

The Excavations of the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology (GPIA) on Mount Zion in Jerusalem (2015 and 2023)

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When you leave Jerusalem's Old City through the Zion Gate, you enter a place that is characterized in a special way by history, narratives, legends, and conflicts. The mountain in the south-west of Jerusalem is sacred to the three major monotheistic religions.

However, the location of many religious traditions and the naming of the elevation southwest of the Old City walls, now known as Mount Zion, can be traced back to an historical error. When the Old Testament speaks of "Zion," it refers to the city conquered by King David around 1000 BCE, the "City of David" (*Silwān*) or to the "Castle of Zion," a Jebusite fortress (1 Chr 11:5) in the north of the settlement at that time. A few centuries later, however, the Temple Mount was regarded as "Zion."



Fig. 1: Mount Zion (southwest hill) of Jerusalem; view from the south with the excavation areas of the GPIA and the Dormitio Abbey in the foreground and the Old City in the background © Yehiel Zelinger, IAA

In 2015, the GPIA began to uncover the old excavation site of Frederick Bliss and Archibald Dickie. The gate with its three superimposed thresholds, parts of the associated walls and the adjoining tower to the west with its constructive sequence of building layers became visible again.

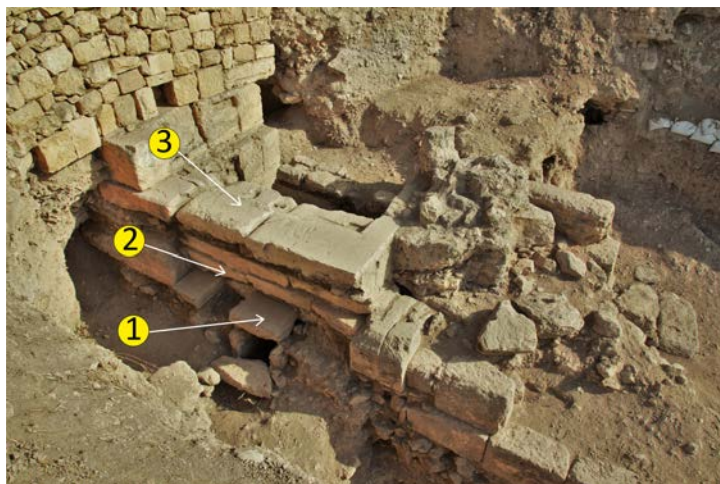


Fig. 2: Overlapping gate thresholds from the Early Roman period (1), the Hadrianic period (2), and Late Antiquity (3) © BAI/GPIA

Since the beginning of archaeological research in Jerusalem, the question of the course of the Iron Age wall has been hotly debated. Under King Hezekiah in the 8th century BCE, many inhabitants of the former northern kingdom “Israel” fled to the south and settled in Jerusalem, which led to a significant increase in the city’s population. This necessitated both the expansion of the water system (“Hezekiah’s Tunnel”) and an extension of the city area to the west. However, clear archaeological evidence of this wall from the 8th century BCE has so far only come to light in the “City of David” (*Silwān*), in the “Citadel of David” and the “Kishle” as well as in the Jewish quarter. Its southern course remained the subject of much speculation and has not yet been archaeologically ascertainable. Yehiel Zelinger (IAA) was also unable to provide any evidence of the Iron Age wall in his excavations south of the GPIA site between 2018 and 2020.

During our excavations, several city walls were identified on Mount Zion and their stratigraphic classification was investigated. The chronological determination was supplemented by numerous 14C and OSL analyses:

- The oldest wall in this area lies roughly parallel to the later built Early Roman, possibly Herodian wall and was dated to the Hellenistic period (3rd/2nd century BCE; stratum 6) based on its architectural style, pottery finds, 14C, and OSL.
- The Early Roman wall with its famous “Essene Gate” was built to the southwest of it (Stratum 5; Fig. 2/1). It is still well documented with several layers of stone on the southwest corner of the tower. The gate is described by Flavius Josephus (*Ios. bell.* V 145).
- No wall was to be expected from the Hadrianic period (Stratum 4). During this era, Jerusalem was not walled but was protected by the *Legio X fretensis*. Hadrian,

however, erected free-standing gate monuments, such as the one above the Early Roman gate in Area I (Fig. 2/2).

