

# Susya – The Displacement of Residents Following the Discovery of an Ancient Synagogue

## **Introduction**

The site of ancient Susya is located in the South Hebron Hills region, on a main road linking Maale Dargot in the south and as-Samu, Yatta and al-Karmil in the north. Susya and the towns to the south and north were important centers in the region of the South Hebron Hills during the Byzantine and Islamic periods.

Today Susya is an antiquities site, but a community of several hundred Palestinians had lived there for centuries, until the 1980s. They were a pastoral community and lived in natural and artificial caves, some of which had been quarried hundreds or thousands of years ago. The community lived semi-nomadically and was expelled from their residence following a military order declaring Susya an archaeological site and forbidding habitation there.

In 1983 a Jewish settlement was established in Susya two kilometers southeast of the ancient site. The settlement was established following the discovery of a synagogue and the antiquities site. Today, the settlement has a population of one-thousand residents.



The site of ancient Susya

## **Part I: The Significance of Archaeological Research in Susya<sup>1</sup>**

Since the 19th century, Susya has been a site of particular interest for archaeologists who carried out numerous surveys and excavations. The site was first identified by Victor Guérin, who conducted a survey of the area in 1869. The Palestine Exploration Fund carried out an additional survey in 1874 and identified two public structures. The possibility that one of the two structures was a synagogue was raised only in the 1930s, by L.A. Meir and A. Reifenberg, but they did not specify which of the structures<sup>2</sup>.

Most of the research has focused on the history of the town between the 4-8 centuries CE, when Susya was an important Jewish city in the South Hebron Hills region<sup>3</sup>.

In a survey conducted in 1969, one of the structures was identified as a synagogue. To fully unearth the synagogue the site was excavated between 1971-1972. Neighborhoods and industrial complexes were unearthed during later excavations that took place in

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<sup>1</sup>See the attached bibliography for more information on the history of archaeological research.

<sup>2</sup> Yeivin, 1993; Guttman *et al*, 1981 (Hebrew).

<sup>3</sup>For example: Baruch, 2008; Hirschfeld, 1983 (Hebrew).

different sections of the site between the 1970s and the end of the 1990s. Remains dated to the Islamic period were discovered north of the synagogue, on a hill cut off from the town. Overall, an area of less than 20 dunam was excavated out of the 80 dunam declared an archaeological site. The ancient synagogue is considered the most important, central finding discovered at the site so far. The archaeological excavations indicate that the town of Susya was established during the 2nd century BCE and lasted, if not continuously, until the 13th century CE<sup>4</sup>.

The settlement first developed in the Hellenistic period, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. Facilities such as wine presses were revealed in excavations, as well as a particular structure understood to be a farmhouse. These findings suggest that during this period the site was an agricultural settlement. The discovery of graves at the site with Edomite names in conjunction with other historical sources have led some scholars to conclude that Susya was an Edomite town, whose residents converted and adopted the Jewish traditions at a later stage.

The settlement was abandoned during Roman period (2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE), likely due to the political changes in the region following the Bar Kochba rebellion<sup>5</sup>.

A settlement at Susya reemerged at the end of the Roman period, near the end of the 3rd century or beginning of the 4th century CE, and developed around the synagogue. The settlement's structures were built in close proximity creating an external, continuous wall, which possibly served as a defensive wall. Underground caves and ritual baths were dug in the courtyards outside the structures. The settlement continued developing, reaching its peak in the Byzantine period (4-7 centuries CE) and in the beginning of the early Islamic period (7-8 centuries CE). The homes built during this period followed a different plan from the one that had previously been widespread.

During the 8-9 centuries CE, the town gradually declined. While the village preserved most of its land, many of the structures were abandoned. During this time, reconstruction was characterized by a recycling of stones from earlier structures and an inferior quality of construction. By the end of the 9th century CE the town's area was significantly reduced and was concentrated around the main road, which crossed the site southeast of the synagogue. At this point, a mosque was built in the synagogue's courtyard. The town was entirely abandoned by the end of the 9th century.

