



Omrit

A Unique Archeological Site
in the Upper Galilee



Eran Gaash
Landscape
Architecture



MACALESTER
COLLEGE



Carthage



General Planning Program

Against the background of the Galilean landscape, remnants of the past are being removed from the depths of the earth, reminding us that there has been life in our region since the dawn of history. The Roman temples in Tel Omrit, near Kibbutz Kfar Szold in the eastern Upper Galilee attest to a diverse culture, highlighting the significance of history and the importance of knowing where we come from and where we are headed.

Slowly but surely, more pieces of the temples that were erected on the ancient road to Damascus are appearing. With some imagination, observers can already begin to reconstruct them in their minds. The sacred work of excavating the findings is being performed by skilled professionals, Professor Andrew Overman of Maclester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, USA and Professor Dan Schowalter of Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin, USA, assisted by groups of students from their colleges, and other schools from around the world.

We are pleased to see students arriving every year for another season of excavations, yielding additional discoveries that shed further light on the civilization that existed here in the Upper Galilee.

This is an opportunity for me to express our gratitude for your dedication and devotion to the cause, your loyalty to the project and your extensive investment. The project is now in an advanced stage and in order to complete it we need additional funds. We hope that we will succeed in raising the money to enable the researchers and excavators to complete the reconstruction of this unique cultural and archeological gem being uncovered here.

When the work is completed, the site will be declared a national park, joining the network of national parks spread throughout the state of Israel, which create a reminder of history and represent the lives of past generations.

I would like to wish you success in all your efforts to promote this project and hope that our activities together will be fruitful.

