

For the attention of:

Ms *Dalit Atrakchi*, Secretary of the Israeli Commission for UNESCO

Professor *Eli Stern*, Chair of the World Heritage Committee, the Israeli Commission for UNESCO

Mr *Tzvika Tzuk*, Israel Nature and Parks Authority

Professor *Irit Amit*, Chair of ICOMOS Israel

Architect *Ruth Liberty Shalev*, Chair of the Monitoring Committee, World Heritage Committee

Re: Request to include the Palestinian village of Bayt Jibrin in the site description of the Marsha Caves and Beit Guvrin

On April 26th 2014 UNESCO recognized the Maresha Caves and Beit Guvrin as World Heritage site no. 1370. The announcement and the historical description of the site mention (on p.242) the civilizations that existed at this site during various periods: the Israelite period (eighth to sixth century BCE), the Persian period, the Hellenistic period, the Roman period, the Byzantine period, the first Arab Muslim period (from the seventh century AD until the eleventh century) and the Crusader period. The announcement's survey of human history at these sites ends here. The report notes that after the Crusader period "it is likely that the caves were also in use during later periods but the underground complexes remain unchanged" (pp.242-3).

The commission ignored within the report the rich life that continued within the recognized area for hundreds of years until the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. As can be seen in the documents compiled here (and in our [presentation](#)) - namely a map of the declared area, an aerial photograph, and maps of mandatory Palestine and of Israel - the Palestinian village of Bayt Jibrin existed in the area of the heritage site and its buffer zone. According to the researcher Walid Khalidi, the village existed for hundreds of years and in 1945 had a population of 2,430 living in nearly 400 homes. It was a center of service and trade for other villages in the region and had two schools, a clinic and a weekly market. In 1948 the population was approximately 2,820.

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority is currently the responsible body for this ancient site, which includes the site of the village. The Nature and Park Authority's only reference to the village and its significant profile is in a short sentence which notes that it was "occupied by the IDF on October 27th, 1948." This quotation is presented in a guide brochure for the Beit Guvrin national park. This is the only mention of the village throughout the entire description and interpretation on the website, and in the printed brochure and the numerous written explanations stationed at the site itself.

As at other ancient locations across the country Bayt Jibrin is part of the continuity of settlement at this site, and Arab-Muslim settlement had - until 1948 - been part of the archaeological and historical continuity of the area since the arrival of Islam in the seventh century AD. Israel's physical destruction of Palestinian villages in 1948, and later in the '50s and '60s, is reflected metaphorically in the declaration, which ignores the village of Bayt Jibrin. As such the Israeli Commission for UNESCO is in fact falling back on the common practice in Israel of ignoring, erasing and deliberately destroying 1300 years of Arab-Muslim-Palestinian culture in the coun-

try, and in this region in particular. This phenomenon is also reflected in the archaeological excavations at nearby sites such as Hurvat Burgin and Hurvat Itri. These digs emphasize and focus on periods connected to the Jewish history of the place and ignore, erase and fail to present the site's Palestinian-Islamic relics.

This approach contradicts the idea of multiculturalism and multi-layering that is required by the World Heritage Convention and other conservation conventions (the Burra, Nara and Lausanne Conventions), that show the importance of the inclusion of all past communities in the preservation of the site.

Our letter is intended to make sure that the description of the site will be changed and that the presence of the Palestinian village will be reflected as part of the interpretation, display and site interface program at the caves. The reasons why are as follows:

1. **Adhering to the World Heritage Convention** - the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage states that “the description of the property shall include the identification of the property, and an overview of its history and development. All component parts that are mapped shall be identified and described ... The History and Development of the property shall describe how the property has reached its present form and the significant changes that it has undergone.” From clause 132, sub-section 2 of the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention (1972).

Instructions on how to describe the site follow in annex 5 (page 105), clause 2.b History and Development: “This should include some account of construction phases in the case of monuments, sites, buildings or groups of buildings. Where there have been major changes, demolitions or rebuilding since completion they should also be described.”

According to the definitions of the World Heritage Committee the layer of the Palestinian village of Bayt Jibrin cannot be ignored in the site description. This layer is currently absent from the site description, which therefore contravenes the terms of the declaration.

We therefore request that you change the site description in its UNESCO portfolio and include within it an exhaustive description of the village of Bayt Jibrin mentioned above. In addition we ask you to change the site description in all relevant publications including the website of the Israeli Commission for UNESCO.

2. **Interpretation and update and presentation of the site interface program** - according to the conventions for conservation and the guidelines of the World Heritage Committee, there must be presented at a site its entire history relating to every historical layer along with all its communities and their meaning. According to the Burra Charter “[t]he cultural significance of many places is not always readily apparent, and should be explained by interpretation. Interpretation should enhance understanding and engagement, and should be culturally appropriate.” According to the Lausanne Charter, displays at the site are “the most important means of promoting an understanding of the need for its preservation. Presentation and information should... take account of the multifaceted approaches to an understanding of the past.” With all that arises out of the guiding approaches to the field of conservation, it is not possible to display only one narrative at the site of the caves, and commentary and displays on the heritage of the destroyed Palestinian village must be added - even if this subject is complex and sensitive in Is-

raeli society. It is the responsibility of the body that operates the site and runs the program interface for the site - the Nature and Parks Authority - to operate a program of interpretation and presentation that is suitable and has integrity.

We therefore request that you update the program interface on the website and incorporate into it an outline of interpretation and presentation that will inform the public touring the site of the history of the village of Bayt Jibrin in the area. The display plan should also include signs and updating of the information provided to hikers in writing or on the websites.

We would be delighted to meet and provide you with all the information within our possession on life in the village of Bayt Jibrin, as well as any other information that you may require.

We await your response on our requests to you.

Yours sincerely,

Eitan Bronstein Aparicio (*De-Colonizer*), Gideon Sulimani, Noga Kadmon, Eléonore Merza Bronstein (*De-Colonizer*)

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Copy: Mechild Rossler, Deputy Director (Division for Heritage UNESCO)