

Crocodile Creek

The last crocodile on Israel's coastal plain was hunted down in 1912 near Taninim Stream, which was apparently once crawling with the creatures. How did they get there, and where did they go? // **Tamar Hayardeni**

Where To?

Taninim Stream Nature Reserve

Access from Route 4, between Jisr az-Zarqa and Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael

Open Sunday–Thursday
8 am–5 pm, Friday 8 am–4 pm
(04) 626-5151, entrance fee



The checkered history of Holy Land travelogues is littered with sites that don't live up to their names, from the thinning Jerusalem Forest to the cedar Herzl supposedly planted, which was really just another local cypress. That's the Middle East for you. (Even the "peace process" has been more of an intermittent cease-fire, punctuated by unilateral Israeli gestures.) Nevertheless, the average Israeli tourist arrives at Taninim

(Crocodiles) Nature Reserve expecting to see at least an alligator or two.

Not so long ago, Taninim Stream was indeed home to crocodiles, so the name has teeth (as it were). In fact, going back two thousand five hundred years, a town named Crocodeilonpolis (Croc Town, we'd call it now) stood on the banks of the stream. The ruins of this town, currently known as Khirbet Abu Tantar (Crocodile Hill), are clearly visible, though no crocodile skin purse or necklace of crocodile dentures has been found here.

Rooted in History

Situated at the northern limits of the Sharon coastal plain, the stream is known to locals as a reliable water source. It begins at Ramat Menashe, between Kibbutz Dalia and Kibbutz Ein Ha-shofet, then trickles down the slopes of the Carmel and into the Mediterranean some twenty-five kilometers away, south of Kibbutz Ma'agan Michael. The Arabs in the area refer to this body of water as Wadi el-Zerka (Blue Stream), but it's also well known as Wadi Tamasiah (*tamsah* means "crocodile" in Arabic) or even Crocodilion. Saltwater springs in its lower reaches bear the name Tamsah Springs, so the place was clearly associated with crocodiles.

No one knows when crocodiles first arrived here, but Ze'ev Vilnai,

the famous guide book author and raconteur, quotes a 12th-century Christian pilgrim who went overboard (hopefully not literally) describing the horrific reptiles he encountered in the vicinity. Assuming that neither he nor Vilnai was exaggerating just for effect, these man-eating beasts have been crawling around the swamps of the coastal plain for a good few hundred years.

Vilnai also mentions a pair of Egyptian brothers who ruled ancient Caesarea. The younger plotted to rid himself of the elder and reign alone. So when his sibling was struck by leprosy and had to bathe daily in the nearby stream to ease his suffering, the young villain popped down to Egypt and smuggled back a couple of mighty Nile crocodiles to populate the "healing waters." The elder brother was soon history. Meanwhile, the pair of crocs cheerfully multiplied, creating an indigenous crocodile population in the Lower Galilee. That, legend has it, is why there were crocodiles in the Crocodile Stream.

Alternatively, the Romans are said to have brought the reptiles over from Egypt to spice up gladiatorial combat in Caesarea's amphitheater.

Unsuccessful Encounter

In the mid-19th century, a Christian engineer of Italian origin named



Illustration: Shutterstock

Ermete Pierotti was employed by the Ottoman authorities in the Holy Land, working in Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount. Charged with planning a small pier in Haifa Bay, Pierotti went north to do some fieldwork and was intrigued by reports of the crocodiles of the Zerka River. He writes:

They told me that the prints of the feet of amphibious reptiles were frequently seen in the sandy and muddy banks of the river; that skeletons three or four feet in length had been found; that the shepherds not unfrequently missed some of their flocks, which had been feeding near the Zerka and had been frequenting it to drink; that horsemen who had imprudently forded the stream had been devoured together with their steeds by the crocodiles, and that some time before I arrived

at Haifa the natives had regularly hunted them. (Ermete Pierotti, *Customs and Traditions of Palestine: Illustrating the Manners of the Ancient Hebrews* [Deighton, Bell, and Company, 1864], p. 35)

