

Hinnom Valley/ Wadi Rababa

A socio-political, archaeological overview

Introduction

Hinnom Valley/Wadi Rababa is a uniquely picturesque, archaeologically-compelling stretch of land in the center of a political conflict. The beliefs and traditions associated with the area make for a valley whose religious and cultural significance cuts across national and religious sectors. The area is one of the open spaces in East Jerusalem that the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA) has been developing for tourism in recent years. The landscape development, conservation work and improvement of public access to the antiquities are important and valuable, but accompanied by political interests joined to the battle for sovereignty over East Jerusalem. Thousands of Palestinians live on both sides of the valley, yet its development includes no investment in the residents' well-being and alienates them from the areas under development. The disparity between the development and the emphasis on the historical significance of the sites on one hand, and the absence of any provision for residents' needs and the political conflict on the other, reinforce tensions and suspicion between the two sides.

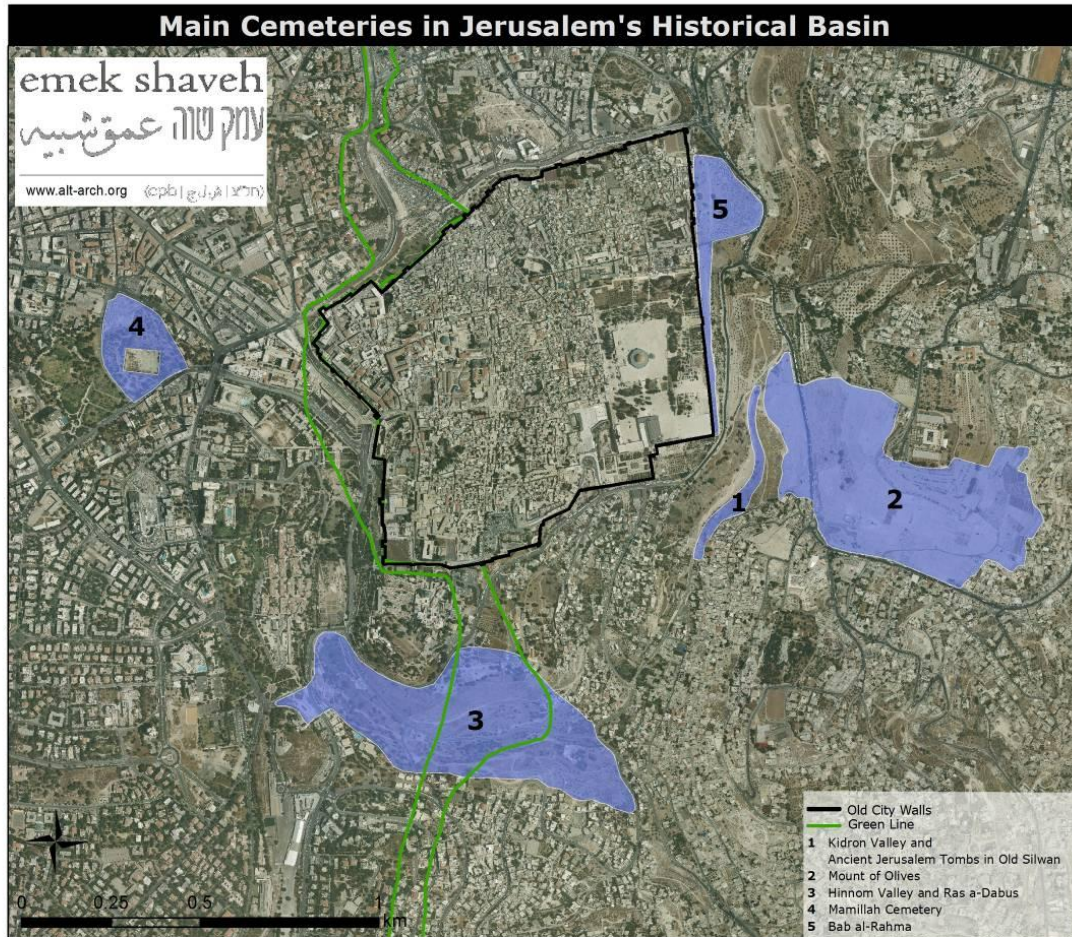


Hinnom Valley, the northern section with a view to the south

Location

Hinnom Valley/Wadi Rababa is bordered by Mt. Zion on the north and on the west by the Jerusalem Cinematheque. The Abu-Tur neighborhood lies to one side of the valley, and Silwan to the other (Number 3 in the Jerusalem's Historical Basin cemeteries map). The valley is part of what until 1967 was the demilitarized zone between Israel and Jordan. Today it serves as a green space for picnics, rock climbing and horse-back riding for both the Jewish and Palestinian populations.¹ Until 1967 the Western part of under Israeli rule, the central area was no man's land and the eastern part was under Jordanian's rule.

