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Ritual Purification and Bathing: The Location and Function of Siloam Pool and Solomon's Pool in Second Temple Period Jerusalem

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Excavations at the southern tip of the ancient city of Jerusalem uncovered four pools from the Early Roman period: two, Silwan Pool and Birkat el-Ḥamra, within the city walls, and two smaller pools on the outskirts of the city. This paper provides archaeological data that supports the identification of Birkat el-Ḥamra with Solomon's Pool and the Silwan Pool with the Siloam Pool, both of which are mentioned in contemporary historical sources. Furthermore, the function of the pools is discussed: the larger, Solomon's Pool, seems to have been an open swimming pool, while the Siloam Pool was used for ceremonies and ritual immersion of pilgrims arriving at the city in the late Second Temple period.

Keywords: purification, bathing, First Wall, Silwan Pool, Siloam Pool, Birkat el-Ḥamra, Pool of Solomon, Tyropoeon Valley

Introduction

The southern outlet of the Tyropoeon Valley—Jerusalem's lowest topographical point—marks the southern point of the city from its earliest days and throughout antiquity. This was the termination point of two of the city's main water sources: the waters of the Giḥon Spring, channeled through the Siloam Tunnel, and the water draining the Tyropoeon Valley (also known as the Central Valley), which traversed Jerusalem from north to south (Fig. 1).

In the Early Roman period, and likely even earlier, the Tyropoeon Valley served as a ceremonial path for pilgrims entering the city from the south and ascending to the Temple. The southern point of the valley raised many challenges throughout the urban development

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of the city. For example, in periods when the city's territory included the Western Hill, such as in the Early Roman period, the city wall had to cross the southern tip of the Tyropoeon Valley at the point of entry to the city.

Josephus describes this area in a somewhat limited and vague manner. While discussing the course of the First Wall, he notes the presence of two separate and adjacent water sources: the Siloam Spring and Solomon's Pool (*Jewish War* 5:145). These features have been extensively discussed in research concerning the urban layout of the city, with various suggestions concerning their location and function. Here, the available textual and archaeological evidence is reevaluated to better identify these two pools and their use in daily life in Early Roman-period Jerusalem, in both mundane and religious activities, particularly bathing and ritual purification.

Historical and Literary Sources

Several textual sources are instrumental in understanding the water systems at the southern tip of Jerusalem (Table 1). The earliest is the Iron Age IIB–C Siloam Inscription, describing the construction of the Siloam (Hezekiah's) Tunnel, allowing for the spring waters to flow "from the source to the pool." The inscription was found *in situ* several meters north of the outlet of the tunnel to the Ottoman-period Silwan Pool, preserving the ancient name 'Siloam Pool' (e.g., Bliss and Dickie 1898:200–201; Paton 1907:171). The Siloam Pool is also mentioned in biblical texts (see Table 1).

Later, in the Early Roman period, Josephus mentions the Siloam Pool (erroneously describing it as a spring), placing it at the edge of the city, near Solomon's Pool and the First Wall. In the New Testament, the Siloam Pool is described as a miraculous healing place. In rabbinic literature, it is mentioned as the source of water used for libations on the altar in the Temple during the seven-day festival of Sukkot, during the Rejoicing of the Water-Drawing House (*Simḥat Bet Ha-Sho'eva*) procession, celebrated on the last day of that festival, and in halakhic discussions on the preparation of 'purification water' or concerning purity and impurity. It is also noted as the starting point of the pilgrimage to the Temple. Accounts dating from the Byzantine period relate to the Siloam Pool's healing and purification properties while noting the existence of another, larger pool in its vicinity, similar to Josephus' description of Solomon's Pool.[2]

The Archaeological Data

The history of archaeological research in this area has been extensively documented (for a summary and references, see Bieberstein and Bloedhorn 1994; Reich 2011; Greenhut and

[2] For further discussion of the Talmudic sources, see Fox 1986; Reich 1987. For a discussion of the Early Islamic sources, see Tal 2014.

Table 1. Sources Concerning the Pools at the Southern Tip of the Tyropoeon Valley, arranged Chronologically

Source	Relevant Passage	Description	Comments
Iron Age IIB–C			
The Siloam Inscription	"And there flowed the waters from the spring to the pool"	Ancient inscription inscribed on the wall of the Siloam Tunnel, indicating the destination of the water flowing from the Gihon Spring through the tunnel into a pool	For the discovery, decipherment, discussion and translation of the inscription, see Schick 1880; Aḥituv 2008
Isaiah 8:6	"Since this people has rejected the waters of Shiloah that flow so softly"	Proverb referring to the rejection of the Shiloah waters	
Persian Period			
Nehemiah 3:15	"And the wall of the Pool of Shelah at the King's Gardenas far as the steps going down from the City of David"	Description of the construction of Jerusalem's wall	
Early Roman Period			
Josephus, *Jewish War* 5:140	"The Valley of the Cheesemakers as the ravine was called, which, as we said, divides the hill of the upper city from that of the lower, extends down to Siloam; for so we called that fountain of sweet and abundant water"	Topographical description of the Tyropoeon Valley	
Josephus, *Jewish War* 5:145	"...then turned southwards above the fountain of Siloam; thence it again inclined to the east towards Solomon's pool, and after passing a spot which they call Ophlas, finally joined the eastern portico of the temple"	Course of the First Wall	For the description of the wall's extension to the east of the pool, see Jewish War 5:242; for the description of the Roman dyke, built in proximity to the Siloam Pool, see verse 505. The Shiloah is described in the travels of Napoletanos along the city (*Jewish War* 2:340) as well as the extent of the Roman destruction of the city by fire (*Jewish War* 2:401).