In a chapter cheerfully entitled “Of Certain Other Animals, Not Domesticated,” Pierotti describes his attempt to check out the Zerka’s amphibious population up close. Escorted by horsemen to the banks of the river one night in the summer of 1859, he soon discovered that no one was interested in following him across:

My escort, to my surprise, seemed afraid, and held back, and on enquiring of my dragoman [interpreter], Antonio Alonzo, I was informed that not one of them was willing to ford the stream, the excuse being that they were unfamiliar with the

An enormous, pregnant female, three meters long and carrying forty-eight eggs, was trapped in the brook in 1877

At the source. Springs well up in the pool by the mouth of Tananim Stream, 2008

Photo: Udi Steinwell, PikiWiki

nature of its bed, but that the real reason was that they feared the crocodiles. On learning this I encouraged the commander of the escort to lead the way, but he responded by descending from his horse, an example which was followed by his subalterns. Irritated at this mutiny I rode into the river, trusting to the sagacity of my horse to find a ford, and soon arrived on the other side without any harm, beyond getting wet to the middle of the leg. (ibid., p. 37)

Pierotti's courageous deed had the desired effect, and his riders forded the stream. Despite his extensive questioning, however, not one shepherd in the area claimed to have ever seen a crocodile, though all insisted they'd lost sheep and found their bones by the river. The shepherds couldn't even show him any of the elusive beasts' alleged footprints.

Ever game, Pierotti went down to search the riverbank himself. He hired two villagers to lead him to the crocodiles' favorite haunt, by the sea, but neither guide would approach the river, despite the increasingly high sums both were offered. When he asked to buy a lamb as bait, the shepherds were appalled and refused to endanger their flocks by attracting the dreaded predators.

Left to his own devices, Pierotti roamed the banks looking unsuccessfully for crocodile traces, although he did manage to purchase some partial skeletons from villagers. Supposing it unlikely that these bones had been



By the By

- ▶ Jisr az-Zarqa (Blue Bridge), a small town on the banks of Taninim Stream, is named for the Ottoman bridge built in anticipation of Kaiser Wilhelm II's visit to the Holy Land. Anchoring off Jaffa in the summer of 1898, the kaiser and his entourage traveled to the city by horse and diligence (a type of horse-drawn carriage). Unfortunately, little of the bridge remains.
- ▶ In 1922, Baron Edmond de Rothschild purchased six square kilometers of the Kabara Swamp, east of Taninim Stream. The Kabara and other swamps were drained by Zionist pioneers and Arab labor. Now all that's left of these marshes is the odd swamp cat, launching itself acrobatically from the banks of the stream into the water and swimming a few swift strokes with its webbed paws, emerging proudly with a fish in its mouth.
- ▶ Popular Israeli songwriter Ehud Manor, who grew up in nearby Binyamina, named one of his more nostalgic numbers for Taninim Stream, recalling the days when he and his friends wandered down to paddle in its muddy shallows. "Do you remember the sky / Reflected skimming on the water?" Manor asks the stream. But like his childhood, the scenery he remembers is gone, swept away like flotsam in the current.



The Roman dam spanning Taninim Stream
Photo: Dr. Avishai Teicher, PikiWiki

brought specially from Egypt for his benefit, he accepted the locals' claims that the skeletons had been found in the Zerka.

Clearly disappointed at unearthing no living evidence of any crocodiles, Pierotti wrote:

I was also told that some months before my arrival in the country, a European had sought with success for remains of the reptile, which was the reason of their scarcity. This was M. Rotte, a Bavarian professor who,

unhappily for science, died in Syria from a sunstroke. (ibid., pp. 38–9)

