

UC Berkeley

Recent Work

Title

The King's Garden

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8m81h6fs>

Author

Fronistas, Phoebe P.

Publication Date

2011-05-04

Peer reviewed

The King's Garden
By: Phoebe Fronistas

Abstract

The King's Garden is a half-hour documentary short that has one foot in the Bible and the other in the "volcanic core" of the Middle East conflict: the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan.

Following multiple storylines and using the accounts of archaeologists, residents and legal experts, The King's Garden tells the story of how one impoverished village became the epicenter of the battle for land between Palestinians and Israelis – and shows how dangerously alive the past can become.

Located just outside the walls of the Old City, Silwan is the place where the oldest archaeological remains in Jerusalem have been found. Many people believe that this slope of land is where King David built his palace and gardens 3000 years ago. For over a century, the local residents were on good terms with the hordes of archaeologists who came to dig in and around their village. But this changed in 1991.

That is when a private settler organization known as ELAD - a Hebrew acronym meaning "To the City of David" – began using means of questionable legality to acquire Palestinian houses in the village. Using documents just released in Israel, The King's Garden reveals how successive national governments supported settler activity by giving them the titles to properties in Silwan for prices well below their actual worth.

Today, ELAD runs the day-to-day management of the archaeological site, the City of David. Independent archaeologists accuse it of being a "a settler evangelical theme park" that offers discredited hypotheses about the archaeological finds as fact, and skews the history of the place to concentrate solely on the Jewish past. In addition, ELAD has settled about 500 Orthodox Jewish residents in Silwan. Violent clashes between the settlers and Palestinians are constant. In The King's Garden, we meet the widow and children of Samer Sirhan, the local "martyr" who was killed by a settler guard in September of 2010. He was never brought to trial. Meanwhile, the increasing tourist numbers at the City of David have led Jerusalem's mayor to create "The King's Garden Plan." To make way for the shops and restaurants that will be built next to the archaeological site, twenty-two Palestinian homes will be demolished.

Events like these have resulted in an increasingly angry younger generation of Palestinians, who pass the time by throwing stones at Israeli cars. Fakhri Abu Diab, who, with a demolition order hanging over his head takes us on a tour of his soon-to-be-demolished village, tries to get the youth to protest in a non-violent manner. But he despairs with what he sees. And he is the one who asks the film's central question: What is more important: their past or our present?

The King's Garden was produced with support from the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley.