

Emek Shaveh's Newsletter March 2023: New government takes politicization of heritage sites to a new level

1 message

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Dear friends,

Over the past few weeks, we too have been swept up in the countrywide protests against attempts to destroy Israel's judicial system and irretrievably cripple the country's democracy. In parallel, we have been concerned over the steep rise in nationalistically motivated violence in the West Bank culminating with the murder of the two Jewish brothers by a Palestinian, and the settler led pogrom against innocent Palestinians in Hawara. In a climate of heightened political emergency and a constant fear of violent conflagration, one can be forgiven for overlooking heritage related developments. However, in this area too, we are watching with concern as the authorities in charge with safeguarding the country's heritage are being consolidated under far-right extremists, in this case the Jewish Power party controlled Ministry of Heritage.

This newsletter outlines the changes brought about by the new government in the area of heritage governance, and its implications for sites, particularly in the West Bank. Years of sacrificing professional standards and democratic norms in favor of policies shaped by political partisanship and nationalist agendas have given us a government which has abandoned even the pretense of maintaining professional standards or an inclusive approach to the country's multicultural heritage.

Under Israel's 37th government, the heritage portfolio is held by Amihai Eliyahu, a member of Itamar Ben Gvir's Jewish Power party. It is not surprising that the far-right party would choose the heritage portfolio. According to the coalition agreement, the purpose of the Ministry of Heritage “is to care for national heritage assets, engage in the exposure, conservation and reconstruction of these assets alongside entrenching Jewish and Zionist heritage.” Indeed, the plans and structural changes within the ministries show that consolidating heritage governance on both sides of the Green Line under the Ministry of Heritage indicates a strategic decision to use all the available statutory mechanisms in order to apply full Israeli control over ancient sites in the Occupied Territories.

The Israel Antiquities Authority comes under Jewish Power's Minister of Heritage

One of the main changes formalized in a [government decision](#) at the end of January was the transfer the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Heritage. The Israel Antiquities Authority is a government body which oversees the entirety of the country's antiquities (including East Jerusalem) and is responsible for implementing the 1989 Antiquities Authority Law. In theory it makes sense to house the IAA under the Ministry of Heritage, but recent attempts to [expand the jurisdiction of the IAA into Area C](#) of the West Bank and now its transition to a ministry headed by a member of the ultra-right Jewish Power party signifies another step towards the extreme politicization of the authority.

The Israel Antiquities Authority Excavates in the Judean Desert

In fact, the spirit of the new government manifested on the ground even before the new coalition was formed. Two months ago, the IAA conducted an excavation in the Judean Desert. According to the international conventions to which Israel is a signatory, an occupying power cannot excavate in occupied land unless it is undertaken for the benefit of the local population. In an unusual step, the IAA not only confessed that it was excavating in the West Bank it also announced that the finds from the dig would be displayed in a museum inside the green line, a move that also violates international law.

Historically, archaeological camps have played an important role in West Bank Israeli settlements. The settlement in [Shiloh was established in 1978 under the auspices of an archaeological dig](#). A similar method was used in Amona twenty

years later. Even if the initial intention does not include turning the site into a settlement, the establishment of a camp is a means of laying hold to an area and displacing Palestinians from their land. It goes without saying that once a camp is established, military presence is needed to guard the Israelis staying on site. We can assume that this trend will only intensify under the current minister of heritage.



Judean Desert excavation. Credit: The Israel Antiquities Authority

The Civil Administration's Staff Officer for Archaeology to come under the Ministry of Heritage

Another, structural decision which was given a political twist by Heritage Minister Amihai Eliyahu is the transfer of bureaucratic responsibility for the Civil Administration's Staff Officer for Archaeology (SOA) from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Heritage. The SOA is a department within the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) responsible for overseeing all antiquity sites in Area C of the West Bank. The decision was described by the minister as part of an effort to "strengthen activities to prevent antiquity destruction in Judea and Samaria". Formally, however, this is a technical decision to transfer staff positions from one ministry to another and in practice for now, the SOA continues to operate solely under orders of the ICA. On a declarative level, however, it is clearly intended to challenge limits imposed by international law and together with steps such as the as the transfer of the IAA from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Heritage represents attempts to consolidate heritage governance on both sides of the Green Line under the authority and agenda of the Jewish

Power party.