- The most recent of the city walls was erected in Late Antiquity. The upper threshold of the gate, the neighboring wall and the upper layers of the tower found to the south of it are still visible (Fig. 2/3).



Fig. 3: City wall from Late Antiquity with gate (top left) and the remains of the tower destroyed in 1903/4 during the construction of the cemetery wall (bottom) © BAI/GPIA

The GPIA followed the preliminary work of Bargil Pixner, Doron Chen, and Shlomo Margalit in their search for the course of the city wall of the 8th/7th century BCE. In the 1980s, they announced that they had discovered a segment of the Iron Age wall founded on the rock. They believed that they had found the southwestern face of the wall directly adjacent to the tower (Fig. 4 A) – the north-eastern end was below and beyond the younger wall from GPIA (Fig. 4 B).

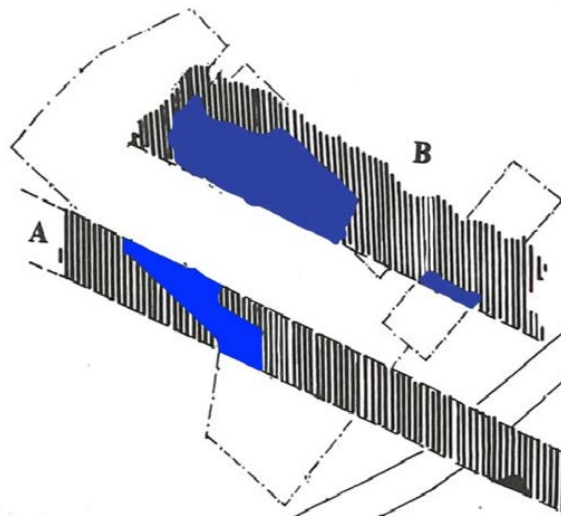


Fig. 4: Bargil Pixner's Iron Age-dated wall on both sides of the wall from GPIA (blue) © Vieweger 2019, II: 290

To reach an untouched excavation area, the GIA excavated an area of 12 sqm at a depth of 5.50 m adjacent to the city wall described by Bargil Pixner. This revealed a casemate wall (Fig. 5). The 2.40 m wide construction was founded directly on the rock and still protruded by about 70 cm. A casemate wall of this type had already been found by Frederick Bliss and Archibald Dickie over 100 years ago in the neighboring Catholic cemetery (east of the GIA excavation site).

Crucial to the dating of the wall in question were the archaeological remains in the foundation trench. Four diagnostic sherds were found here; the most recent finds dated to the Hellenistic era. Based on this and the available 14C data (Fig. 6), this wall can be dated to the 2nd/1st century BCE, i.e. into the Hasmonean period.

The Late Hellenistic and Hasmonean fortifications found (Strata 6b/a) and their numerous phases of (re)construction and destruction are also reflected in the written sources: A first fortification by the Hasmonean rulers in Jerusalem is already attributed to Judas Maccabeus (166–160 BCE). After the destruction in 163 BCE by Antiochus V, Judas' successor Jonathan (160–143 BCE) also had the city fortified with an ashlar wall. His work was completed by Simon. In 141 BCE, this city wall was further extended (see 1 Macc 4:60; 6:62; 10:10–11; 12:36–37; 13:10 and others).

