Handbook of Postcolonial Archaeology

Jane Lydon, Uzma Z. Rizvi

Near Eastern Archaeology: Imperial Pasts, Postcolonial Presents, and the Possibilities of a Decolonized Future

Publication details

Benjamin W. Porter
Published online on: 31 Oct 2010
Archaeological research in what is commonly known as the “Near East” or “Middle East” began in the late 18th century, when European explorers fanned out through the region following Napoleon’s 1798 Egyptian campaigns. Although made up of an assortment of archaeologists and explorers, historians, and philologists, the collective discipline that emerged over the 19th and 20th centuries now bears the title “Near Eastern Archaeology.” Like archaeological practice around the world, Near Eastern archaeology often played a role in European and North American imperial and colonialist enterprises in the region, in part due to Western fascination with the “Land of the Bible.” Currently, the region’s nation-states manage their own antiquities, often using them to construct narratives that legitimate postcolonial circumstances. However, despite more than a half-century of independent control, decolonization of archaeological practices has only recently begun in this region.

The Near East is not so much a place to be located on a map as a discursive formation consisting of assemblages of ideas, peoples, and things fixed in the minds of scholars. Discovering a collective geographic term for the area under review is therefore a difficult and unsolvable problem. The term “Near East,” like related terms “Middle East” and the French-inspired “Levant,” have their origins in late 19th- and early 20th-century European military nomenclature for the region (Keddie 1973). Such terms have largely surpassed earlier labels such as the “Orient” and now dominate North American and European discourse. Some archaeologists working in the United Kingdom have adopted perceived neutral categories such as “Western Asia” or “Southwestern Asia” in their research. These terms have overtaken older indigenous
designations such as the Arabic *mashriq*, or, “eastern part of the Arab world,” and *bilad ash-sham*, or “province of Damascus,” and replaced them with translations of the “Middle East” into Arabic *ash-sharq al-'awsat* and Hebrew *ha-mizrakh ha-tikhon*. These earlier and relatively emic terms more accurately account for the area under discussion in this chapter (Naccache 1992: 6–7).

Like the discipline’s cartography, its chronologies have often been organized according to external, rather than internal, factors that impacted social life in antiquity. Three distinct chronological taxonomies have tended to dominate. The most general version divides the study of the region’s human occupation into prehistory and history. A second taxonomy divides Classical and pre-Classical periods, classifying the latter according to the appearance of technologies such as stone (Palaeolithic), copper (Chalcolithic), bronze, and iron into the region. A third schema segments historical eras into three exclusive periods that rarely overlap in academic discussions: an ancient period from the fourth millennium B.C.E. to Alexander the Great’s campaigns in 333 B.C.E.; a Classical period spanning the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine empires’ occupation; and an Islamic period beginning with the introduction of Islam in the 7th century and continuing until World War I. In this last taxonomy, smaller time periods are established according to whichever local or foreign imperial power dominated the region: e.g., Akkadian, Hellenistic, or Crusader. Rarely are chronologies defined according to local historical or cultural developments in antiquity, and when they are, scholars often apply blanket ethnic labels such as “Canaanite” and “Israelite” with little critical thought. Although archaeological research in prehistoric and Islamic periods has increased in recent decades, the discipline has traditionally focused on ancient and Classical periods.

