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Graveyard Metropolis East of Jerusalem's Old City

An archaeological overview, including political and religious aspects

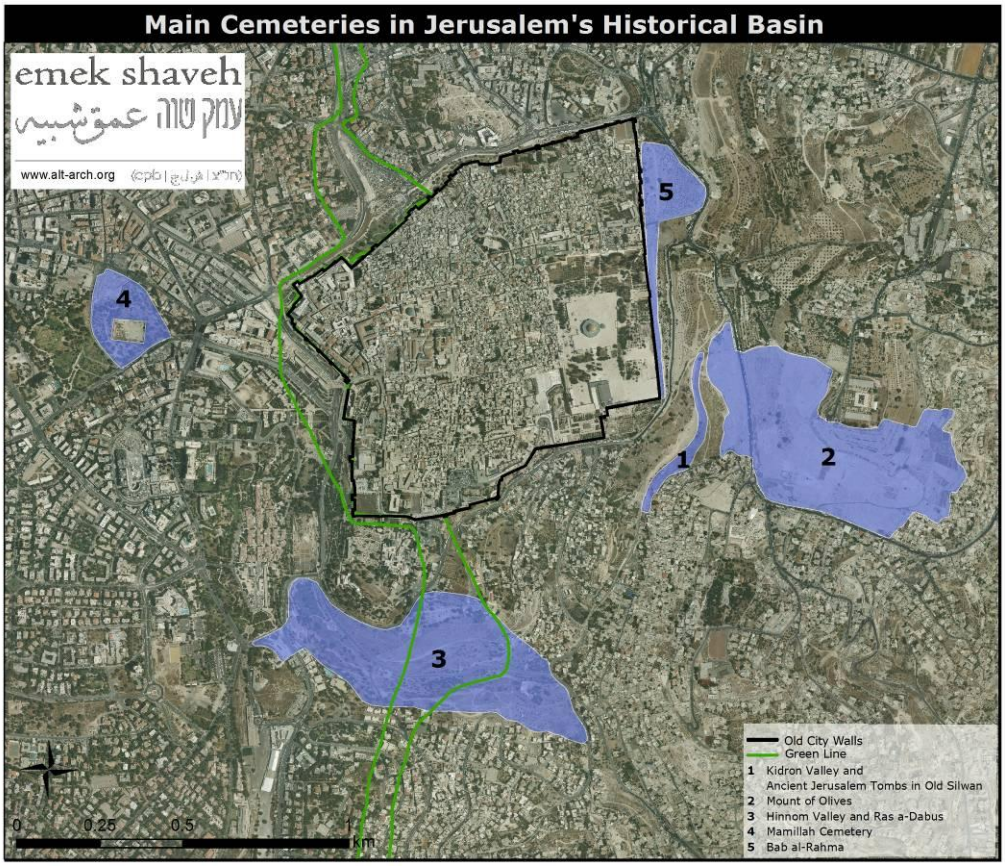


Mount of Olives and Kidron monuments – looking east

Location

This document reviews cemeteries located east of Jerusalem's Old City from the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives. The graves, which are part of Jerusalem's established tourist trail, cover some 400 dunam (approximately 100 acres), a significant portion of the municipal area east of the Old City. At the same time, the cemeteries are set plumb at the heart of East Jerusalem, between and within Palestinian neighborhoods. The survey includes the Bab Al-Rahma cemetery (No. 5 on the map), the Kidron graves, including those at the foot of Ras Al-Amud (No. 1 on the map), and the graves on the Mt. of Olives (No. 2 on the map).

In the course of Jerusalem's evolution, graves and cemeteries were erected just outside the city, on the slopes and foothills surrounding the city. The cemeteries add up to a broad continuum of burial sites from different periods that are associated with various religious backgrounds. Their location in East Jerusalem, flanking the Old City , as well as their religious import, have made them politically significant. The identifications attributed to the graves, the cultivation of their surroundings and the use they are put to affect the socio-political conflict in the area. The following is a review of the sites from east to west.



Mount of Olives

A large Jewish cemetery lies from the edges of the Palestinian neighborhood of Ras Al-Amud in the south to the churches of Gesthemane, Mary Magdalene and Dominus Flevit in the north. To the south, the cemetery borders the Palestinian

neighborhoods of A-Tur and A-Sawana (adjacent to the settlement of Ma'ale Zetim within the A-Sawana neighborhood); to the west it reaches the inclines of the Kidron Valley near the burial monuments known as Tomb of Zecharia and Pillar of Absalom/Tomb of Absalom.

