



## IN THE HIGHLAND'S DEPTH

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Cover Picture: Kh. Balāta in the middle of Nahal Shiloh curve, north of Beit Arie (photograph: S. Cohen)

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

Shay Bar

## **Abstract**

The Iron Age I site of el-'Unuq, discovered by the Manasseh Hill Country Survey, is a large enclosure on a hilltop in Eastern Samaria that is isolated by ravines. It has been suggested that this may be one of the locations termed 'foot-shaped enclosures' and identified as the biblical Gilgal sites by Adam Zertal. A recent satellite viewing of various sites in Samaria in a region classified as Area B by the Oslo Accords revealed that this site had been almost completely destroyed. No signs of salvage excavations were witnessed or reported prior to or during the destruction of the site by modern construction activity. This situation is representative of a major obstacle for those interested in salvaging archaeological sites in the region: There is no direct coordination, or even the faintest connection, between the Palestinian archaeological authorities and the Israeli Staff Officer of Archaeology of Judea and Samaria.

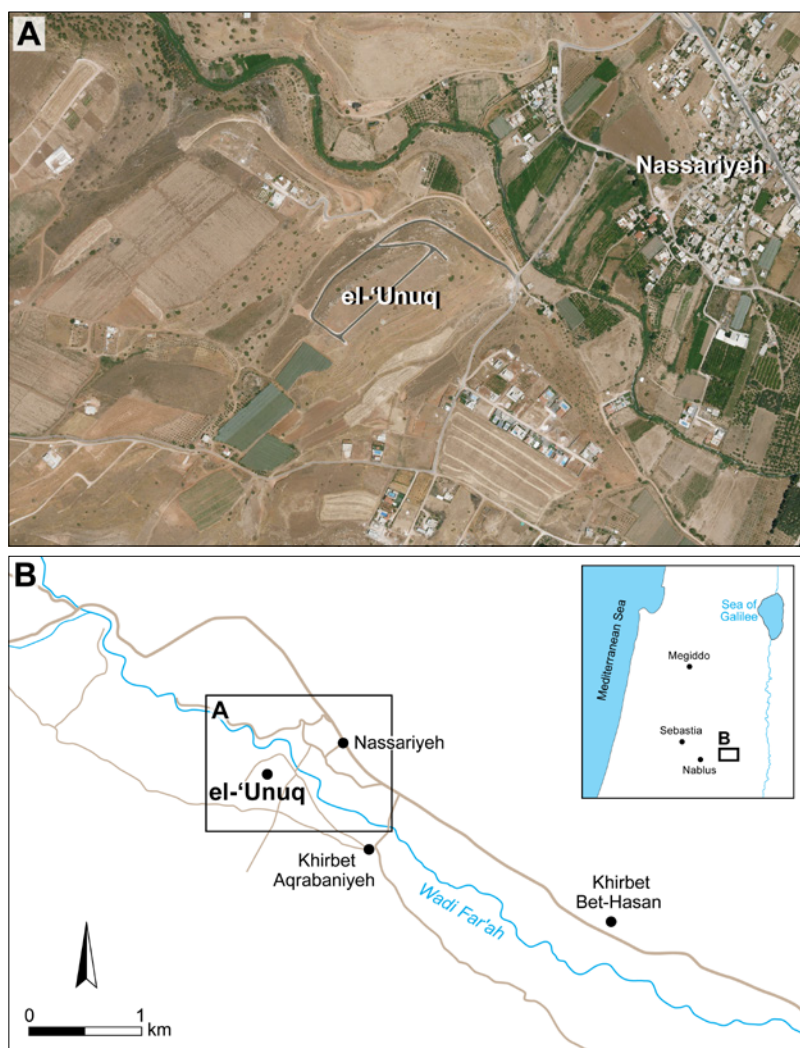
**Keywords:** Iron Age, foot-shaped enclosure, Samaria, Oslo Accords, destruction

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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 (ITM 23506/68392), located northwest of the Palestinian villages of Khirbet Bet-Hasan and Khirbet Aqrabaniyeh and southwest of Nassariyeh (fig. 1).