Table 1. (cont.)

Source	Relevant Passage	Description	Comments
Josephus, *Jewish War* 5:252	"Simon occupied the upper town, the great wall as far as the Kedron, and a portion of the old wall, from the point where it bent eastward at Siloam to its descent to the court-house of Monobazus, king of Adiabene beyond the Euphrates; he held also the fountaine and part of the Acra, that is to say, the lower town, as far as the palace of Helena, the mother of Monobazus"	The fortifications and features in the Lower City of Jerusalem	
70 CE–Byzantine Period			
John 9:7	"And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing"	Healing miracle of the blind man in the Siloam Pool	
Mishnah, *Sukkah* 4:9	"One would fill a golden jug with a capacity of three log with water from the Siloam pool"	Source of water for the water libation offering in the Temple during the Feast of Weeks and the joyous water drawing on the seventh day of Sukkot	
Mishnah, *Zavim* 1:5	"If he saw one issue which was as copious as three, lasting as long from Gad Yawan to Shiloaḥ, which is the time it would take to bathe and dry twice, he becomes a full *zav*"	The laws regarding the impurity of the full *zav*	See Reich 1987 and further references therein
Mishnah, *Parah* 3:2	"When they reached the Shiloah spring they got down and filled the cups with water and then they ascended and sat again on the doors. Rabbi Yose said: each child used to let down his cup and fill it from his place"	Part of a ritual for the preparation of 'purification water' (מי חטאת)	

Table 1. (cont.)

Source	Relevant Passage	Description	Comments
Jerusalem Talmud *Hagigah* 1:1:18	"From where does one measure? from the wall or from the houses? Samuel stated, from the Siloam. And the Siloam was in the middle of the capital"	Discussion of where the act of pilgrimage to the Temple of Jerusalem	
The Bordeaux Pilgrim 32	"Also as you come out of Jerusalem to go up Mount Sion, on the left hand, below in the valley, beside siloe. the wall, is a pool which is called Siloe and has four porticoes; and there is another large pool outside it"	Description of two pools, including the Siloam Pool with a quadriporticum, and an additional large pool next to it	Some scholars link between the tetra-nymphaeum described in Chronicon Paschale of the seventh century CE and the quadriporticum noted here (see Tsafrir 1999:115, 147)
Theodosius 8	"From the Siloam Pool to the Pit where Jeremiah was cast, one hundred steps. This pool is within the wall"	The construction of a church above the Siloam Pool in Jerusalem	
Early Islamic Period			
Antoninus Placentinus 9, 23, 24	"When leaving Jerusalem to ascend to Zion, to the left, descending into the valley, next to the wall, there is a pool called Shiloah, and from there, the Siloah flows... In one, men bathe, and in the other, women, for ritual immersion. With these waters, many miracles are performed, and even lepers are purified. Before the Temple, there is a large pool made by human hands, and people bathe there all the time.... Now, the Shiloah spring is enclosed within the city"	Description of the location of the church above the water source known as Shiloah. Mention of a large pool where people bathe regularly and a description of the water flow from the spring	