The Mt. of Olives is holy to all three religions, but most of the graves here are recognized as Jewish graves. Jewish tradition holds that the Messiah will come to Jerusalem from the east, and the first to be resurrected will be those buried in the Mt. of Olives. Archaeological digs conducted here show graves from as early as the Middle Bronze Age (approximately 2,000 BCE) as well as from the Late Bronze Age (1,500-1,200 BCE) and graves from the First Century BCE through the First Century CE, a period referred to as that of the Second Temple. Principal examples of graves from that period are those found during the digging that preceded the building of the Dominus Flevit Church in the 1950's.[i] Nonetheless, the cemetery grew particularly significant from the 14th Century CE on, when religious leaders and the learned began to be buried there. During Jordanian rule, 1948-1967, the cemetery was not in use, and the Jordanians cut and paved a road across it.



Ossuaries from the Church of Dominus Flevit

Landscape Development in the Mount of Olives Cemetery

Recent years have seen widespread reconstruction of the gravestones in the Jewish parts of the Mt. of Olives cemetery, and public tours. Lately it was even decided to increase security patrols in the area. Most of the grave-preservation and cultivation, as well as the Mt. of Olives Information Center, are run by the Elad Association or Ir David Foundation, better known in its administrative role in the City of David archaeological site.[ii] The Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA) is investing tens of millions of shekels in the Mt. of Olives and in the work of linking it to west Jerusalem. For example, a pathway currently under construction from the Mt. of Olives to Mt. Scopus will cost 20 million NIS.[iii]

The Mt. of Olives cemeteries form a wedge that blocks geographic continuity for the adjacent Palestinian neighborhoods, and simultaneously create a bridge and continuity between the Jewish settlement in Ras Al-Amud, and the homes of settlers in A-Tur (Beit Orot [House of Lights] and Beit HaHoshen).



Mount of Olives, Ras Al-Amud and Kidron Valley, looking north-east

Kidron Valley Antiquities

The burial monuments in the Kidron Valley, at the foot of the Mt. of Olives, are considered the grandest and most unique of Jerusalem graves. These monuments have been recognized as part of the landscape surrounding the Old City for thousands of years. The Pillar of Absalom is in our day the most prominent edifice in the Kidron Valley, easily recognizable through its singular architecture: a round dome set on a square structure. Beside it we find the Tomb of Benei Hezir and the Tomb of Zecharia. These tombs are excavated in the rock; their facades resemble free-standing structures, and they enclose much more space than that necessary for burial.

An inscription that mentions the Benei Hezir family was found in the Benei Hezir Tomb, leading archeologists to accept the assumption that members of this family were buried here. There is a possibility that the family is in fact a well-known family of Jewish priests from the Second Temple period.[iv] The absence of findings in the tombs and their special structure have led to various speculations regarding the identities of those interned in the remaining tombs. The tombs were given various names over the ages, and those buried within them were also variously identified, as a variety of pilgrims documented them throughout history. Crusaders identified the tombs with figures from the Old or New Testament. For example, the travelogue of the Traveler from Bordeaux in the 4th Century CE mentions the tombs in the valley, and identifies the Tomb of Zecharia with Hezekia's Tomb and the Pillar of Absalom with Isaiah's Tomb.[v] Later Christian tradition identified the Pillar of Absalom with Zecharia, the father of John the Baptist. Muslims called the structure Tantur Faron (Pharaoh's Hat), apparently because its dome was reminiscent of that of the Egyptian ruler. It might be said that since the tombs were erected, religious and political leaders have tried to tie the tombs to their respective traditions. It is clear, for example, that not one of the figures said to have been buried in Absalom's Tomb was in fact buried there. In our day the monuments are identified as burial sites of the Jerusalem nobility from the Second Century BCE to the First Century CE.[vi]

The design of the graves informs us of the links with neighboring cultures and their effect on Jewish culture in this era. The Kidron Valley graves suggest Nabatean graves in Petra. The influence of artworks from the Helenistic Roman world such as Asia Minor (contemporary Turkey) is also recognizable.[vii] Since burial practices do not change often, the design and artistic influences testify to a society that lived in peace with the cultures and ethnic groups it was surrounded by.