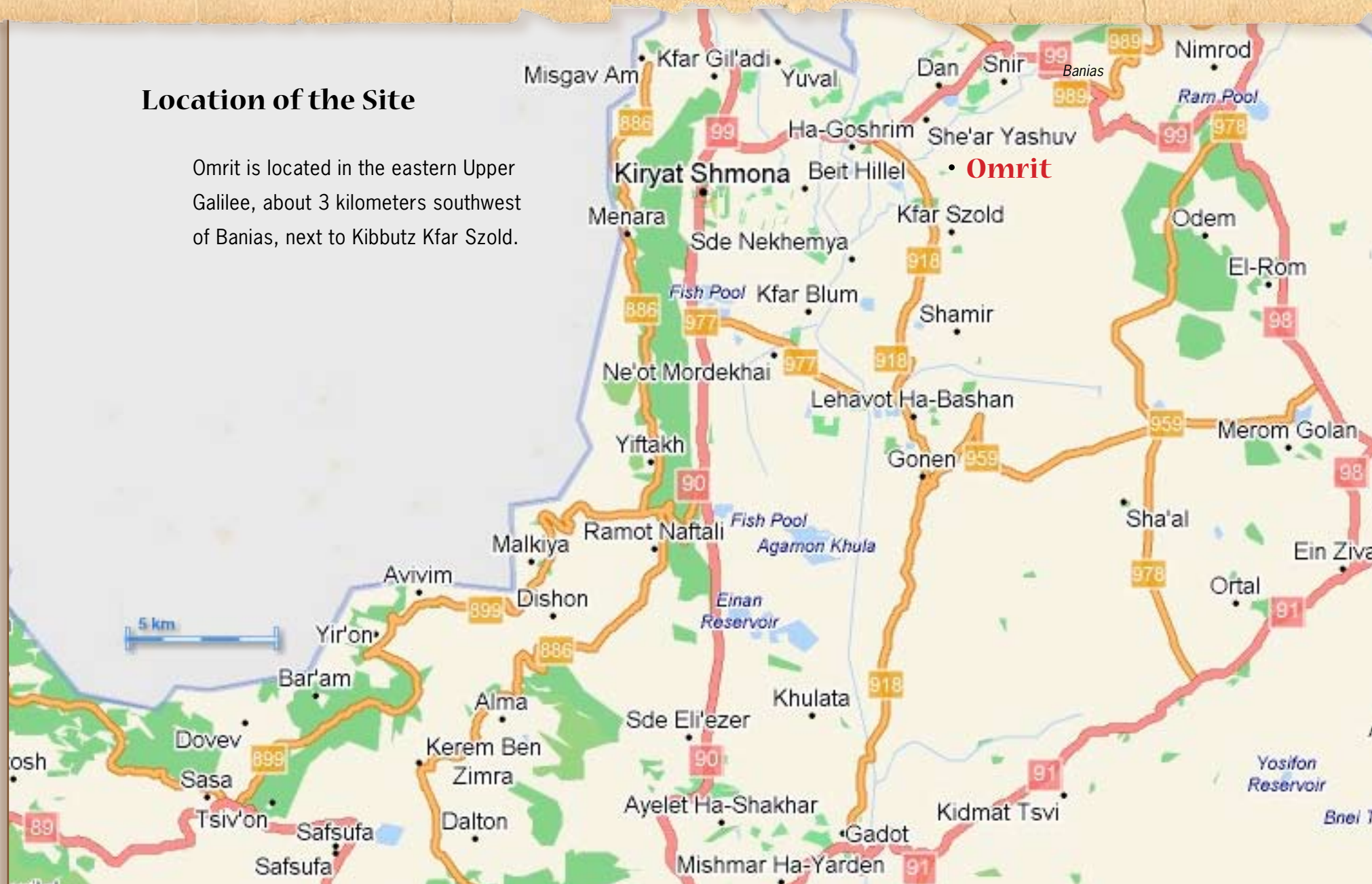
Sincerely,

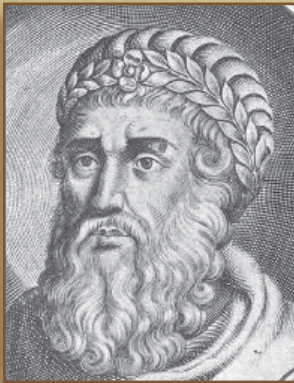
Aharon Valency

Mayor, Upper Galilee Regional Council

Location of the Site

Omrit is located in the eastern Upper Galilee, about 3 kilometers southwest of Banias, next to Kibbutz Kfar Szold.





So when he had conducted Caesar to the sea, and was returned home, he built him a most beautiful temple, of the whitest stone, in Zenodorus's country, near the place called Panlure. (Josephus Flavius, *The Antiquities of the Jews* XV, 363)



Omrit

Over the last decade, continuous work has been underway to excavate a unique temple complex at Omrit, on the slopes of the Hermon, about 3 kilometers southwest of Banias. Every year an archeological team of professionals and students from Macalester College in Minnesota and Carthage College in Wisconsin, directed by Dr. Andrew Overman and Dr. Dan Schowalter, participate in the excavation of the site. The delegation also maintains strong ties with the Upper Galilee Regional Council, which sponsors the site, as well as joint academic programs with Tel Hai College, especially scientific conferences attended by researchers from throughout Israel and abroad.

Historical Background