¹ Jerusalem, Local outline plan, archaeological attaché 63, 64



The wadi is for the most part construction free, except for some stone terraces surrounding fruit trees and a road connecting the Al-Bustan neighborhood in Silwan to Abu Tur and west Jerusalem. Archaeologically, Hinnom Valley is the continuation of an area called Katef Hinnom (Hinnom Shoulder)/Ras a-Dabus, which lies from St. Andrews Church in west Jerusalem to Al-Bustan in the east. The entire area served for burials over thousands of years. Its eastern, lower end is identified with Akeldama in the Christian tradition.



Hinnom Valley/Wadi Rababa – view from Silwan to the Abu Tur neighborhood

Archaeological Survey

The area contains many tombs excavated into the rocks, where dozens of people were buried over different periods. Burial styles and other findings allow us to date the earliest ones to the end of the Judean Kingdom (7-8th Century BCE), and show continuous burials up to the Byzantine period (4-7th Centuries CE). Along the road that runs from Abu Tur to the valley one can see a number of graves from the Judean kingdom. Additional graves from that period are found in privately-owned land belonging to residents of Abu-Tur.



Tombs excavated in the rock face – 8-7th Century BCE

In the course of digging in the Hinnom Shoulder/Ras a-Dabus, where the Begin Center is currently located, archaeologists unearthed a silver scroll dated to the 7th Century BCE with an inscription of a section from the Priestly Blessing, a prayer which was familiar in biblical times and is still recited in synagogues to this day.² This is a rare and unique find that testifies to the continuity of prayer traditions over thousands of years.

The Onuphrius Convent, which belongs to the Greek Orthodox Church is situated on the valley's incline. The convent was built in keeping with the Christian tradition that identifies the valley with Akeldama – the field of blood. Christian tradition has it that

² G. Barkay, "Katef (Shoulder) Hinnom excavation in Jerusalem," *Qadmoniot* 68, 1984, (in Hebrew) and G. Barkay et al., "The Amulets from Katef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 334, American Schools of Oriental Research, May 2004

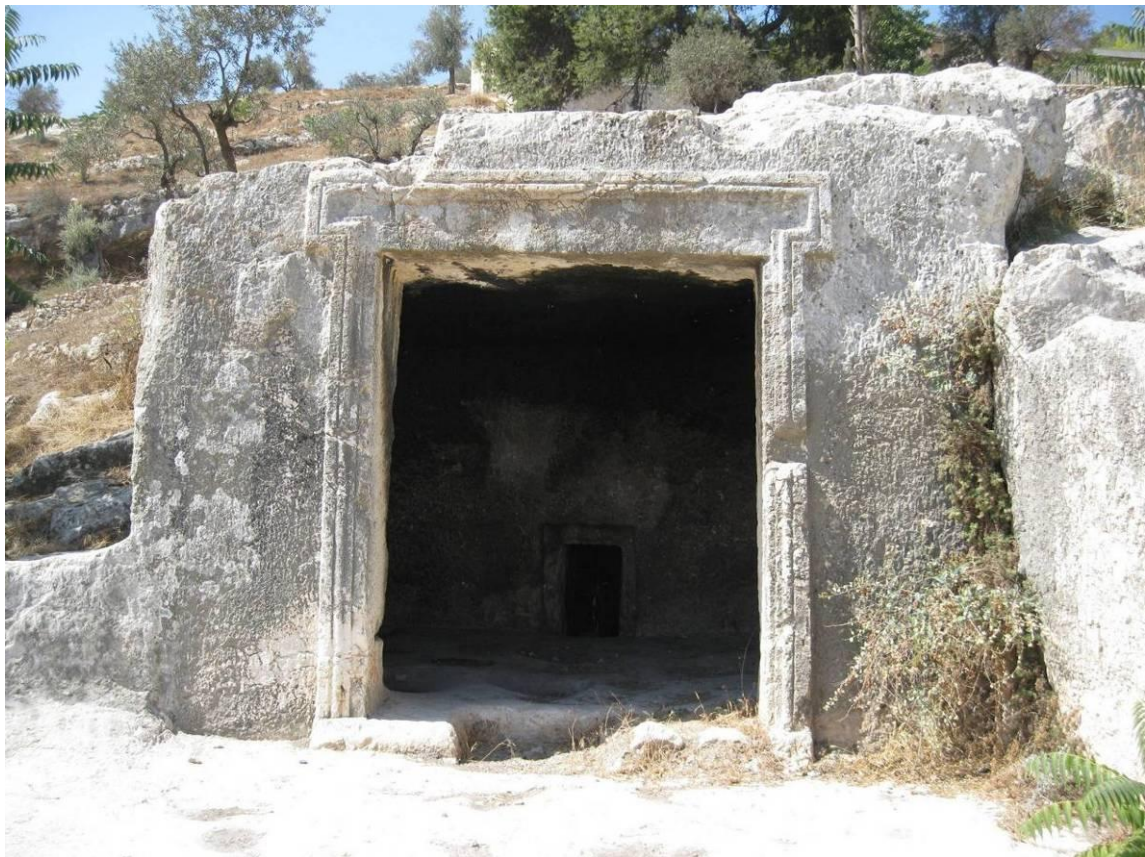
it was bought by Judas Iscariot with the money he received for delivering Jesus to the Romans. A Crusader-era structure (12-13th Century CE) identified as a burial place for Christian pilgrims who died in the Holy Land abuts the convent's north end. Its function may account for the name: "the House of bones." The hall is preserved up to its ceiling, and is adjoined by a tower.