**Figure 1:** Map of the adjacent area of el-'Unuq (based on an image from [govmap.gov.il](http://govmap.gov.il), accessed on March 2023; graphics: S. Haad)

The site was discovered by the Manasseh Hill Country Survey (MHCS; fig. 2), which has discovered numerous Iron Age I sites in eastern Samaria and the Jordan Valley (Ben-Yosef 2007; Zertal 2008, 83–85; Zertal and Bar 2017, 58–63; 2019, 41–44). The sites found by MHCS showed nomadic characteristics and were usually typified as scattered sherds or simple/composite enclosures (e.g. Zertal and Bar 2019, 43).

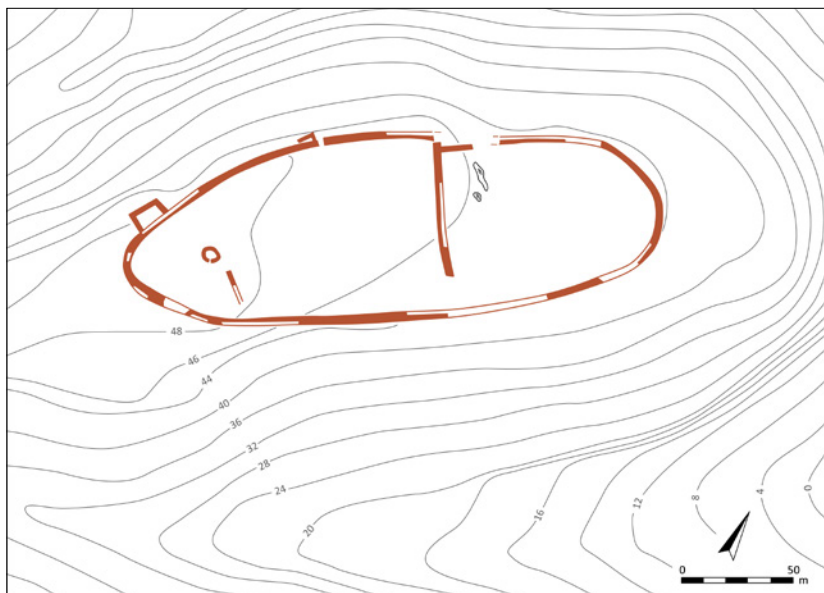


**Figure 2:** Aerial view of el-'Unuq during the survey and before the destruction of the site, looking south (after Zertal 2008, fig. 345); Note the well-preserved surrounding wall and some structures inside the enclosure

The site of el-'Unuq, centrally located on the main route connecting the Jordan Valley and Samaria (fig. 3), was described as follows:

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 2008, Site 160).



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

Adam Zertal suggested that this site was one of the locations that he termed "foot-shaped enclosures" and identified as the biblical Gilgal sites (Zertal 2018, 159–164; 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). The survey found an abundance of sherds, especially handles, with indented decorations (fig. 4: 1–8, 11–12). It has previously been suggested that these were indicative of an important bureaucratic, and possibly also cultic, aspect of the Iron Age I society that inhabited the region (Cohen 2005).<sup>1</sup> As this site was one of the most imposing Iron Age I sites in Wadi Far'ah, and the one richest in indented decorations (Cohen 2005, 105, 148–149), I believe that it may have been their primary manufacture or distribution center.

<sup>1</sup> Finger-impressed jar handles in the early Iron Age IIA were also claimed to represent bureaucratic systems (Kang and Garfinkel 2015; but see Bunimovitz et al. 2019).