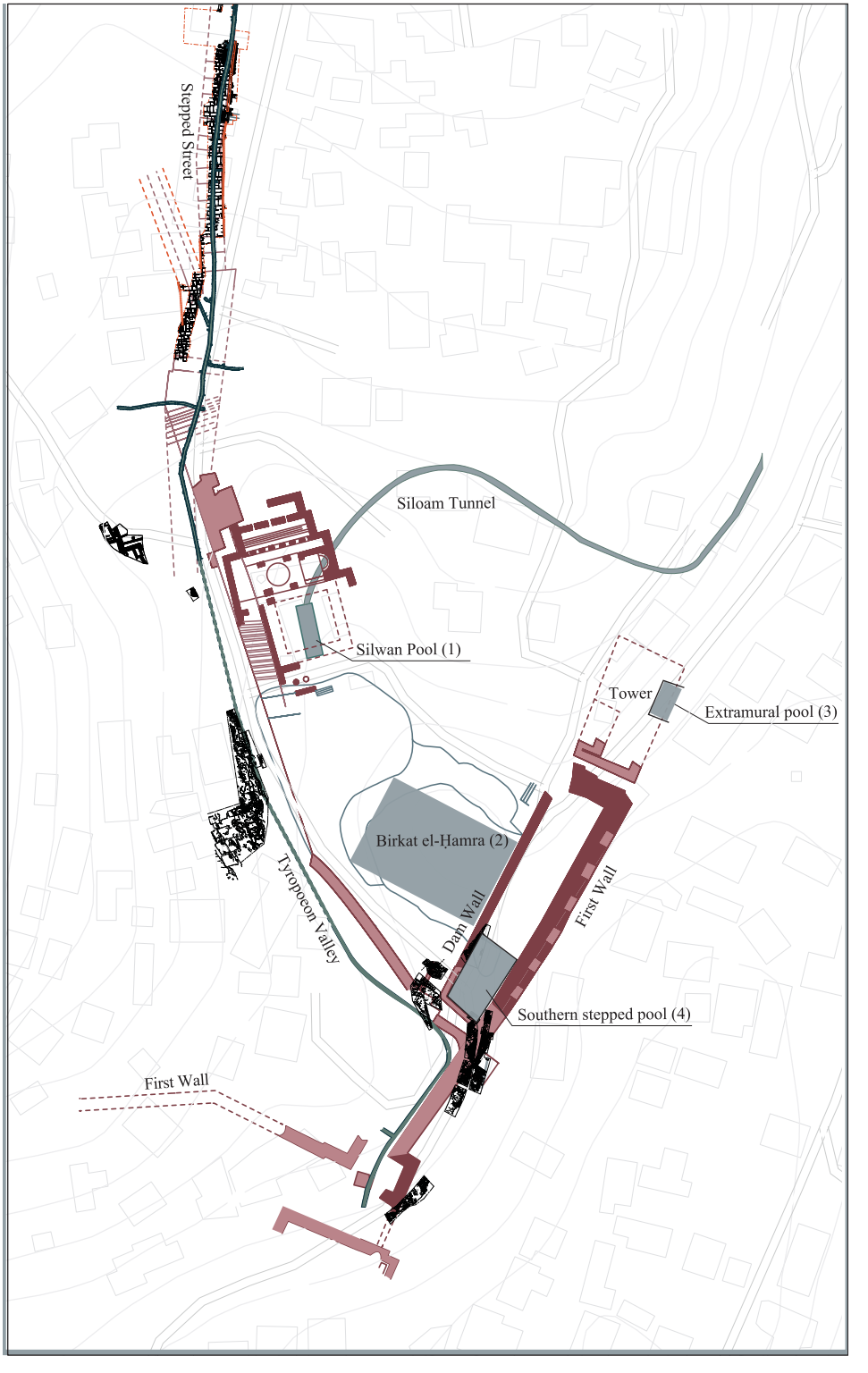

Fig. 1. Plan of the excavations along the Tyropoeon Valley, focusing on the area of the Silwan Pool and Birkat el-Ḥamra (drafting: O. Zakaim).

Mazor 2020; Szanton, forthcoming [a]: Table 1). Four pools from the Early Roman period have been exposed so far at the southern tip of the city (Fig. 1):

(1) The Silwan Pool, located at the outlet of the Siloam Tunnel (Guthe 1881; Bliss and Dickie 1898; Fig. 2).

(2) Birkat el-Ḥamra, located at the outlet of the Tyropoeon Valley, where Reich and Shukron uncovered the monumental staircases of a very large pool (Reich and Shukron 2005; 2006; 2011; Shukron and Reich 2007; 2010).

(3) A pool exposed northeast of Birkat el-Ḥamra (Adan-Bayewitz 1979), outside the fortified area of the city.

