prohibited. This is in violation of the Protection of Holy Places Law, which guarantees free access to holy sites. At the same time, those affiliated with the Elad Foundation have been permitted to enter the spring as they wish, beyond the official opening hours and without paying an entrance fee.

In June, 2019, the Nature and Parks Authority established a new rule according to which entrance for the purpose of religious ceremonies in the national park would be permitted beyond opening hours. However, visitors wishing to immerse in the spring are required to pay an entrance fee and to coordinate their visit in advance. This decision ignores the freedom of access as set forth in the Protection of Holy Places Law.



The Shiloah/Siloam Pool (No. 4 on the map)

To date, no scholarly report regarding the excavations at the site of the Shiloah/Siloam Pool has been published. It is therefore not clear on what basis researchers have identified the structure as a pool for ritual immersion from the Second Temple period. The widely quoted but partial information that the excavating archaeologists have thus far provided raise questions about the dating, the various stages of construction and the various uses of the site throughout history.

The “Pilgrims’ Road” (No. 5 on the map)

“The Pilgrims’ Road” is the name given to the underground excavation continuing the length of an ancient Roman road which is being conducted jointly by the Elad Foundation, the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Nature and Parks Authority.

The title “Pilgrims’ Road” was coined by the Elad Foundation and by excavators who describe the road as the route taken by pilgrims to the Temple during the Second Temple period. This is misleading, in that all agree that the road did not lead directly to the Temple, but rather, is a segment of a road paved alongside the western side of the Temple compound in accordance with topographical considerations.

The archaeological excavation of the “Pilgrims’ Road” is being conducted in a tunnel that runs beneath Silwan’s main street and the houses lining it. This horizontal excavation method is not considered an acceptable excavation method in Israel or abroad and has even been criticized by archaeologists working under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

The excavation has not been coordinated with the Palestinian residents beneath whose homes the tunnel runs, nor has their approval for the excavations been sought. Some of the houses situated above the route of this tunnel show cracks in the walls and their stability is impaired. The Antiquities Authority and Elad deny that the cracks are linked to the excavations.