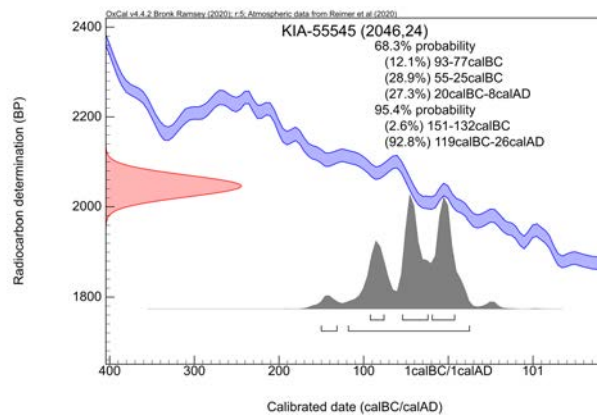


Fig. 5 & 6: Hasmonean casemate wall with tower (blue) and the 14C dating © BAI/GPIA

There is no evidence of an Old Testament (Iron Age II) city wall in Area I or anywhere else on Mount Zion. This contradicts the generally accepted idea of the extent of the Iron Age walled city. It would have been perfectly logical and, above all, militarily sensible if the Old Testament wall had followed the contour lines high above the Hinnom Valley. But it is undisputed that the Old Testament city of the 8th/7th century BCE was walled under King Hezekiah.

According to the GIA excavations in 2020, it must be assumed that Jerusalem covered a smaller area during Iron Age II. It is possible that the northern part of the hill (today's Armenian and Jewish neighborhoods) or only its eastern part was within the walled city area. Two possible courses of the wall following the contour lines of Jerusalem are roughly depicted

as possibilities in the yellow and light green versions in Fig. 7 – however, the question of their exact course is open and must be left to future archaeological investigations.