### Histories and Historiographies of Near Eastern Archaeology

Near Eastern archaeology’s vision of itself is apparent in the many disciplinary histories its practitioners have produced. The subjects of these historical projects have ranged from hagiographic biographies (Running and Freedman 1975), to intellectual (Davis 2004; Moorey 1991), excavation (Blakely and Toombs 1980), and institutional histories (King 1983), the last of which organizes actors and their contributions according to nationality such as “American” and “French” (Drinkard et al. 1988) and schools of thought (e.g., “Albright” and “Chicago”). These disciplinary histories, however, have not critically examined how pervasive ideas about race, culture, politics, and language come to inform archaeologists’ claims about the region’s history and society. Not until Silberman’s 1982 publication of *Digging for God and Country* and his 1989 follow-up, *Between Past and Present: Archaeology, Ideology, and Nationalism in the Middle East*, did a more critical period of reflection arise. The last decade has seen the publication of additional studies that investigate, critique, and...
sometimes counter the extent to which Near Eastern archaeologists participated in 19th- and 20th-century colonialist enterprises. Primary sources for such studies include travelers’ accounts, photographs, memoirs, excavation field notes, and interviews both published and archived in universities, foundations, museums, and research centers in the Middle East, Europe, and North America. While some consideration has been paid to Iraq (Abdi 2008; Bernhardsson 2005; Goode 2007; Larsen 1989, 1996), Iran (Abdi 2001; Goode 2007; Majd 2003), Jordan (Corbett 2009), and Turkey (Goode 2007; Shaw 2003), and very little to Syria and Lebanon (but see Naccache 1998), the state of Israel and Palestine have received the most attention (Abu El-Haj 2001; Davies 1992; Kletter 2006; Steen 2002; Whitelam 1995).

These disciplinary histories have drawn attention to three distinct eras when Near Eastern archaeology played an instrumental role in advancing imperial, colonial, or postcolonial objectives. The first period spans the end of the 18th through the early 20th centuries, the final century of Ottoman imperial rule. During these decades, European and North American diplomacy, pilgrimage, and settlement increased in coastal ports like Jaffa and Beirut, and in urban centers such as Aleppo, Damascus, and Jerusalem. Explorers such as Paul-Émile Botta and Austen Henry Layard in Iraq and Edward Robinson in Palestine conducted early excavations, and, in the case of Botta and Layard, brought physical evidence of early “civilizations” back to European museums, in turn stimulating further interest in the region’s ancient societies. Layard’s discovery of Ashurbanipal’s library and, in particular, an account of a catastrophic flood similar to that described in Genesis 6:9 were sensational discoveries widely reported in the European press. No undertaking would be bigger, however, than the Palestine Exploration Fund’s Survey of Western Palestine, a multi-year survey of the region’s ancient remains, as well as its contemporary peoples and infrastructure (Figure 3.1) (Conder and

Figure 3.1 The Palestine Exploration Fund’s Survey of Western Palestine was a multi-year survey of the region’s ancient remains as well as its contemporary peoples. Here, a surveyor and local assistant measure distances from a fixed point (1925, courtesy of the Palestine Exploration Fund).
Kitchner 1881; Moscrop 2000; Watson 1915). Not only did these maps and descriptions assist archaeological research for the next several decades, they also were an important resource for the British military during World War I. The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries saw the first systematic excavations at sites such as Nippur, Carchemish, and Tell el-Hesi. Excavation projects were often supported by recently established foreign research institutes such as the American Schools of Oriental Research, now the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem, and universities such as the Syrian Protestant College, now the American University in Beirut, and the Jesuit-run Université Saint-Joseph. Intellectual trends during this period dwelled on theories of race, oriental despotism, biblical history, and the divergent legacies of Classic and Near Eastern civilizations.

The end of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire ushered in the second era: a three-decade-long British Mandate of Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan and the French Mandate of Lebanon and Syria. Now that archaeologists were no longer beholden to Ottoman authorities, the region witnessed a surge in excavations. The exploration of regions that were previously too volatile for foreigners was now possible (Glueck 1940). Colonial powers established government offices to manage this increased activity. Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem saw the construction of museums that stored and displayed excavated artifacts. This period also saw interests in chronological foci diverge; while British and North American scholars remained interested in biblical archaeology, the French concentrated on Classical-period remains in Syria and Lebanon. Prehistoric and Mesopotamian archaeology, however, attracted interest from scholars regardless of national affiliation. Despite the social and ethnic unrest that marked this second era, so-called biblical archaeologists consider this time their “golden age” due to the flourishing of excavations in Palestine and the intense intellectual debates over the origins and nature of biblical societies (Moorey 1991: 54–78).