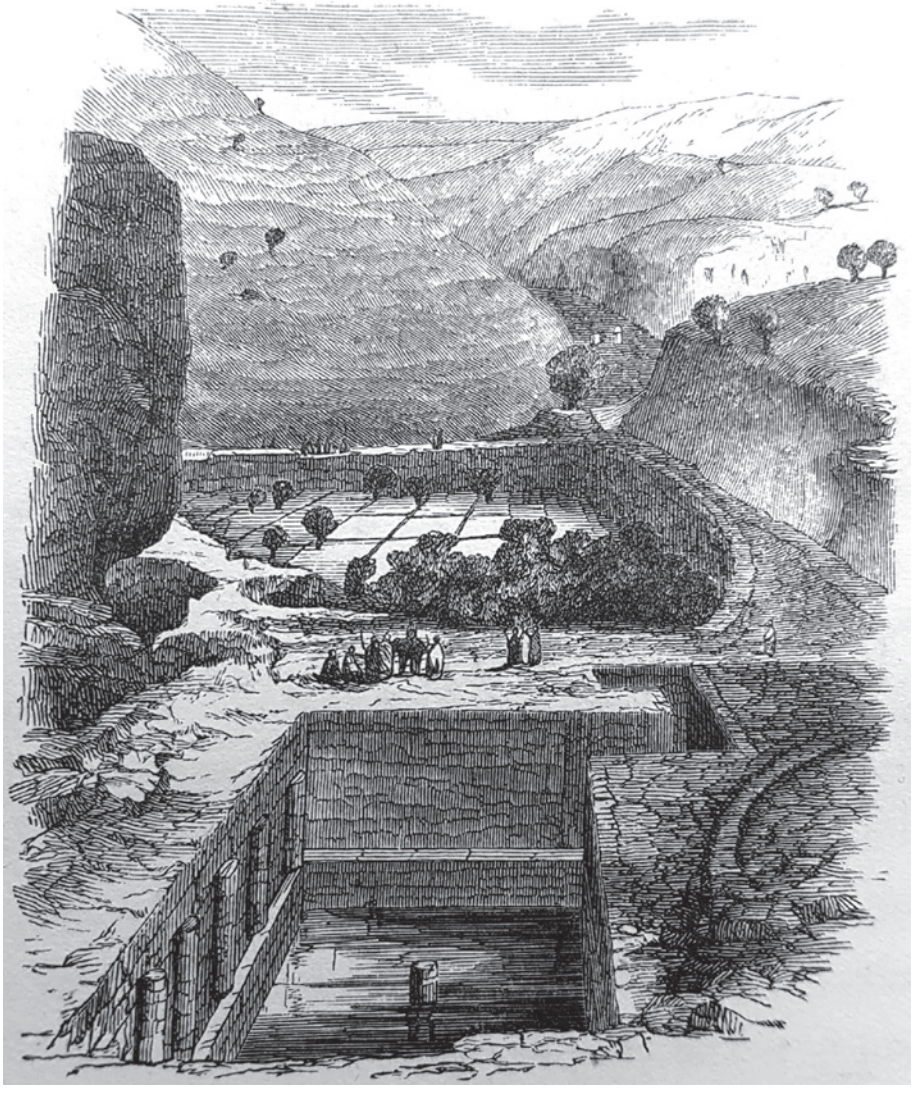

Fig. 2. Artistic reconstruction of the area surrounding the Silwan Pool and Birkat el-Ḥamra, looking southeast (illustration: J.H. Byram; see Barclay 1857:525).

(4) A pool exposed by Guthe (1881) and Bliss and Dickie (1898)—whose full extent came to light in subsequent excavations (Weksler-Bdolah and Szanton 2014; Greenhut and Mazor 2020; Weksler-Bdolah and Hagbi 2022)—between the dam and the city wall (Fig. 3; see also Weksler-Bdolah and Szanton 2014: Fig. 9).