On a hilltop overlooking the Upper Galilee - an impressive Temple complex was built during the Roman period. An ornate colonnaded street connected the Temple to the main road system connecting the Mediterranean coast with Beth Shean to the South and Damascus to the northeast. The temple is located in the foothills of Mt. Hermon, which since ancient times was considered a sacred place. Its location on the Lebanon ridge which had more Roman temples than any other region in the eastern empire, also enhanced its significance.

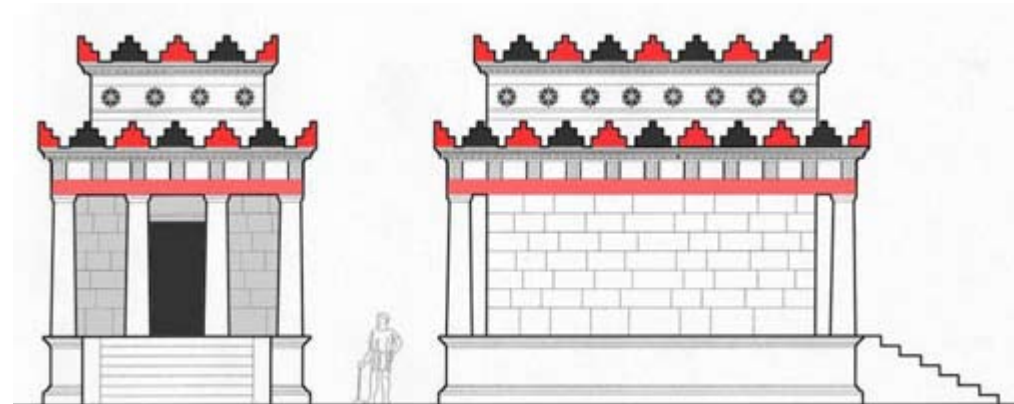
Towards the end of the Hellenistic period and during the Roman period, this area marked the border between Iturea and Coele-Syria, which later became the Roman province of Syria. After the victory of Augustus in the battle of Actium, the emperor gave Iturea to Herod. It became a strategic buffer zone between Parthia and the area under Roman rule in the east. To the imperial Romans, Parthia had long been an existential threat, dating back to the Republican period, with the fall of Crassus and the loss of the legionary standards in the Battle of Harran in 53 BCE. The diplomatic achievements of Augustus in Parthia and Armenia in the year 20 BCE, and the restoration of those standards led to a rehabilitation of Roman honor. This event was marked in Rome with victory celebrations, and helped to bring Pax Romana (the Roman Peace) to the eastern Empire.