Although notions of Jewish and Arab nationalism and their imagined connections to more historically remote societies began earlier, these sentiments would not see full expression until the third era, with the dismantling of European empires, the withdrawal of colonial powers, and the establishment of the region’s modern nation-states. At their inception, these new states inherited the laws, institutions, and museums established previously under colonial rule, and foreign researchers were now required to seek permission from government officials. The need to train indigenous archaeologists to manage these antiquities arose, and undergraduate and graduate curricula were instituted in universities. Excavations at Hazor in Israel and Tall Mazar in Jordan trained indigenous archaeologists in excavation methods, sometimes with the assistance of Western scholars. Departments of antiquities, universities, museums, and research institutions published periodicals in Arabic, Hebrew, and European languages. Besides excavation, archaeology was charged with developing antiquity sites for tourism,
an initiative that would grow to become an important revenue generator for these young countries.

Despite this thriving archaeological infrastructure, the intellectual concerns of indigenous archaeologists closely mirror those of their Western counterparts, stressing culture history, subsistence practices, and social evolution. Such similarities can be explained, in part, by the fact that scholars from Arabic-speaking countries are often trained in European, North American, and Australian graduate programs and then return to fill university and high-ranking government posts. However, the situation in Israel is different, as almost all Israeli archaeologists receive training in Israeli graduate programs where, at times, European and North American scholars also seek training.

The role that archaeological evidence has played in national narratives that create justifications for these contemporary states has differed in each country and across time, making generalizations impossible (Meskell 1998; Silberman 1989). In Israel, archaeological evidence associated with the First (ca. 1000–580 B.C.E.) and Second (500 B.C.E.–approximately 200 C.E.) Temple periods has played an active and at times controversial role in national narratives. The dominant paradigm argued that archaeological research provided substantial evidence for an ancient Israelite kingdom closely resembling the Hebrew Bible’s description (Yadin 1972). Such affirmations resonate with some Israelis as well as with the Jewish diaspora and North American Christians who support the country. For some, the claim that an ancient antecedent existed not only proves the biblical account, but also lends legitimacy to the State of Israel’s existence. But recent reflections on past research as well as new excavations have challenged these assumptions (Davies 1992; Finkelstein and Silberman 2001; Whitelam 1995). The arguments vary in nature, but most suggest that archaeologists have overstated the evidence for an Israelite kingdom, while some challenge the extent to which evidence can be securely dated to a particular century. While this debate has produced heated conversations and at times unprofessional behavior that has spilled out of the ivory tower and into the public square, it has also led scholars to reflect on the methods they use to prove their claims. One consequence has been a movement away from relative ceramic chronologies and toward absolute dating methods such as carbon-14 (Levy and Higham 2005). Despite these shifts toward new dating techniques, the argument over the extent and nature of ancient Israel is far from settled.

The use of archaeology in national narratives has been relatively unsteady elsewhere in the region. For example, limited attempts to base Lebanese nationalism on “Phoenicianism” slowly died out, making archaeology a peripheral concern in national identity. In Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, archaeology was used to provide qutri (regional) histories that demonstrated the historical logic of the new national borders largely drawn by colonial administrators. At the same time, these works countered appeals to Arab national unity that were popular in the 1950s and 1960s, which depended more on a shared Islamic history.
than on any archaeological remains. This relative dearth of local and national writings about the past has created a situation whereby local and national categories and chronologies are informed by Western research.

Decolonizing Near Eastern Archaeology

Despite the dominant role that nation-states play in managing archaeological resources, there are several signs that archaeological practice, frameworks, narratives, sites, and artifacts no longer rest strictly in the hands of nation-states. The enormous challenges that government agencies face in management and funding make it impossible to govern a nation’s archaeological resources systematically, especially during periods of conflict and social upheaval in countries such as Iraq and Lebanon. These discrepancies in management open up spaces for individuals and groups to participate in archaeological discourse and practices. At times, this participation can lead to site destruction and subsistence looting, as was seen with the breakdown of the Iraqi government during the 2003 United States invasion (Emberling and Hanson 2008) and the clandestine destruction of archaeological remains during the rebuilding of downtown Beirut by the private construction firm Solidaire (Naccache 1996, 1998).