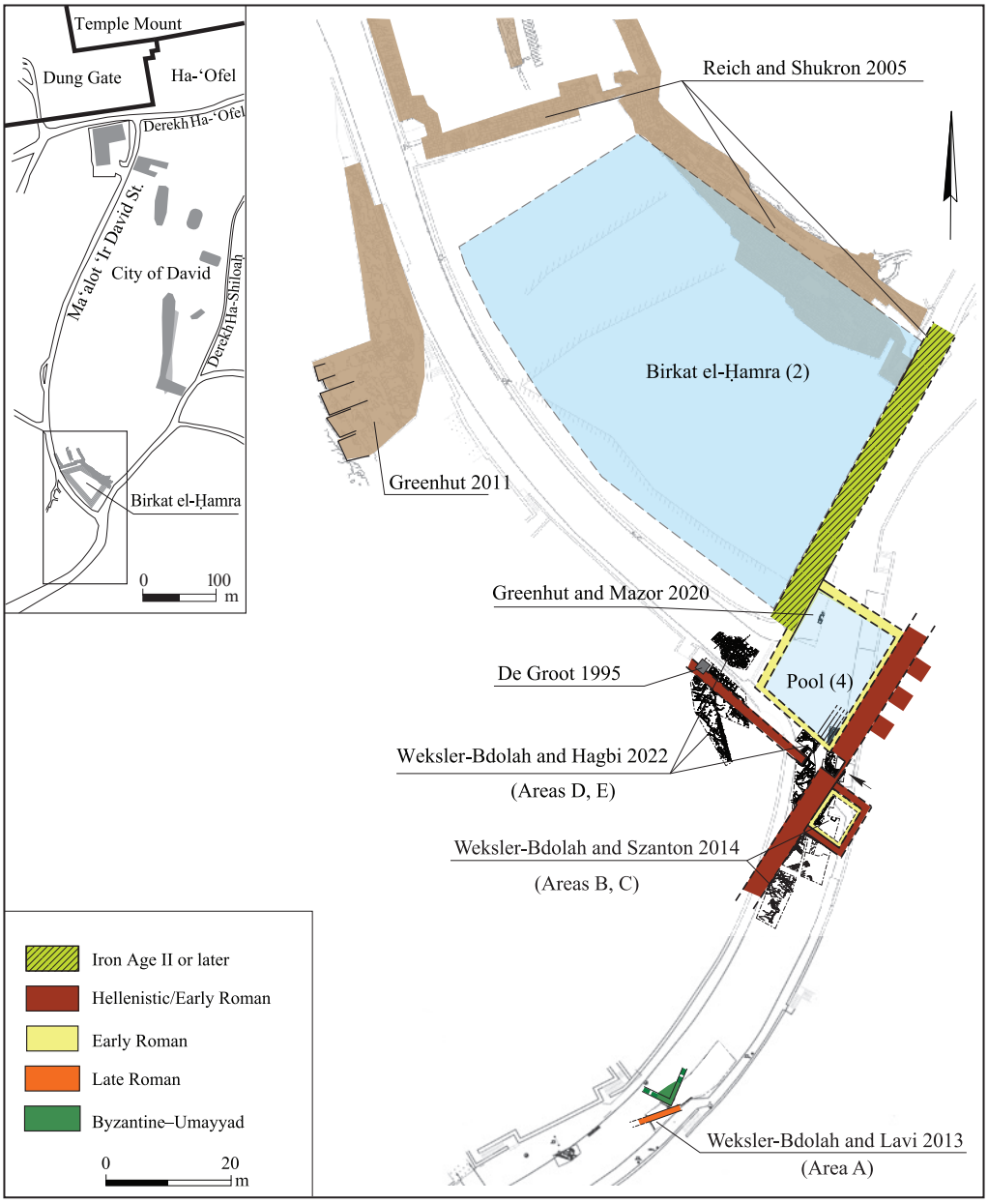

Fig. 3. Location map of the excavations near Birkat el-Ḥamra
(see Weksler-Bdolah and Hagbi 2022: Fig. 2).

Pool Nos. 2–4 were dated based on stratigraphic, ceramic and numismatic data (Adan-Bayewitz 1979; Reich and Shukron 2006:94; 2011:246, 251–253; Greenhut and Mazor 2020), whereas the dating of pool No. 1, exposed in the late nineteenth century, is based only on architectural, typological and stratigraphic documentation (Bliss and Dickie 1898:152–160; Fig. 4) and therefore, its dating to the Early Roman period has been challenged by