Josephus Flavius, who describes the developments in the region and the special relationship between Herod and Augustus in great detail, tells us: "So when he had conducted Caesar to the sea, and was returned home, he built him a most beautiful temple, of the whitest stone, in Zenodorus's country, near the place called Panlure" (The Antiquities of the Jews XV, 363). At this point in the excavations it seems very likely that the Omrit temple was Herod's northern Augusteum. The site appears to have significance for imperial Rome until the fourth century.

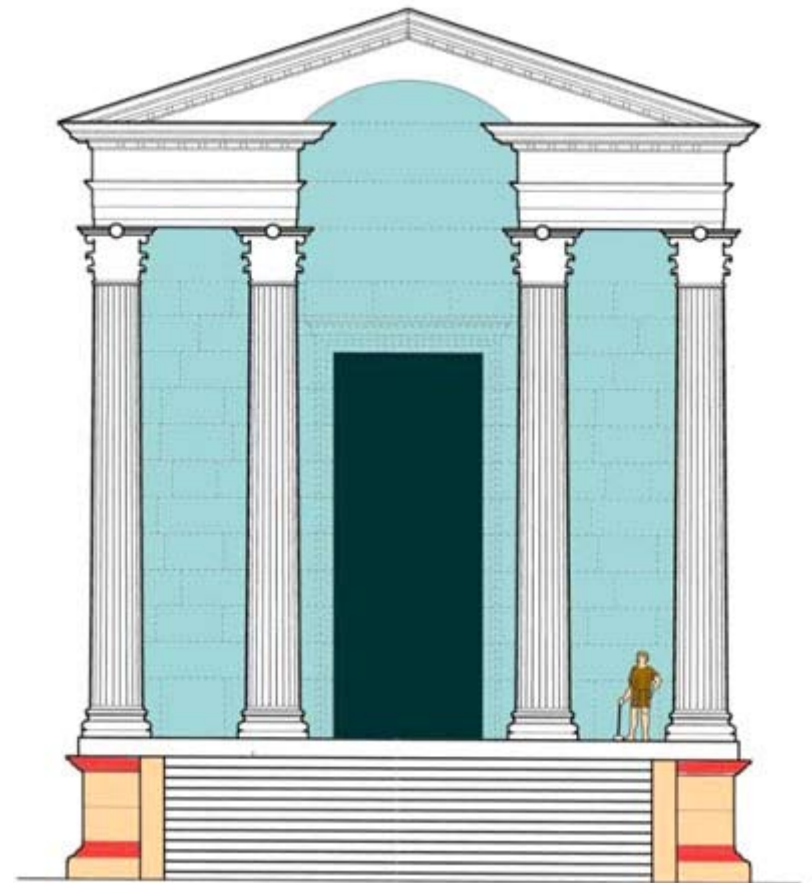
The Temple Compound

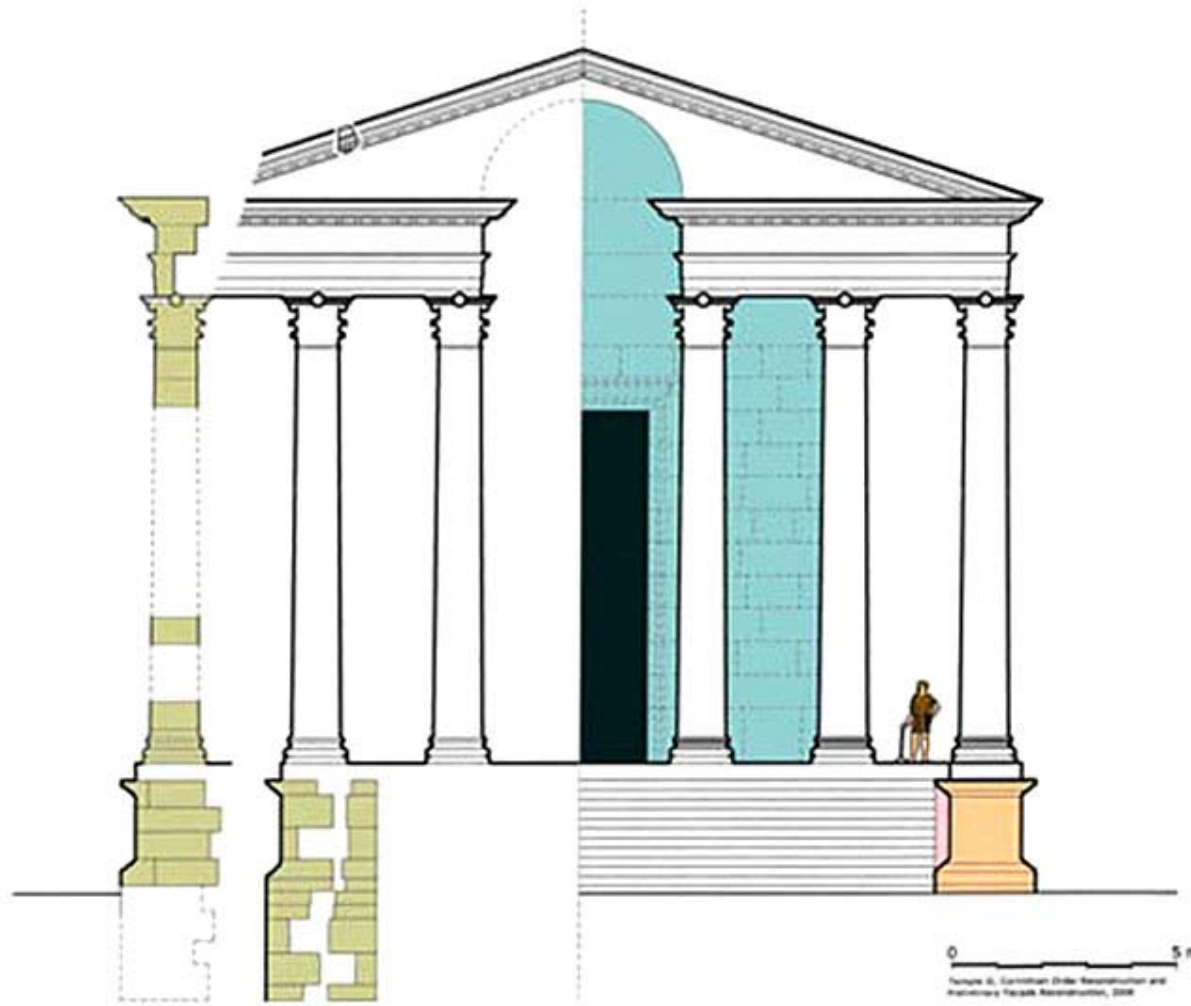
Omrit is unique because of the series of ornate Roman temples that were erected at the site within a relatively short period of about 120 years. The temples are located one within the other and their foundations and certain building elements have been marvelously preserved.

They began with an impressive memorial built on a high foundation on the hilltop built around the year 50 BCE. It is decorated with a fresco and Corinthian columns. Around the year 30 BCE, the monument was converted into a small temple, most probably at the initiative of Herod who wanted to mark his annexation of Iturea. An ornate staircase was built to its east and the façade was decorated with four high columns and exquisitely decorated walls.



As recorded by Josephus Flavius, after Augustus traveled to Parthia, Herod built a new temple intended for the ritual worship of the emperor. It seems very likely that Herod constructed his new temple over the dismantled remains of the Early Shrine at Omrit. Given its hilltop location, the temple would have served as an excellent road sign for Herod's control of the region.





