

## CHAPTER 2

# Do Communities Have a Role in Community Archaeology in Jordan?

Maria Elena Ronza

*Sela for Training and Protection of Heritage, Jordan*

### Abstract

Within the past 30 years, community archaeology worldwide has worked to address ethical concerns raised by the colonial nature of traditional archaeological missions, and over the past 20 years, Jordan has witnessed a transformation of this colonial enterprise in the rise of community archaeology as a discipline. Unfortunately, this transformation has occurred in the appearance but very often not in the substance. This chapter discusses how archaeology and colonialism are closely intertwined in Jordan, and how such a relationship is fuelled by a culture of welfarism that traps host communities in a vicious cycle brokered by non-governmental organisations that alienates them from their own heritage. The chapter aims to initiate a discussion around the role and voice of host community in archaeology and how community archaeology could contribute to transforming the status quo.

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## **Introduction**

Within the past 30 years, community archaeology worldwide has worked to address ethical concerns raised by the colonial nature of traditional archaeological missions, and over the past 20 years Jordan has witnessed a transformation of this colonial enterprise in the rise of community archaeology as a discipline.

Unfortunately, this transformation has occurred in the appearance but very often not in the substance. This chapter discusses how archaeology and colonialism are closely intertwined in Jordan, and how such a relationship is fuelled by a culture of welfareism that traps the host communities in a vicious cycle brokered by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that alienates them from their own heritage. The chapter aims to initiate a discussion around the role and voice of host community in archaeology and how community archaeology could contribute to transforming the status quo.

## **The Role of Archaeology in Perpetuating the Colonial Legacy in Jordan**

Archaeology and colonialism are strictly intertwined (Hingley 2013; Sorrentino 2014, 156; Spurr 1993, 57). Trigger (1984, 356–63) suggests a connection between archaeological practices and ‘the role of nation states ... as interdependent parts of the modern world-system’, and, with his definitions of archaeology as nationalist, colonialist and imperialist, he draws a direct connection between archaeology and the national and international policies of nation states. Archaeological practices in south-west Asia (the ‘Middle’ or ‘Near East’) have indeed played a pivotal role in perpetuating colonial practices well into the twentieth century, and have ignited the process of the dispossession and alienation of host communities from their own past (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019; Hingley 2013; Mickel 2019).

However, Hamilakis (2008, 274) argues that Trigger's definition of colonial archaeology does not take into account the complexity and diversity of the colonial experience. Building on this argument, Hingley (2013) introduces the concept of 'colonial archaeologies' that have common motifs marked by the colonial discourse, which created 'a judgmental and often a patronising attitude to the rights, lands, ancestors, and possessions of the peoples that were colonized'. In a quite pragmatic way, archaeology in Jordan has until recently been – with notable exceptions – quite forthrightly a colonial enterprise, implemented by foreigners, mostly European and North American professionals, who invest time and money in extracting raw data, then return to their institutions to process and add value to it, to build their own careers (if not fortunes).

The Western academic system rewards these intellectual entrepreneurs for mentoring a new generation of foreign professionals, who apprentice, often for very low wages, in order to enter the guild and perpetuate the system (Addison and Ronza 2018). Foreign-led excavations and cultural heritage projects are in fact pivotal stakeholders in the archaeological scene in Jordan – indeed significantly responsible for the status quo (Addison and Ronza 2018; Corbett and Ronza 2022; Mickel 2019). Too often, foreigners working in Jordan are totally detached from the complex realities of the state and community in which their sites are situated. Too often, the opportunity to grasp local voices, to engage with local academics and to become ambassadors for the host communities is missed and lost (Addison and Ronza 2018).

Archaeological research in Jordan, and in general in southwest Asia, has its roots in the early nineteenth century's biblical archaeology, researching evidence that could substantiate the historicity of the Bible, and in the investigation of the 'classical' past (spanning, in this region, from Hellenism to the late Roman/Byzantine period). Archaeological research has often foregrounded the magnificent narration of empires (especially those belonging to the 'classical' past), versus the minor narration of a local culture which observes and adapts to the great march of those empires

– and the study of this adaptation has often been the domain of anthropology (Trigger 1984, 360). Still today, interpretations of sites by archaeologists overwhelmingly tend to focus on a particular segment of the past, without reference to more recent narratives – including those of communities surrounding the site.

The archaeological site of Petra in the south of Jordan and its community, the Bdoul, stand as a paradigm of such a dichotomy. Petra was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list in 1985 and the Beduoin community, the Bdoul, that used to live in the caves at the archaeological site, were evicted from their homes and resettled in a newly built village (Angel 2011, 10). This ‘resolution’ highlights the unresolved contradiction between the living, evolving nature of the heritage through the continuity of the past into the present and a quest for its safeguarding that aims to preserve it from the people of the present – the host community – that represent this continuity. The Eurocentric approach to history has for centuries shaped the narration of the past by historians and archaeologists (Davis 2013, 36–37). Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi (2019, 94) suggest that archaeology, as developed in the West, is ‘a complex matrix of ... philosophy, history, science, technology’ that, in the Jordanian post-colonial context, has been selectively applied to fragment the past to foster a connection with European cultures. This approach has resulted in a dichotomy between the complex multidisciplinary approach to the biblical and ‘classical’ past, and a more pragmatic, descriptive and often dismissive approach to the past of the host communities.