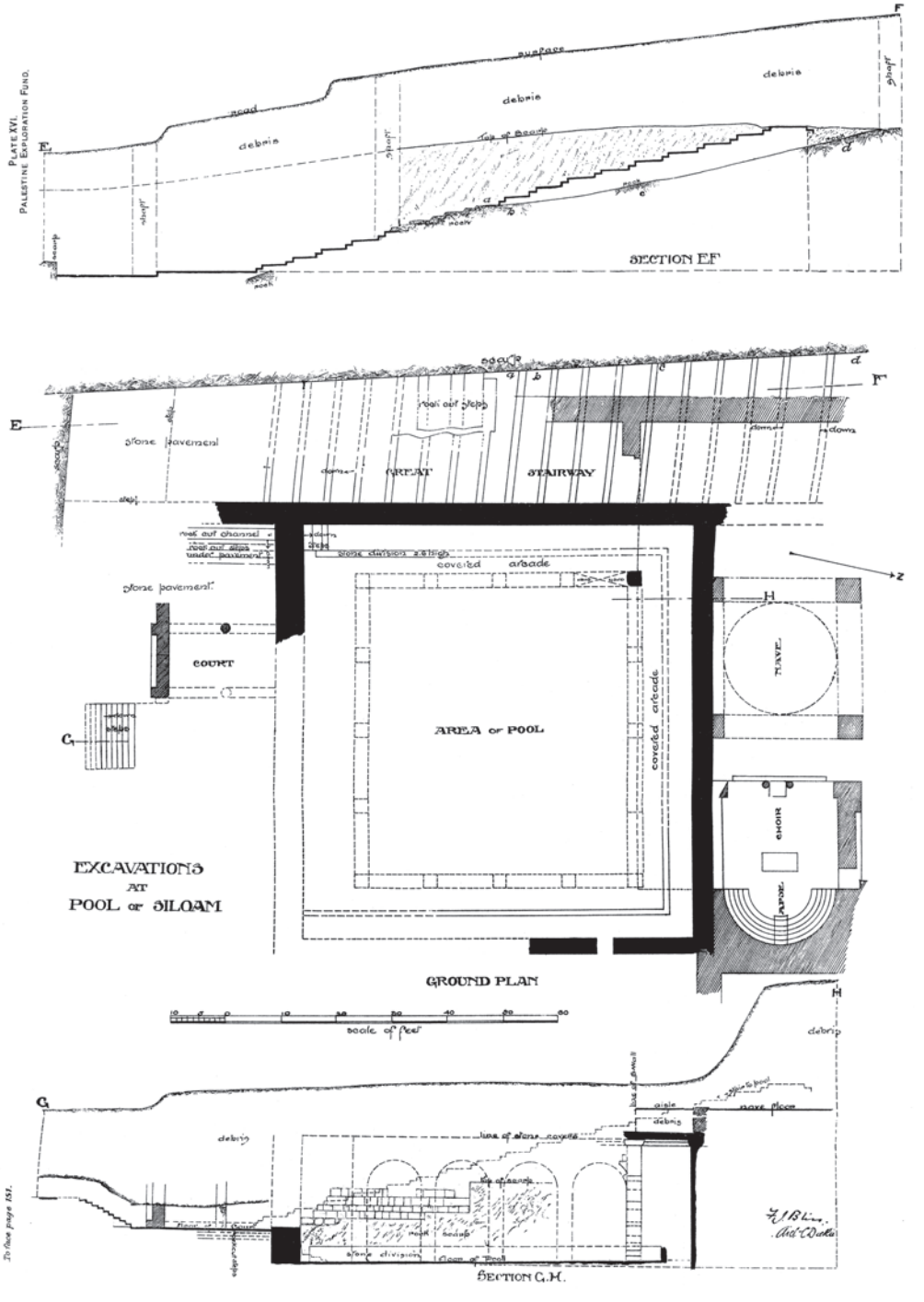

Fig. 4. Plan and section of the remains of the Silwan Pool at the exit of the Siloam Tunnel (Bliss and Dickie 1898: Pl. XVI).

some scholars, who suggested a Late Roman–Byzantine date. As will be clarified below, the stratigraphic data provides clear evidence for its construction in the Early Roman period.

Although all four Early Roman-period pools were exposed in this area, only two (No. 1, 2) are relevant for the identification of the pools mentioned in the textual sources (Table 1). The small size of pool Nos. 3 and 4, in addition to their location on the outskirts of or beyond the city's fortifications, suggest that they were not public urban pools, but rather pools for collecting water surplus.

THE SILOAM POOL AND SOLOMON'S POOL: LOCATION AND FUNCTION

With the construction of the Upper and Lower aqueducts to Jerusalem in the late Hasmonean/Early Roman period, significant portions of the city no longer relied on the water collected in the pool(s) at the southern tip of the city. This nullified the need to convey water to the city upslope from the pools located at its lowest topographic point. As the pools were no longer crucial for the sustenance of the city's inhabitants, a shift occurred in their use, catering to ritual and recreational needs.

Following Bliss and Dickie's excavations (1898:152–155; Paton 1907), the Early Roman-period Siloam Pool was identified with the Ottoman-period Silwan Pool (No. 1) located at the outlet of the Siloam Tunnel, although some scholars challenged this identification (e.g., Simons 1952:189–192; Hekker 1956:201–199; Wilkinson 1978:118, Fig. 4:7). Following Reich and Shukron's discoveries at Birkat el-Ḥamra (No. 2; Reich and Shukron's 2005; 2006; 2011; Shukron and Reich 2007; 2010), which exposed a significant portion of a large stepped pool and a large stone-paved plaza to its north, and their proposal to identify that monumental pool with Siloam Pool, the earlier identification was largely abandoned. Instead, the smaller Silwan Pool (No. 1) at the outlet of Siloam Tunnel was dated to the Late Roman–Byzantine period, and the larger, Birkat el-Ḥamra (No. 2) was identified as the Siloam Pool of the late Second Temple period. The exposure of Herodian stepped streets to the west and east of the Silwan Pool, led Reich and Shukron to reconstruct a wide, single-tiered monumental staircase, filling the width of the Tyropoeon Valley, assuming that the Silwan Pool had not yet been built in the Early Roman period (e.g., Reich and Shukron 2005; Reich 2011: Fig. 160). However, this suggestion overlooks the stratigraphy of the archaeological remains of the pool uncovered by Bliss and Dickie's and the location of Solomon's Pool, which is said to have been next to Siloam Pool (Josephus, *Jewish War* 5:145). This may be resolved by reconsidering the identification of Siloam Pool with Silwan Pool (No. 1) and Birkat el-Ḥamra (No. 2) with Solomon's Pool. The discussion below considers the reasoning behind the placement of two pools in such proximity by relating to their function.

Birkat el-Ḥamra (البركة الحمراء) (No. 2; Fig. 1)

According to Reich and Shukron (2006:96), Birkat el-Ḥamra should be identified with the Early Roman-period Siloam Pool, further suggesting that it served as a *miqveh* for the

immersion of pilgrims who entered the city through its southern gate. Elitzur stressed that the monumental pool was not fit for ritual immersion (Elitzur 2008a:18–20, 23; 2008b:70–71), considering that it was an open public swimming pool for daily use and recreation. As to its location at the mouth of the Tyropoeon Valley, near the city's fortifications, Elitzur accepted Simons' (1952:189–193) suggestion that Birkat el-Ḥamra preserved the location of an earlier pool, the biblical "King's Garden" (Jeremiah 39:7; 2 Kings 25:4; Nehemiah 3:15) or the "King's Pool" (Nehemiah 2:14) (for a discussion of the Iron Age pool and the gardens surrounding it, see Ussishkin 1994:25–26). This pool was later referred to by Josephus as 'Solomon's Pool,' an identification also supported by the Greek term (*κολυμβη΄θρα*) he uses to describe this pool (Elitzur 2008a:22).

Gurevich (2015; 2017: No. 32, 150) argued that this pool could not have served as a public swimming pool due to issues of modesty and the excessive amounts of water this would essentially waste. He suggested that the pool functioned as a *miqweh* for ritual purification (2015:164), although it is unclear how this use solves any issues of modesty (see below).