Towards the end of the first century CE, the Temple was expanded and enhanced. It may have been the Roman general, and future emperor, Titus, who decided to beautify the temple in the spirit of the times. A new, broader foundation was built around the Herodian temple. The ornate temple was surrounded by limestone columns with large Corinthian capitals, many of which were found at the site, having collapsed in the earthquake probably during the 4th century CE.

There is ample evidence for occupation during the Byzantine period, including a heavy floor built from reused architectural blocks on the temple platform, dividing walls built into the northern colonnade probably to accommodate shops and offices, and a small chapel with an apse built just south of the original Roman altar. It seems clear that the Omrit site was significant for the Byzantine Christian community, and probably for pilgrims as well.



The Potential of the Site

This extraordinary temple complex, unmatched in this region and, in fact, throughout the Roman Empire, was built at a location that is impressive by nature, overlooking the entire region, and marking its geopolitical importance. The amazing preservation and architectural uniqueness enable modern archeologists to partially reconstruct the temples in their different stages along with the colonnaded road and the installations and stores that stood along it. This provides us with us a rare opportunity to develop a unique archeological park that will serve as a tourism site of marvelous quality. These interwoven, impressive examples of Roman temple architecture represent a glorious chapters of history, and they will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to tourism in the area.



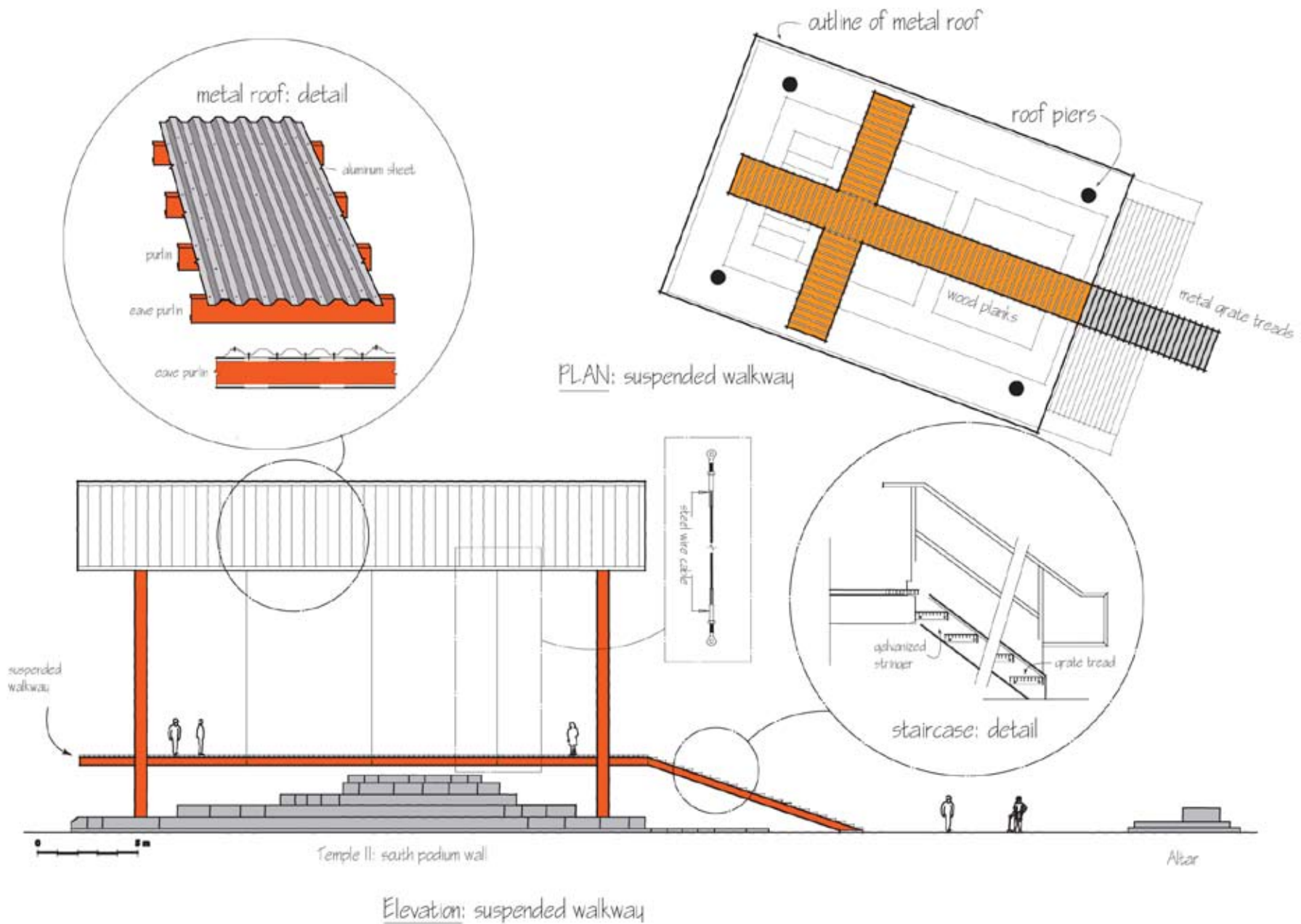
Vision

1. Declaration of the Omrit site as a national park and its adaptation in order to accommodate diverse visitors from Israel and abroad.
2. Continued archeological excavation of the site with the aim of learning about the context of the temple in various periods.
3. Preservation of the heritage and natural treasures at the site and its vicinity, including partial reconstruction of the findings.
4. Transformation of the site into a tourism magnet that will strengthen the communities in the region.



Method

1. Declaration of the site as a national park – promotion of a statutory plan to be submitted to the planning authorities.
2. After declaration, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority will manage the site according to the vision and in keeping with the law.
3. Preparation of a booklet for prospective donors – for raising funds to continue the archeological excavations. The booklet will describe the potential of the site, along with a development plan and cost estimates. It will be sent to the relevant organizations and potential donors to help in the fundraising effort to support implementation of the plan.
4. Conservation plan – Preparation of a conservation plan for the site, including a conservation survey, documentation of the findings, a construction expert opinion and partial renovation of the temple according to the conservation plan.
5. Development plan – Preparation of the site and the access to it for diverse target groups, including people with disabilities. The plan will include parking, development of an entrance area, a network of paths and squares, including a bridge over the gorge south of the site.
6. Presentation of the archeological findings – Presentation of the archeological findings at the site as an open museum and preparation of explanations in the form of guiding and explanatory signs.
7. Development of a tourism magnet – marketing of the site in the electronic media in Israel and abroad, production of events to launch the site and publication of the findings from time to time in order to attract a large volume of visitors to the region.



Analysis of the Current Situation

1. There is an asphalt access road up to Nebi Huda. From there, an unpaved road continues to a location just south of the site.
To get to the site itself, there is a direct service road passable to off-road vehicles only.
2. There are no parking areas for buses and private vehicles.
3. There is no access to the site for people with disabilities
and it is also a problem for these people to manage the path into and up from the gorge.
4. The site lacks shady areas.
5. In the area to the north of the site there is a danger of mines.
6. The temple columns are located at the site but they collapsed during an earthquake during ancient times.
7. Approximately 10 seasons of excavation have been conducted at the site and there is still much to be learned, particularly in the area to the north and east of the temple site.
8. There is no water, sewage, electricity or communications infrastructure.
9. The historic road to the site, which approached it from the direction of Nebi Huda, is not fit for passage.



Planning Program



1. Preparation of an overall plan and a conservation plan, including a conservation survey and conservation documentation.
2. Preservation of the building and reconstruction of parts of the temple by lifting some of the columns, according to the conservation plan.
3. Expansion of the area of excavation to the north and east of the temple site.
4. Preparation of an access road for vehicles and creation of parking places for 5 buses and 30 private vehicles south of the site, with an effort to minimize disturbance of the area and the open landscape. The parking will be hidden from the site.
5. Fencing in the site to prevent cattle from entering and destroying findings.
6. Construction of an entrance area that will include an information booth, ecological restrooms, an operational storeroom and a snack bar.

Planning Program



7. Preparation of an access road for people with disabilities to reach the site, including points overlooking the site and the Hula Valley and a bridge at the entrance, about 20 meters above the gorge to the south of the site.
8. Removal of safety hazards for visitors in the excavation area – erection of banisters, closing up ditches.
9. Preparation of another footpath along the historic west-east route to site. The path will begin to the north of the Nebi Huda complex.
10. Construction of a shady covering for visitors near the temple.
11. Installation of directional and explanatory signs.
12. Creation of stations with audio explanations and guidance.
13. Planting of shady trees near the paths and squares.

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