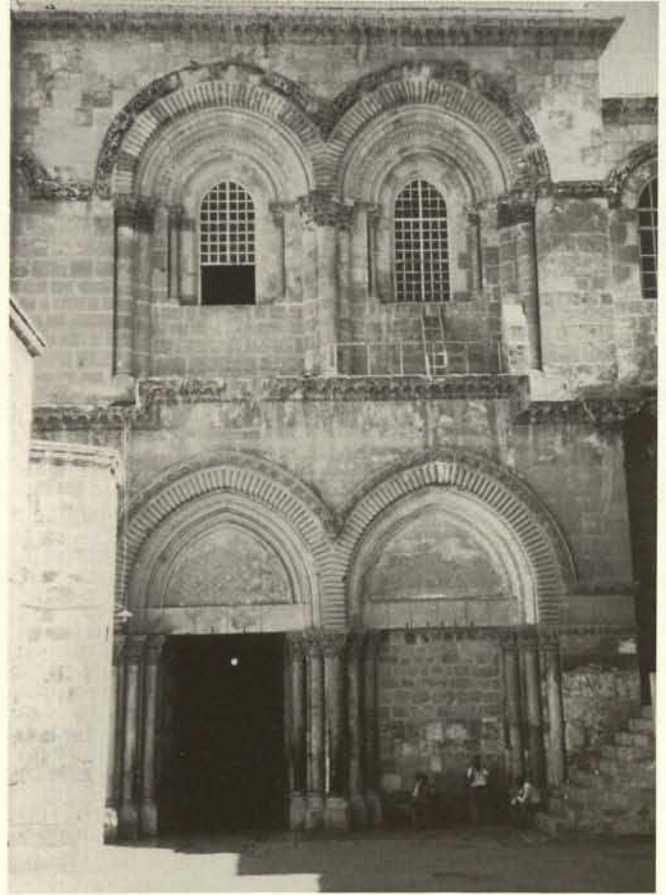


ISRAEL

This paper is a direct follow-up of the report published last year in *Heritage at Risk 2000*, at that time without illustrations.

One of the biggest risks for cultural heritage in this holy land is the works conducted on holy and religious sites by religious authorities. While the political situation only complicates the issues, the traditional religious sole-control over maintenance, development and so-called conservation works at some very important sites is a real threat. Because many of the religious sites and structures are dated as early as the 1st century, and some of them are extraordinarily important monuments, in normal situations professionals in conservation should have made all decisions regarding their physical conditions. Unfortunately, this is rarely the situation. The Israeli 'Law of Antiquities' even recognises this special situation, and although due to the date of their construction some of these sites are considered 'archaeological', the legislation takes away the authority to decide in such places from the director of antiquities. Instead, the authority is granted to a committee of cabinet ministers, which – in fact – was never asked to meet, and consequently most works are implemented without conservation input. The illustrations attached to this report do not point at any specific wrong activity. They show the three holiest places in the old city of Jerusalem, where works that no professional conservation body would have approved were conducted. These works have been undertaken in recent times.

Although the photos show only the Wailing Wall, the Holy Sepulchre Church and the Haram el Shariff (Temple Mount), this unfortunate practice is not typical of Jerusalem only and can be observed in Kfar Nahum (Capernaum), Sidna Ali, Tiberias and many other religious sites.



Jerusalem, The Holy Sepulchre Church



Jerusalem, The Wailing Wall



Masada, construction of a new cable car

Bet Shean



Resource Limitations & Visitor Pressure

Another considerable risk is a lack of sufficient financial resources, combined with a lack of policy for prioritisation where the existing resources should be used. While lack of resources is a common problem worldwide, the situation in Israel is that decisions to plan, preserve and maintain are not based on the level of the cultural values or of the risk to the heritage, but rather on how attractive it is to visitors. The two photos, one of Khorvat Minnim and the other of Masada, illustrate the same issue in different ways. Khorvat Minnim is architecturally and culturally an extremely important site: it is also a national park and on Israel's Tentative List for World Heritage listing. In spite of this, it is completely neglected, with no management, no conservation plans, not even preventive conservation measures, and no maintenance. The other site, Masada, is probably the most famous archaeological site in the country, the most visited, and Israel's first World Heritage nomination. Unlike the previous site, Masada has good plans, an excellent conservation team and has received considerable amounts of money in the last years. Still, it is at high risk, which is the result of not having a long-term commitment to the continuation and financing of very important conservation works – these works must be carried out whether or not there are visitors to the site. Unfortunately, as a senior official in the National Parks Authority said: 'Let us not be naive, if there will be no visitors we will get no money for conservation'. If this is true for the country's most important site, it is no wonder that the less important are at permanent risk of neglect.

Closely linked with this issue, but from another angle, are the pressures from visitation and the pressures to undertake development work specifically for these visitors. Such development is seen basically as a positive objective and should be encouraged from the conservation aspect as well, but it brings many risks with it that should be met and known ahead of time. The Israeli situation in this respect is encouraging and can be used as an example to others, due to good collaboration between the financing side (tourism authorities) and the 'professional' group (archaeology, conservation, management). The biggest risk is probably to the scientific archaeological work, which is expected to provide results and answers much faster than normal archaeological projects would be. This pressure is mainly because of the need to provide answers that will make conservation and anastylosis work possible within the shortest time. The other issue related to developing for visitors includes the necessity for all kinds of safety and protection measures, infrastructure, and accessibility – which very often, even in the best cases, require compromises. Such are the two cases illustrated in the photos: the cable car leading up to Masada, and the railings and protective shelters in Bet Shean. All were very carefully designed and discussed at length, reviewing many alternatives. All are considered necessary to provide access for more people, for the disabled, and to be able to present important aspects of the heritage to the public – all solutions require compromises and are more or less intrusive. This is, of course, a general risk and not typical to Israel, but when income from cultural tourism is one of the major sources of revenue in a country, the pressure on cultural heritage is increased.

Looting

Another problem is looting – another universal issue of which Israel is not free. The illustration shows a case of theft of the central medallion of a mosaic floor from its original location. As a result of two year's of intense investigations the mosaic was



Khorvat Minnim



Akko, historic town, decay of decorated ceilings

found, but in pieces. In most cases that involve illegal excavations and destruction of whole sites, the stolen objects are lost to dealers, collectors and even museums. A special 'anti archaeological-looting unit' wages a permanent battle against this destructive phenomenon – with many successes but never enough.

Akko

The last illustrated case is of a historic city and another World Heritage site, the old city of Akko. Historic cities are far more complicated than archaeological sites. The very important objective and value of keeping the city alive also means the provision of facilities and infrastructure, serving both the community and visitors, handling property ownership issues, and at the same time, protecting the cultural values. It sometimes seems impossible and if the community is not convinced and does not collaborate, it is practically impossible. Therefore, historic cities need good management, good planning, conservation knowledge and skills – they also need incentives, education and trust. The old city of Akko had the entire first mentioned, as well as government and city commitment translated into big financial investments and planning efforts. In spite of this, cases of illegal construction, alterations and unskilful implementations are still too common. Education and other public activities, as well as model projects and law enforcement, are all part of the battle to reduce risks, and it works slowly. The photos show a general view of the old town and a partially rescued, typical wooden ceiling. Many of these existed in the past, some still do and many have disappeared.

The effort to minimise and eliminate risks is continuous and permanently with us. The risks will always be there and, therefore, the need for education, training, good practices and allocation of financial resources is also permanent.

Replica of a mosaic floor being put in place of the stolen original