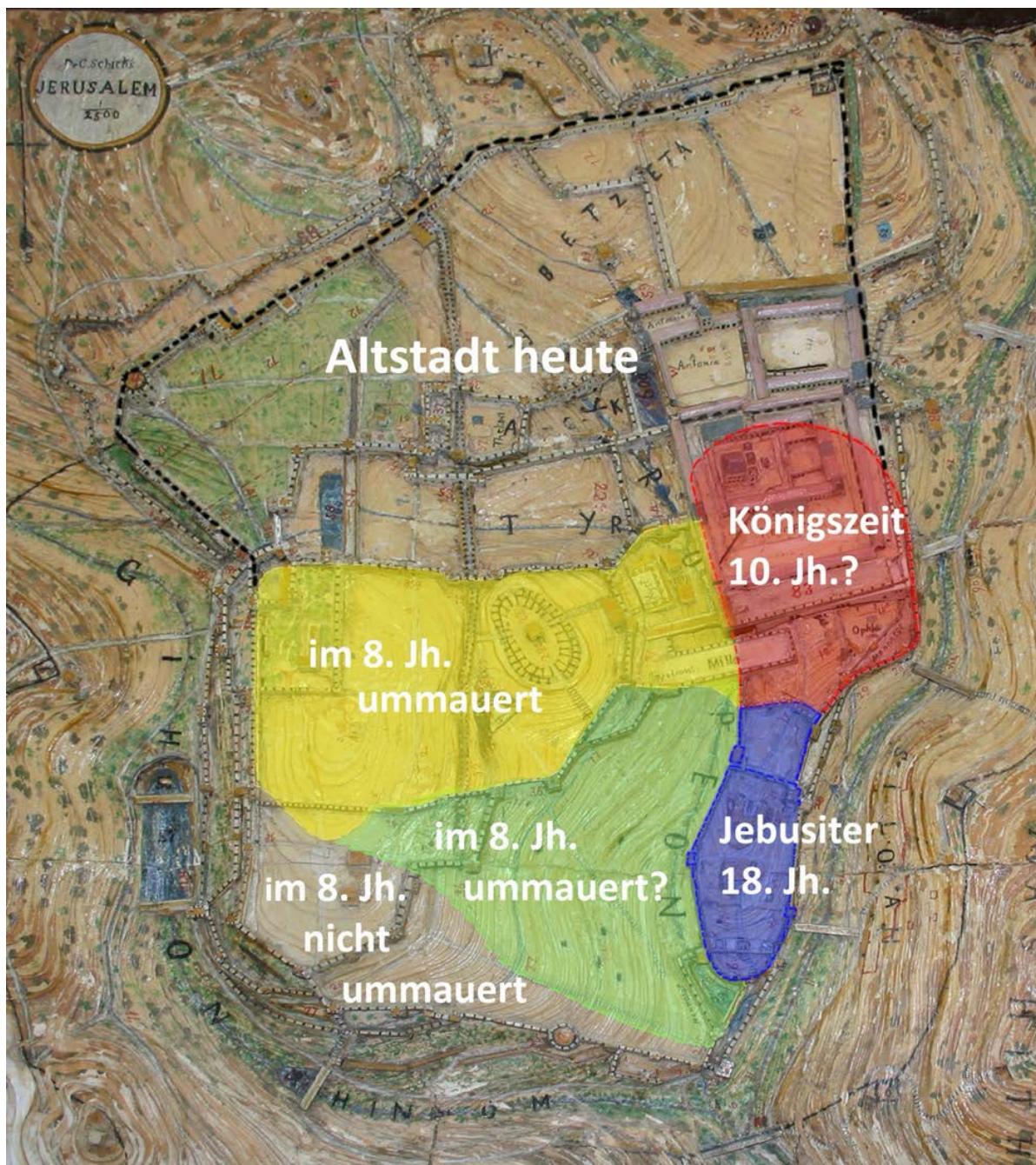


Fig. 7: Possible solutions for the construction of the Iron Age south wall based on the topographical conditions in Jerusalem © BAI/GPIA

Even if the excavation areas of the GPIA (Fig. 1) are located outside the Old City today, these areas were nevertheless located within the walled city of Jerusalem in antiquity – at least this can be assumed with certainty for the Late Hellenistic era to the Early Islamic period. The GPIA was able to identify six different strata.

In addition to a villa from Late Antiquity era, also some streets, dwelling quarters, a bath and representatively furnished residential buildings were excavated. A huge wall from Area VI/1, which possibly belonged to a building from the time of Emperor Phocas (602–610 CE) served as a local “Government building.” This corresponds to the reports of Antiochos Strategos about Mount Zion (after Michael Dschernin). Jerusalem rebelled against the new emperor Phocas after Mauricius’ death (602 CE). However, his general Bonosos was able to re-establish Constantinople’s rule over Jerusalem and built this fortress-like building.

The Hagia Sion on the heights of Mount Zion was a center of attraction for many pilgrims during late antiquity and the High Middle Ages. The ground plan of the church can only be roughly reconstructed so far, since archaeological findings can only be based on the early excavations from the time the modern abbey was built (1898–1900) by Baurat Theodor Sandel and a limited rescue excavation from the 1980s by Bargil Pixner and Emanuel Eisenberg.

The GPIA excavations in 2023 uncovered part of the magnificent building. In the area of the Greek Orthodox cemetery, the narthex belonging to the Late Antiquity church came to light. A freshwater channel was discovered under the floor of the narthex, carved into the rock, which was probably used to supply the atrium courtyard with water. The canal in excavation area VIII/2 of the GPIA, which had already been taken out of use by the earthquakes of 747–749 CE, is dated to that time by two coins found there in situ.

Contrary to what is assumed in Fig. 8, there is every indication that the church in Late Antiquity had the same western extension as the later Crusader sacred space. A quarry was located to the west of it. According to 14C evidence, the mound created above the Late Antiquity area, presumably a courtyard area, to the west of the Late Antiquity atrium dates from the Crusader period.

