



Khirbet el-Lauz Revisited

Lessons from the Renewed Destruction of a Vulnerable Heritage Site

Salah Hussein Al-Houdalieh

NEEDS BANNER CAPTION

I first became professionally involved with Khirbet el-Lauz in 2007, in response to a pattern of repeated destructive looting of the site stretching back decades. At that time, I conducted a thorough survey, carried out some limited excavations, engaged the local community on various levels, and then published two articles presenting my findings (Al-Houdalieh 2008, 2009). After a hiatus of nearly ten years, punctuated by occasional site visits by myself and others, the place has now been attacked and severely damaged once again. However disheartening this new devastation may be, out of it one must seek to derive new understandings—I have even engaged some of the looters face-to-face!—and also to find glimmers of hope for the future, all of which it is my purpose to share in this space.

Beyond this, the main aims of this work are to keep the issue of antiquities looting and the destruction of archaeological sites at the forefront in the minds of professionals and the general public alike, and to encourage cultural heritage stakeholders everywhere to develop more suitable and creative tools to ensure the protection of all heritage resources.

First, some brief background on the site. The West Bank site known as Khirbet el-Lauz is located in an uninhabited area between Safa and Bil'in villages within Oslo-designated "Area C,"

approximately 22 km northwest of Jerusalem. Historically, it lies about 2 km north of the Roman road that once connected the Mediterranean coastal plain with Jerusalem, by way of Beit U'r (Beth Horon) and el-Jib (Gibeon). At 300 m in elevation, the site occupies the summit and slopes of a small rise commanding a wide vista to the north, south, and west, with a chain of higher hills to the east. The ancient settlement at Khirbet el-Lauz covered a total area of about nine thousand square meters and today is owned by several different individuals or families residing in nearby Safa Village. These owners used to visit their land twice a year, to harvest the olive fruits in October and to plow the land in February–March, but today their livelihoods no longer include agriculture. The site is known to the locals as Khirbet el-Lauz ("almonds") due to the abundance of those trees which grew there in former times, especially during the Ottoman period.

The occupation history of Kh. el-Lauz spans the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods. The extant remains include several significant architectural features, including many rock-cut burial caves and ground graves, several residential units, subterranean hiding complexes, rock-cut ritual baths, cisterns and their catchment channels, a few oil- and wine-presses and rock-cut columbaria, a fortification system, a church, and several agricultural terraces. This site reached its zenith during the Byzantine period, and most likely enjoyed some status among surrounding settlements, although its ancient name remains unknown. The place was damaged by a major earthquake

which hit the Levant at the end of the Umayyad period, ca. 749 CE, and it was later used as agricultural land throughout the Ottoman era and down to modern times.

As mentioned, Khirbet el-Lauz has suffered periodic bouts of highly destructive antiquities looting stretching back to the 1970s (for details, see Al-Houdalieh 2009). Therefore, in 2007 I carried out a research project on the site with the aim of examining, from an objective archaeological perspective, the local practices of such looting. (Disclosure: I was in fact born in nearby Saffa Village and currently reside there). This 2007 work proceeded through five phases: (1) Interviewing some of the individuals who had participated in the looting and the extraction of archaeological objects; (2) a survey of the *khirbet* in order to comprehensively document the plundered and damaged features; (3) detailed excavation of four specific plundered features: a Roman-period ritual bath and a winepress, rock-cut tomb and church all from the Byzantine period; (4) a campaign of conservation and restoration of the unearthed mosaic pavements of the Byzantine church (afterwards covered with a 40 cm-thick protective layer of sieved soil); and (5) conducting, over the course of our fieldwork, guided site visits for several groups of Saffa Village residents, in order to raise their awareness of the importance of archaeological sites to their cultural identity, and to engage them in protecting this and other such heritage sites; these visitors included families, members of the village local council, and school groups of all ages with their teachers.

The results of that initial research project were fourfold: (1) According to the interviewed looters, at least eighty-nine features of different periods had already been vandalized, including the Roman and Byzantine rock-cut tombs, Roman-period ritual baths, a Roman-Byzantine columbarium, cisterns of the Roman through Early Islamic periods, Byzantine-era olive- and winepresses, residential structures of various periods, and the Byzantine church. (2) Our field survey indicated that about 75 percent of the total area of the ancient settlement had been damaged down to the bedrock, sometimes using heavy, mechanized equipment. (3) Our detailed excavation of the four plundered features indicated that the looters working on these spots were professionals, since they left behind nothing except the sherds of nonrestorable ceramic vessels (Al-Houdalieh 2008, 2009). (4) In subsequent years, the residents of Saffa Village—especially the local council, youth leaders, and teachers from three different local schools—have independently organized visits to the *khirbet* for their members, students, supporters, and guests.