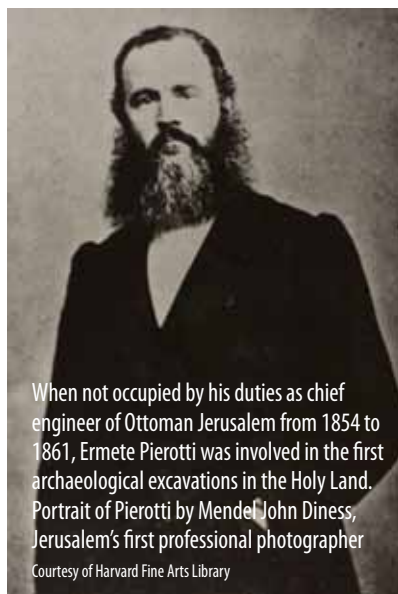
The Last Survivor

Though Pierotti's efforts produced not so much as a crocodile tail, British zoologist Henry Baker Tristram fared better just four years later. Tristram's memoirs recount his astounding successes in Holy Land reptile research, with four Arabs he'd sent to Wadi el-Zerka managing to hunt down

a crocodile over three and a half meters in length. They chopped up the dead amphibian and sent Tristram the pieces at his base in Nazareth. According to his memoirs, he still had the croc's head.

Pierotti's singular bad luck looks even worse considering reliable testimony from 1877 that a pregnant crocodile three meters long was caught in the Zerka. She was carrying forty-eight eggs, so had she not been killed she could have single-handedly repopulated the river, and we'd probably find some of her offspring there to this day. Victor Guérin, a French explorer visiting the area at the time and privileged to examine the specimen, identified her as a proud member of the Nile crocodile species. Guérin's assessment goes a long way toward authenticating either or both legends regarding the Zerka crocodiles' Egyptian origins.

Whether in the name of research or out of fear of attack, local efforts to hunt down the crocodiles soon made them all but extinct in Taninim Stream. As a result, there was widespread dismay when in 1912 a German tourist encountered a giant reptile – although this one was definitively the last survivor of the Zerka's glorious crocodile dynasty. An avowed nature lover, the German made sure the croc was well and truly dead before dragging the body to Jerusalem to be stuffed by the father of taxidermy in the Holy Land, Father Ernst Schmitz. Keen students of biology can still see it on display



When not occupied by his duties as chief engineer of Ottoman Jerusalem from 1854 to 1861, Ermete Pierotti was involved in the first archaeological excavations in the Holy Land. Portrait of Pierotti by Mendel John Diness, Jerusalem's first professional photographer
Courtesy of Harvard Fine Arts Library

at Schmidt Girls' College, opposite the Old City's Damascus Gate, where it's one of the highlights of the institution's mounted animal collection.

So ends the story of the crocodiles of Taninim Stream. All that's left of them is the name of the river (the Israeli equivalent of Crocodile Creek) and a few legends. Though the crocs have been replaced by lizards and the odd chameleon, Taninim Nature Reserve remains a delightful place to visit, especially now that it's maintained by the Israel Parks Authority. Don't miss the impressive system of dams and aqueducts built by the Romans and improved by the Holy Land's many subsequent rulers, right up until today. □



Tamar Hayardeni

A licensed tour guide and research fellow at the Ben-Zvi Institute, Hayardeni has also authored several children's books

Handy Info



Where to Eat

► Agenda

Paz gas station, Caesarea Junction
Kosher, dairy, 053-944-4000

► Koya

13 Ha-shoham Street, Caesarea
Industrial Park
Kosher, meat, (04) 627-3005

► Tartine

6 Ha-meyasdim Street, Binyamina
Kosher, dairy, (04) 618-0926



Don't Miss

► Rothschild Memorial Gardens

Access from Route 652, between
Zikhron Yaakov and Binyamina
Open Sunday–Thursday 8 am–4 pm,
Friday 8 am–2 pm
(04) 629-8111, free entry

► Caesarea National Park

Off Route 2, near Caesarea and Kibbutz
Sedot Yam
Open Sunday–Thursday 8 am–6 pm,
Friday 8 am–4 pm
(04) 626-7080, entrance fee

► Orot Rabin Power Station

Visitors' center, audiovisual
presentation, and tour
Exit Route 2 at Caesarea Junction
By appointment only
076-864-4333, free entry