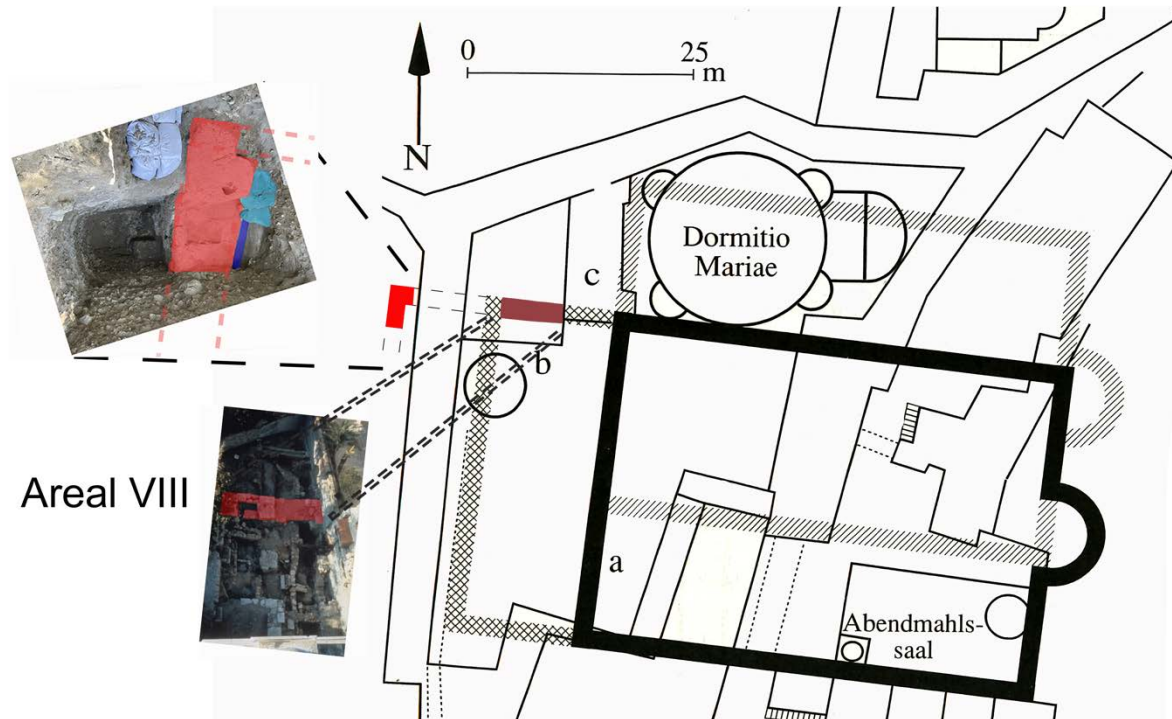


Fig. 8: Picture top left: Area VIII.2 narthex (red) and canal (blue) with capstones in situ (turquoise)© BAI/DEI; bottom left image: Excavation Bargil Pixner and Emmanuel Eisenberg © Bargil Pixner/John F. Strange; image on the right: black and hatched = hypothetical ground plan of the late antique church; squared = Crusader church; both after Küchler 2007, 624 Fig. 343 © BAI/DEI with the kind permission of Max Küchler

In areas IV/3 and V in the garden of the Dormition Abbey, the GPIA came across a massive structure. It was a massive, 3.20 m wide mortared wall, which was also based on a projecting foundation on the outside. The monumental construction of this wall surpassed all the city walls excavated by the GPIA in the Zion Cemetery in recent years and even eclipsed the defense capabilities of the Late Antiquity wall from the 5th century CE. Its height can be estimated at 6–8 meters. It ran roughly parallel to the longitudinal axis of the Late Antiquity and Crusader church. The pottery in the surrounding area points to the (High) Middle Ages.

Thanks to the friendly and knowledgeable help of Amit Re'em and other experts, it soon became clear that this was a wall surrounding the Crusader-era Church of St. Mary and the Holy Spirit and the neighboring monastery (the Augustinian Canon monastery). (cf. Theodoricus; Johannes Phocas; *Gesta regis Henrici Secundi Benedicti Abbatis* and the map of Cambrai).

M. Broshi found a 2.25 m wide wall in the Armenian cemetery as early as 1971/1972, which he later also interpreted as the enclosure wall of the monastery complex in the north (between the city and Mount Zion). Together with the walls found by the GPIA in areas IV/3 and V, a coherent picture emerges of the Crusader-period enclosure of the Hagia Sion in the 12th century CE (Fig. 9).