Figure 1. A cut made by a bulldozer in the Byzantine-era church of Khirbet el-Lauz, looking south, 2018. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2. Destruction of the walls of the Byzantine-era church of Khirbet el-Lauz, looking west, 2018. Photograph by the author.

In the years since 2007, I made it a point to visit the site at least annually, and during all that time I noticed no dramatic changes—no new holes indicating resumed antiquities looting or other destructive activities. Then in February 2018, I organized and conducted a site visit for a number of students from the Saffa Secondary Girls School, with the aim of educating them about the ancient history of their village, using Khirbet el-Lauz as an example. But as we approached the eastern boundary of the site, where the Byzantine church is located, I immediately recognized that the site had recently been revisited by looters and once again badly damaged. The then-unknown perpetrators had obviously used a bulldozer to demolish the external walls of the church, plow a wide trench through the church's protective back-fill, and cut into the previously conserved mosaic pavements. They had also used more traditional equipment (hand tools) to dig holes within and around the church complex (figs. 1–4). The area was left in near-total destruction, and the cistern



Figure 3. Cubes of recently destroyed mosaic pavement of the Byzantine-era church of Khirbet el-Lauz, looking south, 2018. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4. Looting pit at the southwestern corner of the Byzantine-era church of Khirbet el-Lauz, looking south, 2018. Photograph by the author.

located just west of the church was found almost full with large plastic bags of rotting garbage. Continuing our walk toward the summit of the *khirbet*, we noticed an increasing number of freshly dug holes and trenches of different sizes and depths, and heaps of dirt and discarded pottery sherds. Based on the lack of the usual seasonal growth of plants around these disturbed areas, we knew that all this destruction had just been carried out in the preceding two months, during the winter of 2017–2018.

A site survey conducted that day documented the number of freshly vandalized spots at forty-six, falling into two categories: cuts in the ground and the dismantling of stone walls. The cuts were of two types: elongated trenches

and circular pits. The trenches, mostly dug into the slopes, varied in size up to 5 m long \times 2 m wide \times 1.8 m deep (fig. 5). The circular pits, however, were dug around and then *beneath* some flourishing, ancient olive trees (fig. 6), in the process cutting all of the radiating (side) roots and even many of the main roots extending deep beneath the trunks, all done in hopes of finding supposed hidden, rock-cut tombs or dwelling chambers. At the conclusion of their vandalism, the antiquities looters left the cuts open and fully exposed to the elements. The rest of the vandalized spots involved the now-destroyed remains of massive walls (figs. 7 and 8), especially of the settlement's fortification system. Long sections of these walls were either totally or partially dismantled down to the bedrock, leaving heaps of stones scattered all around.

However disturbing the above discovery was to me personally, it simply represents, in microcosm, a vexing worldwide phenomenon. It is one which all of us—everyone engaged in the protection and management of cultural heritage resources—are well aware of: antiquities looting and the illicit trafficking in archaeological materials that drives it. Thus, I present Khirbet el-Lauz, on one level, as a case study representing all endangered archaeological sites everywhere. And, while my focus here is on looting, I acknowledge the whole range of destructive impacts—including armed conflict, sectarian strife, and ill-conceived development—which daily wreak their own havoc with the world's cultural treasures.

On yet another level, Khirbet el-Lauz stands for all the endangered archaeological sites throughout the West Bank, regardless of their status under the Oslo Accords (Areas A/B/C). Like Khirbet el-Lauz, thousands of other cultural heritage features, both major and minor, have already been vandalized and damaged to various extents, and dozens of these, according to my personal knowledge, are even now being actively robbed and destroyed. One contributing factor to this situation, often overlooked, is the detrimental impact of the Israeli occupation upon the Palestinian economy. Simply put, for people living close to the edge financially and struggling to provide for their families, the looting of antiquities can seem an attractive alternative.

Narrowing our focus even more, Kh. el-Lauz and other similar sites situated in “Area C”—still over 60 percent of the West Bank, 25 years after Oslo—face special challenges stemming from the regime of full Israeli control, both “civil” and “security”. For one thing, Israel is obligated under international law to protect such places, an obligation they pointedly have never fulfilled. Here it is worth noting that Khirbet el-Lauz and its remains have been known

to the Israelis for decades, via a survey and report by their Antiquities Authority in the 1990s and brief fieldwork conducted by the military in 2005 (Al-Houdalieh 2008, 2009). As for the Palestinian authorities, besides having practically no access to the place, they have in Area C no authority to apprehend or prosecute looters or vandals, even if they wanted to. Moreover, no Palestinian person or entity—even the landowners themselves—is permitted to erect any structure, such as a protective fence (again, if they were so inclined). Thus, such places languish in a sort of limbo where the Israelis *will not*—and the Palestinians *cannot*—provide official protection (for more on this topic, see Al-Houdalieh 2010).