A public swimming pool would have undoubtedly been significant in this area of the city, both during hot summer days and on holidays when thousands of pilgrims arrived in the city. While no public bathhouse has been found thus far in this area, it is probable that the pool adjacent to the city gate and the street that ascended to the Temple Mount served the pilgrims not only for recreation but also for bathing. After cleansing their bodies, the pilgrims could continue to the nearby Siloam Pool (No. 1; see below) to purify.

The Silwan Pool (No. 1)

Bliss and Dickie's (1898) groundbreaking work failed to provide definitive chronological data for dating the architectural remains at Silwan Pool; however, their meticulous descriptions and documentation of the remains in the area of the Silwan Pool—including the segment of an Early Roman stepped street, the remains of the pool and the Byzantine Church (Fig. 4)—enable dating the pool to the Early Roman period. Bliss and Dickie reconstructed an almost-square pool (22.8 × 21.6 m) surrounded by a colonnade of arches that supported covering stones. To the west of the pool, Bliss and Dickie exposed a stepped street (herein: 'the western street'). The relationship between the western street and the pool's wall is described by the excavators as follows (Bliss and Dickie 1898:151–154):

> Part of the stairway is covered by the later church, and the buried steps themselves were found when we dug inside the church under the level of its flooring. On the west, the steps butt against the scarp, and on the east against the west wall of the original pool, which also served as their parapet.

Based on this description and the published plan and section, the western street abutted the wall of the pool and therefore, they must be contemporary or later than the pool. The dating of the western street to the Early Roman period was determined by Reich and Shukron (2006) due to the fact that the Byzantine church was built above it (Fig. 5), and as the architectural style of the pavement—including alternating narrow and broad steps—

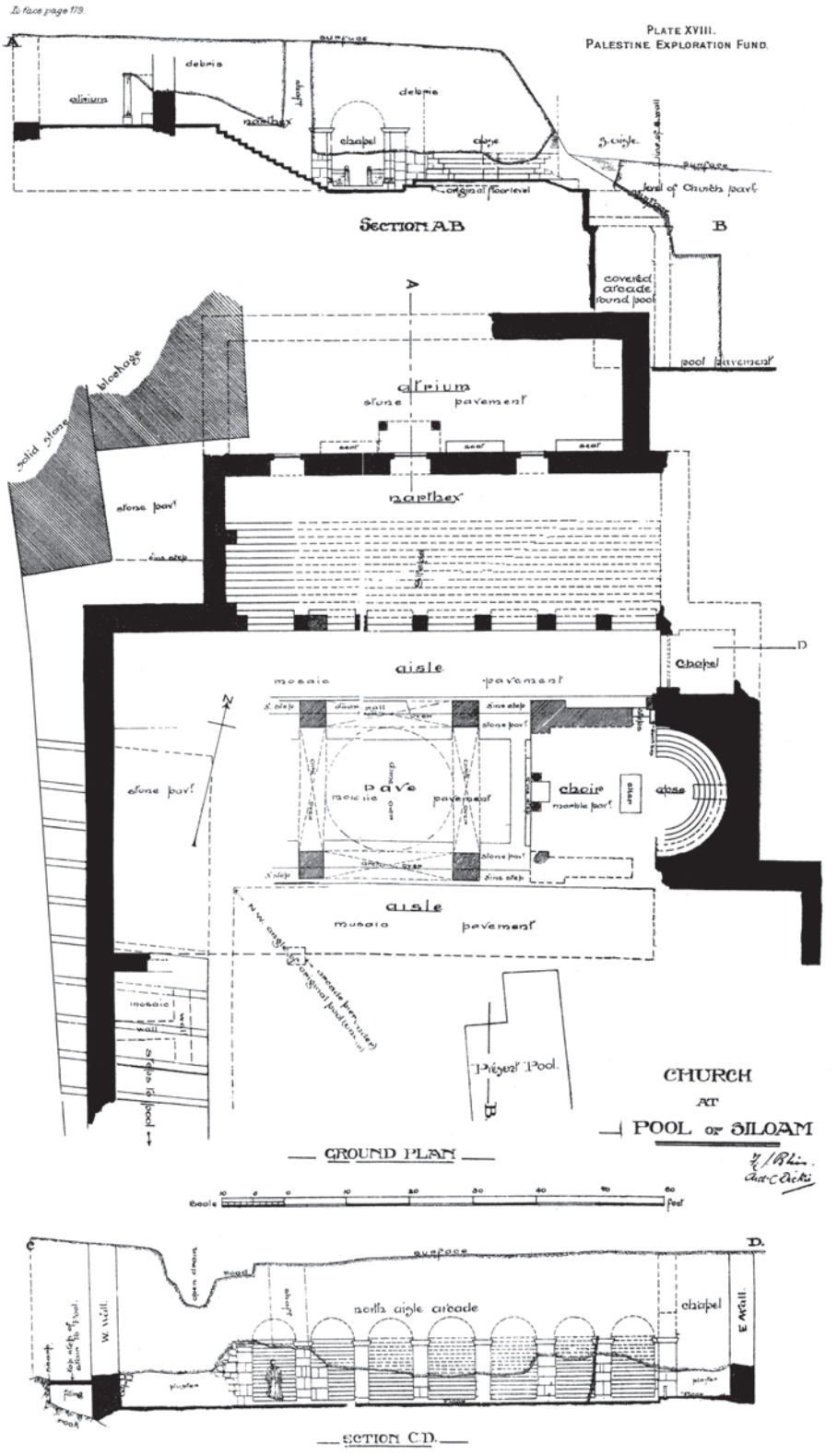

Fig. 5. Plan and section of the remains of the Siloam Church (Bliss and Dickie 1898: Pl. XVIII).