Tomb of Benei Hezir and Tomb of Zechariah



Tomb of Absalom /Pillar of Absalom

Jerusalem Graves at the End of the Biblical Era

Less than a hundred meters to the south, at the foot of Ras Al-Amud, we find graves dated from the 8-7th Centuries BCE, and identified as part of the cemetery of the Jerusalem nobility from the Judean Kingdom. The best-known grave among these is a tomb called "Yehu Who Is Lord of the House," after the inscription at its entrance. Another tomb, the most opulent among the tombs from that period, is called Pharao's Daughter's Tomb because of its shape, which suggests Egyptian architecture.[viii] The Jerusalem nobility of the Judean Period excavated their graves on the eastern slopes of the Kidron valley, while its homes were built right across it, on the western slope. Most were ancestral family tombs where many generations were buried. The Biblical term "gathered unto his forefathers" apparently describes the literal process of laying the corpse in the same place as its ancestors.[ix] The structure is composed of an open, excavated square which leads to a square room three of whose walls are excavated arcosolia where the dead and the burial offerings were laid. At the corner of the tomb, an excavated niche served as a repository of the buried and the older offerings. Today these graves are scattered among homes in the Ras Al-Amud neighborhood in Silwan. Some of the graves lie at the edge of the neighborhood, and others within the narrow alleys. In some cases the graves serve local families.



Pharaoh's Daughter's Tomb in Ras Al-Amud, dated 8-7th Century BCE

Landscape Development in the Kidron Valley

Widespread development work to make the area accessible to the public and tourism-ready have been initiated in the area, especially in the past year (2011). The Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) along with the East Jerusalem Development company (PAMI) and the JDA (Jerusalem Development Authority) are working to restore and develop the Kidron Valley from the fringes of the A-Tur neighborhood in the north to Al-Bustan in the south. The restoration includes tree planting, building terraces and clearing pathways such as the path leading from the Church of All Nations (Gesthemane) to the margins of the Silwan village – the City of David archaeological site, the Gihon Spring area/ Ain Umm Al-Daraj. At the heart of the route we find the opulent family tombs excavated into the rockface. Twenty million shekel have been allotted to the project (4 million Euro, or $5.5 million).[x]



Grave openings from the 8-7th Centuries BCE below Ras Al-Amud houses



Construction works in the Kidron Valley

The Jerusalem Municipality and the Tourism Ministry plan to establish a Jewish museum centered on artifacts from the City of David near the Gihon Spring. The museum is slated to be built in the Wadi Hilwe neighborhood in the village of Silwan, which connects the Kidron Valley to the Archaeological site of the City of David. The combination of the archaeological site, the Jewish museum and the Kidron burial monuments creates a tourist route that emphasizes Jewish culture and tradition right inside a Palestinian zone, while ignoring both Palestinian traditions and presence.

Bab Al-Rahma

The Muslim cemetery of Bab Al-Rahma adjoins the eastern wall of the Old City. Apparently the Golden Gate – Bab Al-Rahma -- was blocked during the 8th Century CE (indicating that the gate existed before the Ottoman city wall was built in the 16th Century). It is likely that burial in the area began a short while later. Today there are

graves adjoining the entire eastern wall of the old city, and the cemetery is used by Muslim East Jerusalemites to this day.

In recent years, several Israeli groups are working to oppose burials in the southern part of the cemetery, which is used by Silwan village residents. The Temple Mount Antiquities Rescue Committee brings together archaeologists, intellectuals and legal experts, and in 2005 placed a High Court suit against the State of Israel for not enforcing the ban on burials in the southern part of the cemetery.[xi] The basis of the claim is that the place has been declared an antiquities site and part of the Jerusalem Walls (City of David) National Park, and that digging and burial in the area is damaging to the antiquities. The High Court's ruling of 2009 rejected the suit, but asserted that the authorities must enforce the law and protect the site from damage (burials). Today, residents who want to bury their deceased in the southern part of the cemetery must obtain permission from the court.[xii] The opposition to burials in Bab Al-Rahma stands in stark contrast to the wealth invested in the Jewish cemetery in the Mt. of Olives.



Bab Al-Rahma Cemetery, looking south



Golden Gate and Muslim tombs

The Cemeteries and the Palestinian Neighborhoods

The cemeteries are located either within or on the border of the Palestinian neighborhoods of Ras Al-Amud and A-Tur. As pointed out earlier, some of the graves and burial grounds from the Biblical era are scattered between the residents' homes, the Mt. of Olives cemetery lies at the edge of A-Tur, and the Kidron Valley is the eastern border of this neighborhood. Israeli authorities invest millions of shekel in development without any coordination with the residents and without taking any account of their needs. As a result, after dozens of years of neglecting to develop basic infrastructure for Palestinian neighborhoods, we now find widespread investment slated in principal for cemeteries understood as Jewish/Israeli properties. The tourist trails do not include the neighborhoods inner streets and thus separate the neighborhoods and the cemeteries. Ras Al-Amud and A-Tur are walking distance from one another, but the trails that connect the edges of the cemeteries do not link the two neighborhoods. The separation is not a result of an historical division between the burial sites and the neighborhoods, but an artificial partition of pathways and tourist sites intended for the use of Israelis and Jewish tourism.

