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מגדל דוד - מוזיאון לתולדות ירושלי - 16860					

Thousands of years of history unveiled at Tower of David's Kishle Prison

• By SETH J. FRANTZMAN

On the eve of the War of Independence several Jewish prisoners found themselves locked into the dank and dirty Ottoman-era prison that abutted the police station near today's Tower of David in Jerusalem's Old City.

They were members of the Irgun, the Jewish underground that was engaged in a campaign against the British. One of the prisoners scrawled the group's logo onto the wall, a map of Mandate Palestine and what is today Jordan, the Land of Israel they hoped to liberate.

That 1947 etching, along with thousands of years of history remained locked away for years as the Old City fell into Jordanian hands, and then, after 1967, was neglected as archeologists focused on excavations at the citadel area adjoining the abandoned prison.

The opening of new excavations in the Tower of David go hand in hand with the installation of photo geometry devices by the Enviewz company that allow visitors to hold a tablet computer in their hand that gives them an interactive virtual view of what they are seeing and provides explanations and other information.

"This is one of the most excavated areas in the city, after the City of David," Amit Re'em, the Jerusalem District Archeologist from the Antiquities Authority explains as he guides our group through the excavations.

When Re'em first opened the door into the prison known as the Kishle, he saw the rusted iron bars. "For two years we excavated this by hand. We dismantled the prison cells but preserved the English, Arabic and Hebrew graffiti that the prisoners had carved." Like so much of Jerusalem the prison was built atop debris that filled in thousands of years of history.

Access to the Kishle is from a winding rickety metal staircase south of the Tower of David. Perched above is the Ottoman-era minaret, and stairs lead to the ramparts walk that ring the Old City. From the battlements one can see the new fountain at Teddy Park below the Mamilla neighborhood. A police compound adjacent to the Kishle reminds one of the continuity of this site; it has been manned by soldiers since the time of the Hasmoneans and before, a strategic highpoint chosen by Herod and other kings as a place for a palace and citadel.

The Kishle still has the feeling of a dank prison. Birds nest in the tiny windows that let in slants of light at the top. A stairway descends to the current level of excavations, past crusader-era ruins.

"From here we see the retaining walls and



JERUSALEM DISTRICT ARCHEOLOGIST Amit Re'em gestures inside the former Kishle Prison. (Seth J. Frantzman)

sewage system, and this is just the tail of the elephant," explains Re'em. The first-century Jewish general turned historian, Josephus Flavius, mentioned a palace at this location. "He spoke of a lot of water; baths, ritual baths, pools. Herod loved water and this is proof," says the archeologist pointing to the drainage system that goes under the Old City walls and ends at Sultan's Pool. Re'em, energetic and constantly on the move during the tour, is fluent in all the historical geography, shifting from the story of the High Priest Annas to the tale of how Jesus was brought to the palace of Herod, according to the New Testament.

Re'em envisions tourists being greeted one day by holograms in which they will see virtually the different walls from the various periods. "In this beautiful place we can see all the archeological and historical sequence of the history of Jerusalem."

Eilat Lieber, the general director and chief curator of the museum, has a vision for the Kishle that involves opening it to the public for tours as well as making it a center of culture. "We want to put an exhibition about the finds with a floating glass floor [at the upper level]. What is important to us is to know about the history and create a new cultural space for activities like lectures, music and modern art, bring the past and future together."