Onuphrius Convent – a view to the south

A set of excavated family tombs dated to the First Century CE are located near the convent. These are luxury tombs composed of several rooms with carved burial niches. These structures and the ossuaries (sand-stone chests) within them are evidence of a burial style practiced by Jerusalem area Jews at the time of the Second Temple. Inscriptions found on some of the tombs and the ossuaries support this claim. The tombs' wealth and their presence on this slope testify to the centrality of Jerusalem and of the temple. Pilgrims from throughout the ancient world made their way to Jerusalem, and the rich among them invested a great deal of money to

purchase burial grounds and build opulent family graves.³ The graves served these families over several generations. Inscriptions found on some of the graves include names that appear to belong to families originating outside Jerusalem, such as the cave of the Ariston family, which was based in Apamea, Syria.



Entrance of a quarried grave – Early Roman Period / Second Temple period

It appears that Jerusalem residents continued to use the graves during the late Roman period (2nd-3rd Centuries CE) and in the Byzantine era (4-7th Centuries CE). The later use of the structures was made by people who were not of the original families that

³ G. Avni & Z. Greenhut, *The Akeldama Tombs*, Jerusalem, 1996, and also: R.A.S. Macalister, "The Rock cut Tombs in Wady er-Rababi, Jerusalem," *PEFQS*32, 1900, pp. 225-248 & *PEFQ*33, 1901, pp. 145-158; 215-226

purchased the burial sites.⁴ Alongside the old graves, which were in continuous use, new graves were excavated in the late Roman Period and the Byzantine era. These graves are characterized by arcosoliums (arched recesses used for entombment) excavated in their internal walls. Remnants of cremation burials (the burial of cremation ashes) were also found in the Hinnom Shoulder/Ras a-Dabus. Cremation burial was customary in the western parts of the Roman Empire, and offers testimony that the interred came from those regions. The assumption is that they were Roman soldiers or officials.⁵



6-7th Century BCE graves in the Hinnom Shouler/Ras a-Dabus

A fenced cemetery near to the incline below the Mt. Zion Hotel is Jerusalem's Karaite Cemetery. Today the cemetery is no longer in use, but it served the Karaite

⁴ G. Avni & Z. Greenhut, *The Akeldama Tombs*, Jerusalem, 1996

⁵ G. Barkay, "Katef (Shoulder) Hinnom excavation in Jerusalem," *Qadmoniot* 68, 1984 (in Hebrew)

community that came to Jerusalem in the Tenth Century and persisted until the 20th. On the slopes of Mt. Zion, on the north bank of the Hinnom Valley, we find a cemetery called Sambuski. This cemetery served poor Jews during the Ottoman period.⁶ Today the place is surrounded by a fence and out of use. The area is under Israeli authorities' control; plans for the graves' repair and restoration have yet to be actualized.