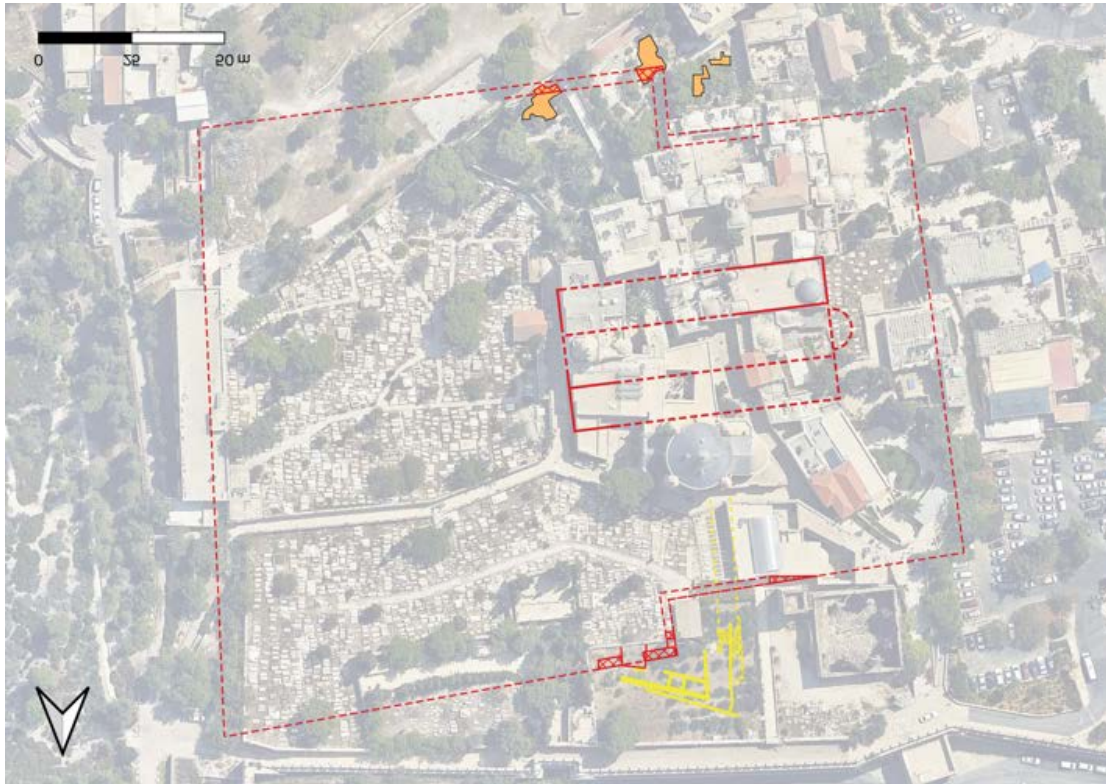


Fig. 9: Reconstruction of the Crusader-era church on Mount Zion with enclosing walls © BAI/GPIA

In 1212 CE, Wilbrand von Oldenburg saw the south-west hill included in this ring of city walls, the course of which was still depicted on a city map by Marino Sanuto Torselli around 1310 CE and documented by Frederick Bliss and Archibald Dickie at various points on the slope above *St Peter's in Gallicantu*.

The GPIA was able to rediscover and map the dry moat of this wall ring in 2019. The associated tower – which had already been excavated by Frederick Bliss and Archibald Dickie in 1902 – was also chronologically assigned. The defense system had the obvious purpose of cutting off access to the high plateau of Mount Zion for the Crusader armies advancing toward Jerusalem. From there, they could have fired on the city without hindrance. Presumably, St Mary's Church on Mount Zion was destroyed along with the walls in 1219 CE.

A comprehensive presentation of the findings from the GPIA excavations is published in Dieter Vieweger, *Archäologie in Jerusalem: Die Ausgrabungen des Deutschen Evangelischen Instituts für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes zwischen 2009 und 2023* (De Gruyter, 2025; <https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783111498935/html>).