Israel ventures into antiquity sites in Area B in contravention of the Oslo Accords

Another cause for concern is the Minister's stated plans to take action in Area B of the West Bank where the Palestinians possess authority over antiquity sites. In November, prior to the establishment of the new government, the ICA [demolished Palestinian structures at an archaeological site in Area B](#), in violation of the Oslo Accords. In response to an article published about the incident, Minister Amihai Eliyahu [said](#) "the mistake called the Oslo Accords which resulted in the forsaking of many archaeological sites will come to an end on our watch. Every heritage site, regardless of its location, will be protected, regardless of the identity of those who do the damage."

This joins a [dubious archaeological project in Mt. Ebal](#) (Tel Burnat) in Area B by Israeli settlers and American Evangelist archaeologists who are promoting the site as Joshua's altar. Recently, the Palestinians announced a plan to build a neighborhood adjacent to the Mt Ebal site. In response the Minister said "the Palestinians are carrying out a national attack and are working to erase the Jewish heritage and identity at Mt. Ebal."

Blurring the lines between Areas C and B are a central element in collapsing the Oslo Accords and this example shows once again the strategic role reserved for archaeology in this effort.



Ancient site of Mt. Ebal

150 million NIS to protect antiquity sites in the West Bank

The government decision to transfer the Ministry of Heritage to the Jewish Power party also secured a coalition promise to budget a national "emergency" program to the sum of NIS 150 million (over four years) aimed at safeguarding antiquity sites from destruction and theft and "empowering heritage infrastructure" in the Judean Desert and in Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley. The organization Guardians of Eternity, a self-appointed watchdog of archaeological sites in the West Bank and offshoot of the settlers' organization Regavim, [congratulated](#) the minister for the program and added that they had submitted to the coalition a proposal for a national emergency program for heritage sites which would "revolutionize the field of protecting heritage sites in Judea and Samaria".

The plan follows a four-year campaign by settler groups spearheaded by Guardians of Eternity to crack down on Palestinian construction, agricultural activity and the development of heritage sites in the name of heritage protection, mainly in Area C but increasingly, as we have seen, also in Area B.

When a spoon is not just a spoon

Finally, some good news. In January, the United States repatriated an Iron Age cosmetic spoon to the Palestinian Authority (PA). The exquisite find had been retrieved illegally from the Khirbet el-Koum area in Hebron and was one of 180 illegally sourced antiquities seized from the billionaire antiquities collector Michael Steinhardt. Other artifacts from the collection were returned to Israel.

The head of the US Office of Palestinian Affairs, George Noll, [said](#) the repatriation is "a historic moment between the American and Palestinian people and a demonstration of our belief in the power of cultural exchanges in building mutual understanding, respect and partnership."

We have reported in the past on how Israeli law incentivizes the extensive trade in illegal antiquities which involves Israelis, Palestinians and internationals. For several years now we have been lobbying to change the law. It is ironic that settler groups who have been campaigning against the destruction of antiquity sites by the Palestinians are not keen to change the law that incentivizes destruction in the first place and suggests that the campaign is motivated more by a desire to delegitimize Palestinian claims than to stop the destruction of antiquities. More on the discovery and Israel's role in the illegal antiquities trade in this [radio interview](#) (in Hebrew) with Rafi Greenberg, Professor of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University and head of Emek Shaveh's board of directors.

The return of the spoon by the US is symbolically important not only because it upholds the Oslo Accords which give the PA authority over antiquity sites in Area A and B, but it is an official recognition, the first of its kind, that the ancient treasures of this land do not only belong to the Jewish people but also to the Palestinian people and constitutes an important part of their cultural heritage.



Photo Credit: Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

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Emek Shaveh campaigns against the use of archaeology as a political tool in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. We view ancient sites as shared heritage sites that could serve as a bridge between different peoples and cultures. If you are interested in supporting us please click below.



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