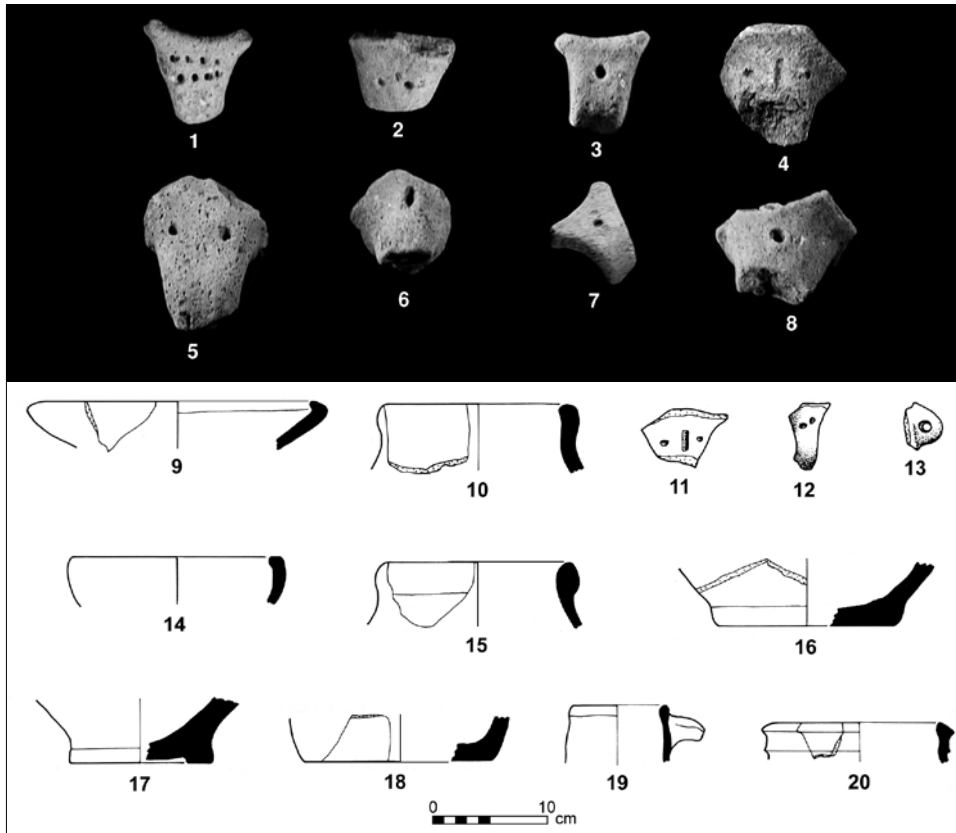


Figure 4: Pottery sherds from el-'Unuq (after Zertal 2008, figs. 346, 348)

## The Destruction of the Site

A recent (March 2023) satellite viewing of various sites in Samaria in a region classified as Area B revealed major damage to the site.<sup>2</sup> A paved road had been built across the site, destroying much of the architectural remains (fig. 5). The main architectural units demolished were the surrounding enclosure wall (completely destroyed in the northwest and southeast) and some of the structures recorded in the survey, both inside and outside the

2 According to the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, Area B is strictly under civil Palestinian jurisdiction, and Israeli archaeologists are not allowed to work there. For further information, see *The Oslo Agreement*, Annex III, Article 2; Lash et al. 2023.

enclosure (e.g. parts of the rampart and the rounded structure). Subsequent satellite viewing (December 2023) has revealed that there will be more destruction to come – large domestic villas are being built on the site (fig. 6) and are destroying what is left of the ancient remains.



