

Delving into the Kishle

Most people think of the Kishle as the David Sub-District Headquarters of the Israel Police, some 150 metres off to the right after entering the Old City of Jerusalem through the Jaffa Gate. There is, however, another part of the Kishle in an obscure corner of the adjacent Tower of David (Citadel) complex. Jay Levinson examines that not well-known Kishle. (Yes, “deeper” is the correct word, as will soon be seen.)



Access to Kishle excavations following renovations
PHOTO ODED ANTMAN

A classic question in archaeology is how many layers of an historic site does one excavate. After all, each layer that is removed means that it is destroyed. Proper methodology dictates that artifacts be saved and photographs be taken, but for all practical purposes the layer --- a segment of history --- is gone forever. Photographs can never fully recreate the ambience of walking through what had once stood on the site.

So it is with the Kishle. The top layer was built by Ibrahim Pasha, son of Mehmet Ali, during the 10-year Egyptian rule in Jerusalem as a military compound to control the nearby entrance to the Old City. Choice of the site was self-evident. Records show that the specific area was barren at the time. Jaffa Gate was the main entrance to the city and a commercial centre. It was also the heart of Ottoman government offices. In 1838 opposite Jaffa Gate the British would open the first foreign consulate in Jerusalem, followed by the Americans (1844).

The adjacent Citadel was virtually impregnable. During the 1834 Fellahin (Peasants') Revolt, revolutionaries conquered all of the Old City ... except the Citadel. It was there that the Egyptian commander of the city, Rashad Bey, sought safety with his garrison. Even after the Ottomans regained control in 1841, the Egyptian-built Kishle remained a military compound.

What to do about the Citadel? During the Great War the area was home to refugees fleeing the fighting. After British conquest (1881-1955), the Military (1917-1920) then civilian (1920-1926) Ronald Storrs Governor of Jerusalem, ordered repairs to be made and garbage removed. Through the Pro-Jerusalem Society, the Citadel hosted cultural events. In 1941 a folklore museum opened. Politics, however, were the order of the day as Jewish-Arab confrontations

intensified. In 1947 the museum closed. Emphasis moved to security.

During the British Mandate the building prominently seen today became a police station, and the bordering structure continued to be a jail. The area was perfect to house detainees before they were released by the British or transferred to prisons. It was in good part protected by the moat of the Citadel, whose steep wall and glacis impeded escape. In the jail there were Jews and Arabs. A corridor ran down the middle of the jail. Jews to the left, Arabs to the right.

Life in detention was a combination of boredom and defiance. In 1947 one detainee scratched the symbol of his affiliation, Etzel, on the wall of his cell. The bars of the cells have been removed to enable excavations, but



Shmuel Matza. Katamon Jerusalem. 1947

that symbol can still be seen. In recent years the inmate, Shmuel Matza, was identified, and he verified that he was the “artist” during his four-day incarceration before being sent to the

Latrun prison.

(In 1954 *Beitar* wanted to further rejuvenate its efforts in Cuba, so a bold initiative was undertaken. Matza, had just graduated with a law degree from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was sent from Israel to Havana as the *Beitar* emissary to bring strength to the Cuban office of the movement. There was no salary for his position. Instead, he was appointed Headmaster for Jewish & Israeli Studies at the Tajkemoni School. He stayed in Havana until December 1956, when he returned to Jerusalem.)

Did the British really want to leave Palestine? Did they hope or think that the vote on Partition would fail at the UN on 29 November 1947? A document dated three weeks before the historic vote shows that Mandate authorities were planning basic repair work on several of their prisons.

Back to the Kishle. Archaeologists continued to dig. The next layer down was from the Crusader era. A short story. During Christian rule in Jerusalem it was forbidden for Jews to enter Jerusalem, yet the Spanish traveller, Benjamin of Tudela, records that there were Jews near today's Kishle. How? Why?

Necessity often overrides principles. The Crusaders were in essence soldiers, and they wore red uniforms. Soldiers, not tailors. They needed people to make their uniforms, and for that task they hired Jews per that Jewish traveller. Not only was weaving equipment found in excavations on the Crusader level of the Kishle. Archaeologists also found the red pigments used to dye the cloth, exactly as the traveller described.

Interesting, but archaeologists kept digging. The next level. They uncovered a pool replete with a system to drain water into the adjacent Kidron Valley. And, there were the clear remnants of buildings. Eureka! Only one person could have ordered the construction of such an edifice, and the proof was

there. The archaeologists found some of the support pillars from part of Herod's palace! Luxury was the game of the day. Water for the pool was diverted from the lower of the two aqueducts Herod had built from the south. The findings verified writings from ancient sources. Again, Josephus was accurate in his reporting.

When Titus conquered Jerusalem, he commanded that Herod's palace and its fortifications, symbols of the *ancien régime*, be destroyed except for one defence tower. The best guess is that he wanted to herald his military might that even despite the towers, his army was victorious. Today the Tower of Phasael (died 40 BCE), posthumously named after Herod's eldest brother, still stands and is mistakenly called the Tower of David.

But why were the Citadel and palace built on that spot? The Citadel is the highest point in Jerusalem, before the city expanded outside the walls. History did not wait for Herod to understand strategic importance. Archaeologists also uncovered part of a Hasmonean wall and mikvah in the moat, as well as a section of a wall probably built by Chizkiyahu to defend Jerusalem.

To keep proper perspective, the history of the Kishle and the Citadel are intertwined from the time the former was built. The current police station probably rests atop layers under which is more of Herod's palace. For many years the Citadel meant security, and building of the Kishle was an extension of that concept. Today we divide the Kishle from the Citadel, but that is a modernism not relevant to historic times. The future? The newest layer of excavation is in the planning stage to become an archaeological centre, showing how archaeology can solve the mysteries of history.

Tours of the Kishle excavations are offered by the Tower of David Museum on Tuesdays at 1030 (Hebrew) and Fridays at 1100 (English).