Under such conditions, with no political resolution in sight, it may be that local, citizen-driven actions such as educational and consciousness-raising activities, community pressure, and citizen monitoring of sites—all founded on a sense of ownership, and of the inherent value of preserving the material remains of the past—may be our best defense against the looters.

My recent site visit with the students provides a case in point: While the destruction we encountered that day was shocking, it also provided an invaluable “teaching moment,” opening the way to an in-depth discussion of the impact of such looting and vandalism of archaeological sites. Further, at the end I ventured that the students and their two teachers might like to help to document the newly vandalized spots of the *khirbet*, to which they readily agreed. Indeed, the detailed findings reported above are the result of our guided, on-the-spot group survey and documentation of the damage.

Then at the end of our survey, amid further discussion of the future of their country’s cultural heritage, yet another connection was made: One of the teachers reminded the students of a current competition, sponsored by the Palestinian Ministry of Education, to prepare and submit the best report on Palestinian cultural heritage, and she suggested that they choose Khirbet el-Lauz as a case study to write about. Before leaving the site, we agreed that the new documentation they had just helped create was for the benefit of all, thus they would receive a photocopy of the survey materials for their use in the project.

That was February, 2018. Taking up the challenge, the girls proceeded to fashion their report—informed by their own firsthand experiences on the site—and submitted it for evaluation at the beginning of April. Then on 15 May the Ministry announced the results: the report of Saffa School received an “A” and won the competition! A few days later, the director of Saffa School invited me to come and celebrate this achievement with them, which I



Figure 5. Looting trench at Khirbet el-Lauz, looking south, 2018. Photograph by the author.



Figure 6. Looting pit at Khirbet el-Lauz, looking southwest, 2018. Photograph by the author.

was most pleased to do (fig. 9). Most important of all, of course, is that an entire class of Palestinian youth now possess a true sense of ownership over Khirbet el-Lauz, and hopefully other places like it.

On quite another level, a few weeks after the site visit I met with one of the professional antiquities looters living in Saffa, known to me from my previous research on that topic. I asked him about the individuals or groups who had recently dug at the *khirbet*, and he provided the names of two local brothers. Soon I had arranged an interview with the two through a mediator, their elder brother, who suggested holding the encounter at his home. After assuring the brothers of strict confidentiality as to any personal identifying information, I asked them a few questions about the motivation for their digging, the

equipment employed, any finds recovered, and the composition of their group.

Here is a summary of what the two brothers revealed: The antiquities looting group consisted of five individuals belonging to two different extended families and ranging between 26 and 35 years of age, three of whom had previously engaged in illicit digging. Interestingly, three of them, including the two brothers, are the *owners* of land parcels on which the *khirbet* is situated. In all, they conducted digging on six different parcels of various sizes for several weeks over the winter of 2017–2018. They made oral agreements with three landowners (who did not actively participate in the digging) in return for a share of the finds, but they dug on one parcel without the owner's knowledge. The diggers decided to excavate in winter because they know that the *khirbet* is rarely visited then, either by the landowners or other individuals or groups. The interviewees used traditional digging equipment (i.e., hand tools) plus a metal detector, but another of the looters indeed operated a bulldozer, using it even to remove some of the ancient building stones from the site. In the end, their weeks of activity yielded exactly sixteen coins and a single, nearly complete oil lamp. Their motivation, they said, was the hope of finding treasure that would help improve their economic circumstances, and their only regret seemingly was the meager outcome.

In my interactions with these two very different groups of local residents—the students and the looters—I see opposite sides of the same coin. Toward our goal of imparting to the general public the value of their local cultural heritage resources, there are both small victories and the ever-present danger of losing the larger war. In any event, especially in places like Khirbet el-Lauz, it is ordinary citizens who are going to step up (or not) as the ultimate watchdogs and preservationists. Educational programs and campaigns can attempt to engage people and raise their awareness of the importance of cultural heritage resources, but in too many places the majority of people simply never fully embrace or internalize these values. Or, as seems to be the case at el-Lauz (and no doubt other similarly troubled regions worldwide), economic realities, specifically, the lure of possible financial gain from looting, can sometimes override whatever wider understanding or goodwill may have been instilled among the people.