Susya was reestablished in the 11-13th centuries CE as an agrarian settlement. It lacked a defensive wall and its economy consisted of raising livestock and some agriculture. The residents lived in the many caves at the site. Cooking and caring for the herds took

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<sup>4</sup>Baruch, 2008; Gutman *et al*, 1981(Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Guvrin, 1995

place outside the caves, within fenced areas. This form of life in Susya continued into the modern period<sup>6</sup>.

### **The Synagogue**

The synagogue, situated in the western part of Susya, was at the center of life in the settlement between the Byzantine and the end of the early Islamic periods. This is the only public structure unearthed so far in Susya, and includes a courtyard, an entrance hall and prayer hall. The synagogue's plan is unique in that the prayer hall is oriented to its width (the entrance is located at the wide end of the structure), in contrast to the building style of synagogues in the Galilee, which were built lengthwise. Synagogues built as wide halls were found only in the South Hebron Hills at sites which developed after the destruction of the Temple in the 1st century CE. An underground, quarried system has been discovered underneath the synagogue. Its function remains unclear.

There is disagreement among scholars regarding the dating of the synagogue. Some date it to the end of the 3rd century or beginning of the 4th century CE, whereas others date it to the end of the 4th century or beginning of the 5th century CE -- the period when the synagogue was at its height. Its floor features mosaics depicting the Holy Ark, and a menorah (an ancient ritual lampstand) and the figure of a deer on either side. In addition, mosaics were found presenting human figures, geometric patterns, animals and Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions.

At the end of the 7th century and throughout the 8th century CE, the synagogue declined in importance and the hall was re-partitioned. The quality of the construction of the partition was inferior to the construction of the original building. The synagogue's floor was damaged during this time and the human figures featured in the mosaics were destroyed. Some scholars think that the structure was no longer used as a synagogue at this stage, and the physical modifications suggest a change in the population - most likely a transition from a Jewish to Muslim population.

During its last phase, the synagogue's prayer hall was no longer in use and, as mentioned, a mosque was built in the courtyard. The cave at the lower end of the synagogue's courtyard was blocked. This phase ended at the turn of the 9th century, when the site was abandoned and the structure was no longer in use<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>Yeivin, 1993; Baruch 2008, 27-32 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup>Baruch, 2008: 112-113 (Hebrew).



Exterior view of the synagogue



Mosaic floor inside the synagogue



### **Commentary on the Site**

Ever since the synagogue at Susya was discovered, research has revolved around documenting the development of the Jewish settlement of Susya and other sites in the region of the South Hebron Hills during the period after the destruction of the Second Temple. These studies seek to link Susya with the other large towns that have been discovered, such as as-Samu (Eshtamoa), Yatta (Yuta) and al-Karmil (Carmel).

Abraham Negev (Negev, 1985) maintained that Susya may correspond with the biblical Carmel. According to Negev, Susya is a modern name originating from a plant found in the area and which was used by the residents. Negev and other researchers sought to point out the changes that took place at the site as evidence of changes that took place among the Jewish population in the area from the Hellenistic period, and especially after the destruction of the Second Temple and the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Yuval Baruch, who researched Susya's antiquities in their geographical-historical context, found that Susya's growth is related to its strategic location at an important crossroads in the mountain region.

All the scholars who studied Susya have ignored the pastoral settlement at Susya between the 11th century into the modern period, despite the abundant findings attesting to its existence. The few studies that do refer to the settlement that developed at Susya during the Islamic period refer to it as a single entity. Yuval Baruch's research is a case in point; in referring to the settlement during the Islamic period, he states that the last phase of the settlement's existence "is dated to the end of the early Islamic period or beginning of the Crusader period and continued to this day" (Baruch, 2008) - this is how he summarized a period of five hundred years, for which most Israeli archaeological research does not see any development worthy of research.

### **Part II: The Place of the Palestinian Community of Susya in relation to the Research, Presentation and Conservation of the Ancient Site**

Most of the research in the region of Susya is conducted by European and Israeli scholars, and focuses on the period between the Byzantine period and the beginning of Islam when Jewish people settled at the site. To this day there is no research and documentation focusing on the lives of the residents and development of the settlement

and its environs during the Islamic periods. This phenomenon is also true for other sites in the area: in as-Samu', Ma'on, Horvat Anim, Carmel, At-Tuwani and other ancient sites, archaeologists have researched mostly the ancient synagogues.

The absence of Susya's more recent past in research is also reflected in the presentation of the site to visitors. The story told to visitor focuses only on archaeological remnants that strengthen the Jewish identity of the place and both the symbolic and substantive right to its ownership by the Jewish settlers who manage the site. In fact, the archaeological excavations at the site have erased its "last layer," the same one that contains information on the lifestyle that evolved at the site over the last five hundred years. The last remaining pieces of evidence of this lifestyle can be found only at the outer edges of the site, where one can visit the caves in which Susya's residents resided until the 1980s. In these caves it is still possible to see a partition of the space into living areas, cooking areas and animal enclosures. Outside the caves we find remnants of enclosures for the livestock and gathering areas for the men.

At the entrance to some of the caves at the site signs state that these were used as dwellings, but explanations about the period in which they were used, the identity of the inhabitants and their lifestyle are nowhere to be found. In a few of the caves there is signage indicating that ancient crafts were created there, such as 'potter,' 'weaving mill' etc. These signs, for which we have no known scientific reference, deflect attention from the stories of the caves and their inhabitants, who resided there until just 30 years ago.

Israeli archaeologists' interest in Susya, resulted in a gradual expulsion of its Palestinian inhabitants from the site. In 1971 excavations began to take place around the ancient synagogue. Families living in the area were forced to leave their caves and moved to nearby villages and even to the northern West Bank. More and more families were expelled as the archaeological excavations expanded.

A few families continued to live at the site alongside the archaeological excavations until 1986. The residents were forbidden to enter the vicinity of the excavation, and later a fence was built around the ruin with an entrance and an exit into and out of the site. They were not given any information about the excavations and were constantly warned against causing damage to the site. Their daily lives were disrupted by repeated threats from the archaeological enterprise. In 1986, the community was altogether expelled from the site and they moved into encampments and caves outside the vicinity of the ruin. Archaeological excavations and extensive conservation projects were carried out around the ruins and in caves that were until very recently inhabited by the Palestinian residents. The site's management was handed to the South Hebron Hills Regional Council, who had a visitors' center built there. Signs have been placed

around the site, which today is presented as an ancient Jewish settlement, and an entrance fee has been introduced.

### **The Residents' Lives and Archaeological Research**

The expropriation order by the IDF applied to 277 dunam around the ancient site. Different studies estimate the area of the site to be somewhere between 75-80 dunam; of those, less than 20 have been excavated. These data demonstrate that the expropriation order was arbitrary and too broad to begin with, and was not intended just for the purpose of regulating the archaeological excavation. The majority of the excavations took place before the order was issued, while the excavations that took place after the fact were conducted in small areas within the site. It is therefore impossible to avoid the conclusion that the order was issued for the purpose of expelling the Palestinians from their land and removing them from the eyes of visitors who come to see a site featuring an ancient Jewish synagogue.

Life in the ruin and in the caves and the relationship between the community and the site are an integral part of the archaeological history and the material culture of the site. The repeated indifference to Susya's inhabitants and their part in its development epitomizes an additional aspect of their physical expulsion from the site, an expulsion that crudely erases a narrative spanning a history of hundreds of years. Furthermore, it is also detrimental to the understanding of the archaeological research process itself.

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Entrance to residential area that served the Palestinian residents of Susya, and a cave dwelling.  
Today, the cave is presented as a “potters” cave - as a model for life in ancient times.



The interior of a cave dwelling converted to model life in ancient times



The interior of a cave dwelling – partitioned into chambers for the animals



The interior of a cave - divided into cooking and sleeping areas

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