**Figure 5:** The new road and the supposed location of ancient structures at el-'Unuq (based on an image from [govmap.gov.il](http://govmap.gov.il) accessed on March 2023; graphics: S. Haad)



**Figure 6:** The new road and the beginning of constructions of villas at el-'Unuq (based on an image from [govmap.gov.il](http://govmap.gov.il), accessed on December 2023)

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

## Discussion – What Can We Do?

Sadly, el-'Unuq is not alone. Over the last decade, many sites in the area have been damaged or destroyed, mainly by large-scale looting activity or unsupervised construction.<sup>3</sup>

El-'Unuq was documented in Hebrew and in English as Site 160 in Volume 2 of the MHCS (Zertal 1996, 394–397; 2008, 433–436). The MHCS is the most detailed existing source of data on the archaeology of Samaria and the Jordan Valley, ranging from the earliest prehistoric periods to World War I. The results of this survey, conducted for over 45 years, have been published in a series (Zertal 2004; 2008; Zertal and Mirkam 2016; Zertal and Bar 2017; 2019; Bar and Zertal 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023) and may be found in almost every library of works on the archaeology of the Levant, as well as in major archaeological institutions worldwide. The archaeological data has been comprehensively published; I expect the Palestinian antiquities authorities to make use of this extensive data to rescue this and other ancient sites in the area under their control.

The situation in el-'Unuq sheds light on an additional obstacle for those who wish to preserve archaeological sites in the region: There is no direct link between the entities responsible for salvaging antiquities on either side of the “separation fence” (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,<sup>4</sup> and his team is not authorized to work in areas under Palestinian jurisdiction (Areas A and B). In a conversation I made with people from the

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3 Only a few examples have been documented and published, including Dhahr Mirzbaneh Tumulus (Bar 2020), the Arumah Fortress (Raviv and Zissu 2019), and another view from Kh. Kafr Shiyan (Al-Houdalieh and Tawafsha 2017). For the broader phenomenon, see also Gutman et al. 2021.

4 The Oslo Accords define Area C as the area under Israeli civil control; see *The Oslo Agreement*, Annex III, Article 2.

Israeli Staff Officer of Archaeology of Judea and Samaria during 2023, they acknowledged that they do not have direct or even indirect contact with the Palestinian officials responsible for safeguarding archaeology in Palestinian-controlled areas. In an earlier case, when I witnessed the destruction of antiquities in Area A north of Jericho, my only recourse was to contact American colleagues in an attempt to inform the Palestinian Authority. This effort was unsuccessful, and all the sites that I reported were eventually destroyed with no salvage operations carried out beforehand.

I urge the archaeological community to work toward the creation of a direct link between archaeological researchers and institutions on both sides in order to facilitate the reporting of endangered sites. Ongoing contact of this kind is necessary to preserve the history of the region.

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# תקציר בעברית של מאמר החלק הלועזי

## ההרס באתר אל-עונוק מתקופת הברזל 1

שי בר

אל-עונוק הוא אתר חשוב מתקופת הברזל 1. האתר נמצא על ראש גבעה בעמק של נחל תרצה שבמזרח השומרון, סמוך לכפר עקרביניה. במקום התגלה מתחם מוקף קיר, אולי חומה, וחרסים מתקופות הברזל 1-2, ובכללם קרמיקה מנוקבת האופיינית לאתרי הפולחן של ראשית ישראל (בעיבל ובשילה). זרטל הציע לראות בו אחד ממתחמי "כף הרגל" שאותם הוא זיהה עם אתרי הגלגל המקראיים. צילומי לוויין שנערכו לא מכבר בשומרון זיהו שהאתר נהרס בעקבות בניית כבישים ושכונת וילות. הבנייה נעשתה בתחומי שטח B לפי הסכמי אוסלו, שהשליטה האזרחית בו נתונה בידי הרשות הפלסטינית, אך היא לא לוותה בחפירות הצלה כמצופה. מקרה זה מצטרף למקרים רבים נוספים המהווים מכשול לחוקרים שרוצים להציל את אתרי המורשת ביהודה ושומרון, באין מנגנון תיאום ישיר או אפילו עקיף בין מנגנוני הבקרה משני הצדדים האחראים למרחב.

מילות מפתח: תקופת הברזל, מתחם "כף הרגל", שומרון, הסכמי אוסלו, הרס

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