The accentuation of the Jewish character of the area creates a barrier between the place and its native residents. The cemeteries are appropriated by Israelis as Jewish/Israeli sites that bolster their traditions and their connection to Jerusalem.

Meanwhile, residents who have lived by these cemeteries for hundreds of years and accepted them as part of their lives, are apprehended as lacking history and any local heritage, as though they are recent immigrants or migrants who have just recently arrived.

Political Influences – from the Mount of Olives to Bab Al-Rahma

Over the generations, burial in Jerusalem has become a form of testimony to the longing of Jews for Zion. Many Jewish leaders and men of letters are buried in the Mt. of Olives. The religious significance of the cemetery gives legitimacy to its restoration and development, and reason for bringing Jewish and Israeli visitors from all over Israel and abroad. The reinforcement of the Jewish connection to the Kidron Valley and to the Mt. of Olives creates a barrier between East Jerusalem's Palestinian neighborhoods and the Old City. The Mt. of Olives has turned into a mute Israeli stronghold (absent living settlers) in East Jerusalem.

The Jewish settlement in Ras Al-Amud adjoins the south-eastern edge of the Mt. of Olives cemetery. At the northern end there are church lands and behind them the Zurim Valley National Park and an Israeli settlement at the heart of the Palestinian A-Tur neighborhood, right alongside the cemetery. Israeli settlement and tourist activities are concentrated in the same geographic area, and each sustains the other.

Despite assertions made by Israeli authorities about the importance of the area to other religious traditions, the development of the Mt. of Olives highlights only the Jewish tradition and its link to present-day Israel. The churches on the Mt. of Olives are associated with Christian traditions, and are physically separate from the cemetery. But the Bab Al-Rahma cemetery, which adjoins the eastern wall of the Old City and is identified with and significant to the Muslim tradition in the area, has received no development and sees no comparable development or investment from Israeli authorities. Furthermore, in recent years right-wing Israeli groups and several organization are battling in opposition to Muslim burials there. The battle culminated with the Israeli government's agreement to enforce the ban on burials. As a result, the residents of the Silwan village are hindered from burying their dead, and in some instances mourners have been arrested in the midst of the funeral.

The cemeteries have become political assets in the battle for sovereignty in East Jerusalem; it is clear that the government and the settlers' main activities are focused on reinforcing Jewish control of these areas. Whole regions east of the Old City are held as bona fide Israeli/Jewish sites and employed as central elements bolstering the enterprise of Jewish settlements in Palestinian neighborhoods in East

Jerusalem and the Old City basin. The State of Israel has not succeeded, and has shown no interest in integrating the religious import of these sites to the Jewish people and their significance to other peoples and other religions. Alongside the investment in Jewish sites and the emphasis on Jewish aspects of various areas, one can't help but see the huge gap in investment in Muslim and other burial sites, and in the presentation of their legacy – both local and universal.

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[i] Bellarmino Bagatti and Milik, *Gli scavi del Dominus Flevit*, An account of the excavations 1953-55, 1958

[ii] Mount of Olives website: http://www.mountofolives.co.il/eng/

[iii] JDA website, Development and Construction in the Old City

[iv] D. Barag, "New Developments in the research of the Tombs of the Sons of Hezir and Zecharrias," *Qadmoniot* 123, 2002, Jerusalem, Pp. 38-47(In Hebrew)

[v] O. Limor, *Holy Land Travels: Christian Pilgrims in Late Antiquity*, Yad Ben-Zvi, Jerusalem 1998 (in Hebrew)

[vi] N. Avigad, *Ancient Monuments in the Kidron Valley*, Jerusalem, 1954 (in Hebrew)

[vii] Ibid, Pp. 91-133

[viii] D. Ussishkin, *The* Village *of Silwan: The Necropolis from the Period of the Judean Kingdom*, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993

[ix] G. Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem," *Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University*, Volume 19, Number 2, September 1992, Pp. 139-192 and Gabriel Barkay,"Excavations at Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem," in Ancient Jerusalem Revealed (ed. H. Geva); Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994, Pp. 85-107

[x] JDA website, Development and Construction in the Old City

[xi] Israel High Court, Case No. : 7800/05 and 7192/04

[xii] N. Shargai, "Dichter rules Temple Mount area off limits to Muslim burial," Haaretz, May 29, 2007