There are, however, more productive examples where communities and nongovernmental organizations are actively managing cultural properties. One recent and well-documented instance has been the work of the Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange (PACE), a nonprofit organization located in the West Bank dedicated to preserving Palestinian heritage. One 2004 initiative saw a campaign to raise the public’s awareness of the damages that nearby antiquity sites were experiencing due to a lack of management (Yahya 2002). These efforts led to multiple coordinated projects in which communities cleaned and secured archaeological sites (Figure 3.2). Structures in danger of collapse were buttressed with temporary materials in preparation for more professional conservation measures. While some critics may see such initiatives as symptomatic of neoliberal practices, where fledgling government agencies consequently bring nongovernment groups to perform the role of the state, these moments, at the same time, open up opportunities for indigenous communities to interact with and craft their own narratives about the archaeological resources in their midst. Whether or not these narratives coexist, complement, or conflict with alternative “scientific” and “nationalist” narratives requires scrutiny of local circumstances.

The recognizable differences between state-sponsored and local narratives of the past are a second symptom that decolonization is occurring. The looting of the Baghdad Museum and the illegal sale of artifacts on the antiquities market indicate the extent to which ordinary Iraqis believed themselves unassociated with the nation-state or its projected past. But these alternatives can be subtler as well. In their work in Central Jordan, Jacobs and Porter (2009) have recognized differences between na-
tional and local discourse concerning notions of “history” and “heritage.” While the kingdom promotes a national heritage that includes more than the last 5,000 years of history, concentrating mainly on Nabataean, Classical, and early Islamic remains, local communities instead dwell on the recent past, beginning in the mid-18th century C.E., as some communities believe that groups before this time share no biological or cultural connections with contemporary Jordanian society. These local sentiments about the past are expressed in language and material culture, as well as in performances in community festivals.

Despite the growing role that the public is playing today in crafting alternative discourses about the past, it is still difficult to identify attempts by scholars based in the region that explore alternative, even subaltern, histories and archaeologies that challenge dominant Western or state-sponsored paradigms. Naccache’s writings on ancient Amorites stand as rare examples of an attempt to explore alternative frameworks for understanding ancient Near Eastern societies (Naccache 1992). In fact, scholars working in Western institutions have taken the lead in decolonizing the discipline, emphasizing themes of alterity, gender, communalism, and non-elites in their research (Pollock and Bernbeck 2005). The consequences of this trend are that non-native scholars continue to guide research agendas in the region as they have for the last two centuries.

Figure 3.2. Under the supervision of PACE, Palestinians clean Mar Ubadia, an ancient church located in the Palestinian village of Aboud. The German Fund for Palestinian non-governmental organizations provided funding for this project (Courtesy of PACE archives).
Today, Near Eastern archaeology finds itself at a critical juncture. Its origins in imperial and colonialis t practices need not dictate the future course of the discipline. Having recognized its problematic role in past colonial and imperial enterprises, and at the same time, the power that archaeological research has to shape contemporary identities, some practitioners are grappling with a way forward. Collaborations among archaeologists, government and non-government agencies, and local communities offer one framework for moving ahead that empowers a variety of stakeholders in the process. Whether or not such moves will create a space for alternative narratives that challenge dominant archaeological paradigms is, for now, too early to judge.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Albert Naccache, Matthew Rutz, and Kevin McGeough for their feedback while writing this essay. The ideas expressed here remain the author’s alone.

Note

1. In this discussion, emphasis is placed on research in modern Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey. This is not to ignore Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the countries lining the Persian Gulf. The history of archaeological research in these countries has received limited attention and calls for further investigation.

References


