**The Destruction of the Iron Age I Site of el-'Unuq**

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**Abstract**

The Iron Age I site of el-'Unuq is a large enclosure on a hilltop isolated by ravines in Samaria. It discovered by the Manasseh Hill Country Survey and suggested to be one of the locations termed by Zertal ‘Foot-shaped enclosures’, and identified as the biblical Gilgal sites. A recent satellite viewing of sites located in Samaria in a region defined as Area B according to the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authorities revealed that the site was almost completely destroyed. No signs of salvage excavations were witnessed or reported, prior to, or during the destruction of the site by modern construction activities. This situation sheds light on a big obstacle for those interested in salvaging archaeological sites in the region: there is no direct, or even a faint connection, between the Palestinian Archaeological Authorities and the Israeli Staff Officer of Archaeology of Judea and Samaria.

**Keywords:** Iron Age; Foot-Shaped Enclosure; Samaria; Oslo Agreement; Destruction

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**Introduction**

The Iron Age I site of el-'Unuq is a large enclosure on a hilltop isolated by ravines in Wadi Far'ah (Israel New Grid 23506/68392; Figs. 1, 2), to the east of the Palestinian villages of Khirbet Bet-Hasan and Khirbet Aqrabaniyeh and to the southwest of Nassariyeh.

The site was discovered by the Manasseh Hill Country Survey (henceforth MHCS) who researched and published many Iron Age I sites in the regions of eastern Samaria and the Jordan Valley (Ben-Yosef 2007; Zertal 2008: 83-85; Zertal and Bar 2017: 58-63; Zertal and Bar 2019; 41-44). These sites had nomadic characteristics and were usually typified as sherd scatters, or simple/composite enclosures (e.g. Zertal and Bar 2019; 43).

The site of el-'Unuq, centrally located on the main route connecting the Jordan Valley and Samaria, was described as follows (Fig. 3; Zertal 2008: site 160): "…The enclosure, elliptical in shape, is 250 m long and 70 m wide. It is surrounded by a well-built wall of large field stones. On the southeastern part of the wall there is a built entrance, with a presumed another one on the western wall. The enclosure is divided into two unequal parts: the large, southern one is about two thirds in area, while the smaller one is in the north. A dirt rampart, presumably covering a wall, separates them. Near and outside the southwestern tip is a 10x15 m rectangular structure… In the middle of the southern tip there is a round stone pile 5 m in diameter, most probably covering a round structure… This is possibly to be identified with a biblical Gilgal. If so, an identification with the one related to the road to Ebal and Garizim (Deuteronomy 11: 29-30) can be suggested".

Zertal suggested that this site is one of the locations he termed ‘Foot-shaped enclosures’, and identified as the biblical Gilgal sites (Zertal 2018: chapter 13; 2021). Most of the pottery collected during the survey was dated to the Iron Age I (70%) and some to the Iron Age II (Fig. 4; Zertal 2008: 434). An abundance of sherds, especially handles, with indented decoration, were found (Fig. 4: 1-8, 11-12). These were previously suggested to be an important bureaucratic, and possibly also cultic, aspect connected to the Iron Age I society inhabiting the region (see in detail in Cohen 2005; for examples of impressed jar handles representing bureaucratic systems in the early Iron Age IIa see Bunimovitz et al. 2019; Kang and Garfinkel 2015). I suggest that, since this was one of the most imposing Iron Age I sites in Wadi Far'ah, and the one richest in indented decorations, it could also be their main manufacture or distribution center.

**The Destruction of the Site**

A recent (march 2023) satellite viewing of sites located in Samaria in a region defined as Area B according to the Oslo Agreement between Israel and the Palestinian authorities (the area under civil Palestinian jurisdiction where Israeli archaeologists are not allowed to work – see in details the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Annex III, Article 2 – [https://web.archive.org/web/20021115180646/http://knesset.gov.il/process/docs/heskemb\_eng.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20021115180646/http%3A//knesset.gov.il/process/docs/heskemb_eng.htm); Lash et al. 2023) revealed major destruction to the site. A new paved road had been built across the site, destroying large sections of the architectural remains (Fig. 5). The main architectonical units demolished are the surrounding enclosure wall (completely destroyed in the northwest and southeast) and some of the structures recorded in the survey inside and outside the enclosure (e.g. parts of the rampart and the rounded structure). Later satellite viewing (end of 2023) shows that this is not the end of the destruction – large domestic villas are being built on the site (Fig. 6) and will destroy what is left of the ancient remains.

No signs of any salvage activity were witnessed or reported, prior to, or during the construction. Unfortunately, it seems that no one is interested in salvaging this important site, or at least researching it before it is demolished.

**Discussion – what can we do**

El-'Unuq is unfortunately not alone. Many sites were damaged or destroyed in the last decade in the region, mainly by massive looting activities or by unsupervised constructions (e.g. the Dahr Mirzbaneh Tumulus – Bar 2020; The Arumah Fortress – Raviv and Zissu 2019; or another view from Kafr Shiyan – Al-Houdalieh and Tawafsha 2017; and see also Gutman et al. 2021; Lash et al. 2023: 907).

El-Unuq was published in Hebrew (Zertal 1996: site 160) and in English (Zertal 2008: site 160) in Volume 2 of the MHCS. The MHCS is the most detailed data source on the archaeology of Samaria and the Jordan Valley from the earliest prehistoric periods to World War One. The results of this more-than 45-year survey have been published in a series (Zertal 2004; 2008; Zertal and Mirkam 2016; Zertal and Bar 2017; 2019; 2021; 2022; Bar and Zertal 2020; 2023), and can be found in almost every library dealing with the archaeology of the Levant, and in major archaeological institutions worldwide. Since the archeological data was fully published, I expect the Antiquities Authorities of the Palestinian regime to use the detailed data to rescue this site and additional ancient sites from destruction in the area under their control.

The situation in el-'Unuq sheds light on another obstacle for those interested in salvaging archaeological sites in the region: there is no direct link between those on both sides of the ‘separation fence’ who are charged with salvaging antiquities (see also Lash et al. 2023: 895). The Israeli Staff Officer of Archaeology of Judea and Samaria only deals with sites located in Area C according to the Oslo agreement (under Israeli civil control – see link above), and his team is not authorized to work in areas under Palestinian jurisdiction (Areas A and B in the Oslo Agreement). He does not have direct (or even indirect) contact with Palestinian officials responsible for safeguarding archaeology in the area under their control (personal communication with the Israeli Staff Officer of Archaeology of Judea and Samaria). In an earlier case when I noticed destruction of antiquities in Area A north of Jericho, I had no other recourse but to contact American colleagues to try to bring the news of the destruction to the Palestinian Authority. This effort did not succeed, and all the sites I reported were eventually destroyed with no salvage operations carried out beforehand.

I urge the archaeological community to find a way to create a direct link between archaeological researchers and institutions on both sides to report sites in danger of destruction in order to salvage the history of the region.

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Figure 1: Map of the adjacent area of el-'Unuq.

Figure 2: Aerial view southwest to el-'Unuq during the survey and before the destruction of the site (Zertal 2008: fig. 345). Note the well-preserved surrounding wall and some structures inside the enclosure.

Figure 3: Plan of el-'Unuq prior to the destruction (after Zertal 2008: fig 347).

Figure 4: Finds from el-'Unuq (after Zertal 2008: figs. 346, 348).

Figure 5: The new road and the supposed location of ancient structures at el-'Unuq (March 2023).

Figure 6: The new road and the beginning of constructions of villas at el-'Unuq (December 2023).

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