To conclude, we can offer Khirbet el-Lauz as an object lesson, reflecting not only the destructive impacts besetting cultural heritage sites throughout the Palestinian Territories today, but also the potential for engaging all the institutions of civil society and the general public in protecting those vulnerable resources. The present work points to the following three facts: (1) Khirbet el-Lauz, like other archaeological sites located in Area C, has been severely vandalized, and it is likely that more of its archaeological record will be demolished with the passage of time. (2) The negligence of the landowners toward their own properties containing archaeological materials makes them vulnerable to vandalism by others. Or, as we have seen, the landowners are sometimes playing an active role by digging on their own land, or allowing others to dig, in search of marketable cultural objects. (3) Since the Israeli authorities are failing to protect the known archaeological sites located in Area C, and the Palestinian Authorities are not *allowed* to protect them, we believe that engaging the civil

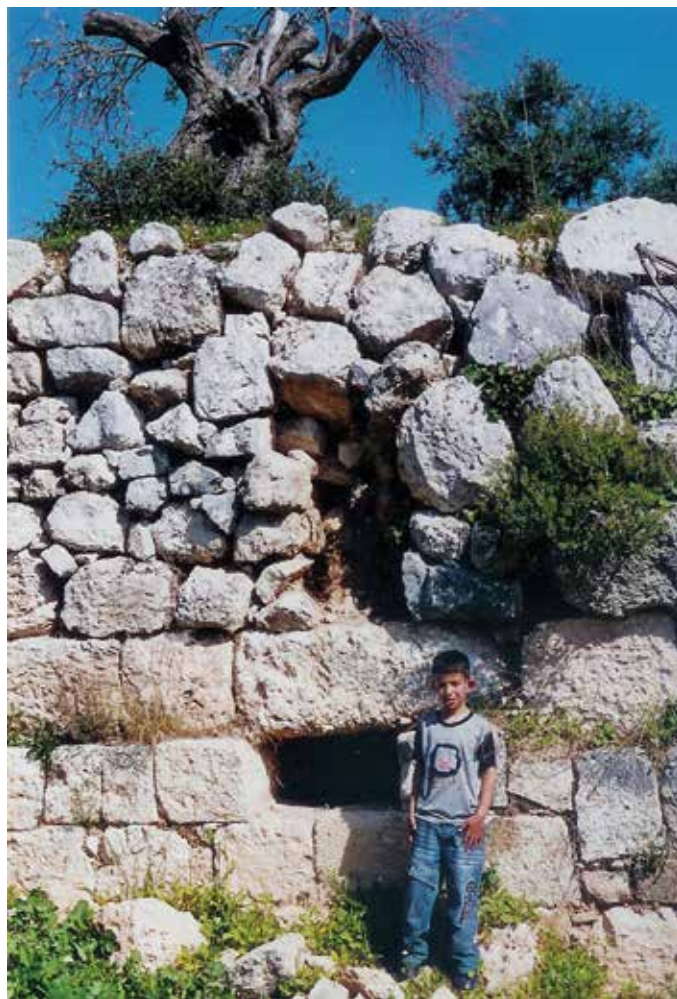


Figure 7. Intact remains of the fortification system at Khirbet el-Lauz in 1986, looking east. Photograph by J. Samara.



Figure 8. Destruction of the remains of the fortification system at Khirbet el-Lauz (compare with fig. 7), looking east, 2018. Photo by the author.

society organizations and the general public can be of great help towards preserving these special places.

The site visits to Khirbet el-Lauz that I organized in 2007, and several civil society organizations later, undoubtedly helped create a heightened state of awareness among a large number



Figure 9. The the team of the school's report, with the author in the middle and the director of the Saffa Secondary Girls School to his left.

of the village residents as to the importance of this and other nearby archaeological sites. Furthermore, such organized visits to the *khirbet* hopefully signal to would-be looters that the site is being monitored by local residents. Indeed, considering the site's history of recurrent looting, it is quite possible that this kind of citizen presence helped prevent potential vandals from attacking el-Lauz for *as long as* ten years! That it failed in the end to protect it absolutely is, to us, simply a call to increased vigilance.

I offer no magic formula, except that “business as usual” is not enough. In order to stem the destruction of these resources in an effective way, all relevant Palestinian, Israeli, and international bodies must carry out their legal and ethical responsibilities to the full extent, keeping in mind that every delay will inevitably lead to further devastation. Those who (hopefully) care about

cultural heritage—professionals, intellectuals, relevant government agencies and NGOs, and many of the general public—should not be left at the end regretting the irretrievable loss of our cultural treasures.

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Salah Hussein Al-Houdalieh is professor of archaeology and cultural heritage/ at the The Institute of Archaeology at Al-Quds University. Al-Houdalieh's current research and teaching interests include archaeology and ethnography in the Levant, cultural identity, antiquities looting and looters, mosaics, the heritage ethics, Roman-Byzantine architecture, and the stratigraphy of the Early Bronze Age in the Middle East. Several of his fieldwork projects have examined how both urban development and the looting of antiquities sites are impacting Palestine's cultural heritage and endangering its archaeological resources. Al-Houdalieh is the author of a series of books as well as many field reports and scholarly articles.