is similar to that of other contemporary street segments, such as that exposed east of the church and Silwan Pool (herein: 'the eastern street'; Shukron and Reich 2007).

According to Bliss and Dickie, the upper part of the western wall of the pool (1.2 m wide) served as the eastern banister of the western street, documented along c. 9 m (Fig. 4). The western wall of the pool forms a southwestern corner with the southern wall (c. 1.65 m wide). Within the church, Bliss and Dickie exposed a stone partition, which ran parallel to the western wall of the pool, at a distance of 1.35 m from the rock scarp on which the western wall of the church was built. The upper edge of the stone partition (length 6.4 m, height 0.75 m, width 0.31 m) was rounded (Bliss and Dickie 1898:142; see Fig. 4: Section G–H), similar to other such architectural elements exposed in the excavations in the Western Wall Tunnels and dated to the Early Roman period (Bahat 2013:280, Ph. 9.07; Weksler-Bdolah 2022: Fig. 15). Additional parts of this stone partition were exposed by Reich and Shukron (2011) in secondary use in Birkat el-Ḥamra. Two more were found *in situ* at the joining point of the outlet of the Siloam Tunnel and Silwan Pool (Fig. 6).

The data presented above supports the identification of an Early Roman pool, flanked by two distinct stepped streets, western and eastern, which was later incorporated into the Byzantine Church. The remains allow for the reconstruction of a roughly square pool, flanked by a roofed colonnade, which included a rounded banister and a row of columns (Fig. 4). It is suggested here that this pool should be identified as the Siloam Pool of the Second Temple period. To the south of this pool was a stepped pavement that linked it to

a b

Fig. 6. (a) The endpoint of the Siloam Tunnel, looking north, with railing stone *in situ*, on bottom left; (b) the curved profile of the railing stone, looking west (photography: N. Szanton).

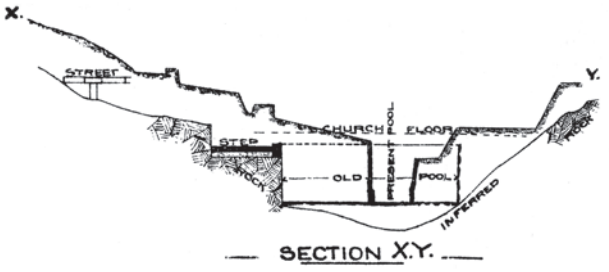

Fig. 7. Section showing the stratigraphic relationship between the Silwan Pool, the earlier pool and the streets surrounding them, looking north (Bliss and Dickie 1898: Pl. XV, Sec. XY).

Solomon's Pool (Birkat el-Ḥamra; No. 1) in accordance with the description of Josephus (see above). The relationship between these pools can also be inferred from the section published by Bliss and Dickie (1898: Pl. XV, Sec. XY; Fig. 7).

It is not clear whether considerations of hygiene and cleanliness underlie the existence of a bathing pool and a *miqweh* in such proximity. During the Early Roman period, Jerusalem served as a Temple City visited by thousands of pilgrims, who entered the city through gates near these pools (Szanton, forthcoming [b]), continuing their ascension to the Temple via the stepped street (Fig. 1; Szanton et al. 2019). This may have led to a need for separating between the masses that bathed in Solomon's Pool and those who wished to purify in the concealed installation of the Siloam Pool.

CONCLUSIONS

Elitzur's (2008a; 2008b) proposal to identify the Early Roman-period Solomon's Pool at Birkat el-Ḥamra seems to stand true. This large, open public swimming pool was filled with water that ran along the Tyropoeon Valley, as well as with surplus water from Siloam Pool to its north.

The Early Roman-period Siloam Pool was located at the outlet of the Siloam Tunnel; its name was preserved until the Ottoman-period (Silwan). In the late Second Temple period, Siloam Pool served as ceremonial and enclosed purification installation, which was fed by the 'living waters' (מים חיים) of the Giḥon Spring, allowing those making their way up to the Temple to maintain purity.

The nearby location of Siloam Pool and Solomon's Pool in this area complies with Josephus's descriptions concerning their relation to the course of the First Wall (see above). Written sources (see Table 1) indicate that both pools continued to exist in later periods. The Siloam Pool maintained the religious and spiritual traditions associated with it, with the construction of a church surrounding the pool in the Byzantine period, while Solomon's Pool (Birkat el-Ḥamra) continued to serve for bathing.

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