The Karaite Cemetery

⁶ Z. Shazar, *Rabbi Gedaliah of Siemiatycze*, Pamphlet, Jerusalem 1962 (in Hebrew), p.25



The Sambuski graveyard at the foot of Mt. Zion, adjacent to Silwan homes

Development and Conservation Work

Apart from the paved road across the Valley which connects Abu Tur and west Jerusalem to the Silwan village and the archaeological site of “the City of David,” most of the area remains unbuilt. Over the years 2003-2005, the Jerusalem Development Authority (JDA), employing the East Jerusalem Development Ltd. (EJD), ran a development project in the valley that included improving the Silwan-City of David road, landscaping, and paving a walkway across the valley. Currently the JDA is at work on the construction of a promenade at the cost of three million NIS.⁷ In 2010, the Sambuski cemetery was surveyed and findings were documented⁸.

⁷ JDA website: [Walkways and Development in the Old City](#) (subsection in Hebrew)

The promenade's route is from west Jerusalem at one end – the Cinematheque and the Hinnom Shoulder region to Al-Bustan in Silwan at the other end.

Over August-September 2011, the Conservation Department of Israel's Antiquities Authority performed conservation work on the Crusader hall. The building has been preserved up to its ceiling, but over the years its underpinnings have eroded, and preservation work was vital for its maintenance. The development work and the Onuphrius Convent create a disconnected, bucolic, Middle Eastern landscape removed from the conflicted reality the valley is surrounded by.

Conservation work in the Crusader hall, "the House of Bones" On the right, entry to an excavated cave



⁸ D. Herzog, *Sambuski – The story of a Jewish cemetery in mount of Zion*, Megalim, Jerusaelm, 2011 (In Hebrew)

Archaeology and the Residents

Much of the Hinnom Valley is part of the Palestinian neighborhood of Abu Tur. Several neighborhood homes are adjacent to graves, and other graves lie within the properties. The development of tourism divides the settled area from that designated for tourism, and increases alienation. The alienation of area residents is amplified because the graves are depicted as Israeli assets, and also because millions of shekel are invested in tourism development while the neighborhood itself – which is in desperate need of infrastructure – sees no investment whatsoever. Furthermore, Abu-Tur is part of Silwan, and the walkway creates a barrier that separates it from the village's other neighborhoods. An example of the difficulty involved in marking off archaeology from area residents is evident in the home property of the Siam family in Abu Tur. The area is fenced in by a stone fence leading to a rocky slope with tomb excavations. The burial style suggests they should be dated to the 7-8th Centuries BCE. The Siam family home is one of several homes on the slope of Hinnom Valley/Wadi Rababa.



An ancient tomb in a private backyard

While the Israeli authorities develop the area, conflicts are taking place between the Palestinian residents and settlers. In the past, the Elad organization built a 120m long roped walkway over the valley. The walkway was advertised as an adventure-sport tourist activity. The project ran for a number of months during 2008. In the past year, conflicts between settlers and Wadi Rababa residents included damage to olive trees, complaints filed with the police and arrests.⁹ Silwan residents feel that Israel is overtaking the open space and the entire area in a way that distances them from it and prevents them from using it for their needs.



Silwan and Al-Bustan, view to the east from Hinnom Valley/Wadi Rababa

⁹ "Settlers attempt to overtake Silwan land parcel, Palestinian resident and Israeli activist arrested," The Alternative Information Center Website, 18.5.2011

Summary and Conclusions

Hinnom Valley/Wadi Rababa, which in the past was under divided sovereignty, is one of the last remaining green spaces between East and West Jerusalem.

The valley connects the City of David site in Silwan village with west Jerusalem. The only thing dividing the two is the Al-Bustan neighborhood; tourism development work planned for Al-Bustan involves the demolitions of dozens of homes. New construction is prohibited due to the archaeological importance and uniqueness of the valley, its closeness to the old city and the steep grade of the rocky incline, which hinders building. While Palestinians suffer from, among other matters, the prohibitions on land use, Israeli authorities develop the region on the grounds of its historical-archaeological significance, and generate a network of landscaped paths to the Israeli part of the valley.

Consequently, there is a danger that the focus on the antiquities will be seen as a threat to the residents and as an Israeli interest. It would therefore be best to display the valley's multicultural heritage via graves testifying to various groups and peoples who lived in the city of Jerusalem, shaped it, and were buried here. Furthermore, multiculturalism is not only the legacy of the graves or the past; it is part of the texture of life in present-day Jerusalem. The development of the valley should be based on an approach that links the past to the present, as well as the various cultures represented in the valley then and now.