In this regard, it is interesting to consider an abstract from the 2019 Petra Management Plan (UNESCO 2019, 9) that implies a juxtaposition between heritage conservation and safeguarding the local community’s livelihood and conveys a passive image of the local community:

PDTRA [The Petra Development and Tourist Regional Authority] is committed to protecting the unique World Heritage Site of Petra while ensuring tourists enjoy its marvels and safeguarding the livelihoods of the local community.

Compare this with an abstract from the 2017 Durham Management Plan (Durham WHS Coordinating Committee 2017, 8) that highlights the active role of the community:

Durham Castle and Cathedral World Heritage Site aims to be a welcoming and inclusive place with a vibrant community which takes its inspiration from its past, whilst planning for a sustainable future and striking an effective and creative balance between a place to live, work, worship, learn and visit.

It is important to note that Durham in the UK was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 1986 – one year after Petra – and one of the criteria for its inscription was the continuity of use, which is listed in the section on authenticity on the UNESCO World Heritage Centre website.

### **Public Archaeology and the Discourse around Identity and Narratives**

In recent decades, the rising interest in exploring and narrating not only the history of empires but also that of local populations has underscored the fact that there are many possible narrations of the past. Thanks to an increasing number of ethnographic projects focusing on host communities' narratives – and thanks also to the establishment of the World Archaeological Congress in 1986 – the academic world has become more and more aware of the relativity of history and of its continuity into the present. Awareness has also increased of how a preferred Eurocentric view of the past has dominated historical narration for many years, and of how local perspectives on the past have too often been ignored (Abu-Khafajah and Badran 2015; Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019; Davis 2013).

For the last three decades, a newfound interest in multiple narratives has accelerated the rise and growth of public archaeology worldwide. Public archaeology is defined and labelled in different ways across various kinds of projects and in different countries (LaBianca, Ronza and Harris 2020, 649; Mickel and Knodell

2015), but it is built on one common feature: the engagement of the public (for a discussion about the concept of ‘public’ see Matsuda 2004). With the increasing engagement of the public and growing interest in multiple narratives, the discourse around cultural identity and its connection to contemporary political geography becomes particularly relevant (Abu-Khafajah and Badran 2015, 106). Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 6–9) examine this connection and the concept of identity in relation to communities – as a cluster of interactions – and in relation to a locality – as a demarcated physical space.

This discourse is relevant in post-colonial south-west Asia, and particularly in Jordan, where the political geography is the result of the colonial past of the region. LaBianca, Ronza and Harris (2020) explain how these complex relations are relevant with regard to finding a way to narrate the past at one particular Jordanian site, namely Tall Hisban. In confronting the different perspectives on the past as conceived by different stakeholders, LaBianca et al. postulate the existence of four different pasts: a *desired past*, a *contested past*, a *forbidden past* and a *propaganda past*. To overcome this conflicted situation, LaBianca et al. propose to narrate the site using ahistorical narratives, ‘in the sense that they are concerned more with the underlying dynamics of cultural and historical change and therefore not focused exclusively on one or another particular historical past’ (LaBianca, Ronza and Harris 2020, 661–64). The authors (2020, 664) report that ‘these narratives/explanations have been shared with the local residents of Hisban and they have been welcomed. And as they are grand narratives of sorts, their great merit is that they focus attention on our common concerns as humans’. The approach of LaBianca et al., which draws its inspiration from global history, prioritises notions of a collective deterritorialised identity (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 9–10). By switching the discourse towards global history, territoriality becomes less relevant as the focus is directed to larger phenomena and how each *local history* has contributed to them.

Nevertheless, the approach of global history is not a matter of scale but rather one of connections (Douki and Minard 2007, 11). Conrad (2016, 64) defines global history as a methodological approach to history that focuses on connections and the ways that they influence and determine structural transformations on a global scale. Therefore, global history is ‘inherently relational’, simultaneous and integrated (Conrad 2016, 65–66). Within this perspective, a participatory approach is pivotal to the development of a global narrative. Global history ‘experiment[s] with alternative notions of space’ (Conrad 2016, 65), but while the identification between culture and places becomes increasingly irrelevant, the accessibility of the global narrative becomes increasingly important (Ghobrial 2019). But even at this global scale, local accessibility and participation is subjected to a persistent colonial legacy in the post-colonial world we live in. This happens because the mobility of people – and consequently their access to culture and information – is regulated by policies that are influenced by colonial ties and are directly linked to economic independence (Anderson 2013).

### **How the Aid Industry Shapes the Colonial Present**

Colonial relations are still shaping the contemporary world with new modalities which represent the transformation and perpetuation of these relations (Hallward 2013; Hingley 2013). What emerges as a constant within these transformed relations of power is the existence of a *vulnerable other* in need of guidance and support (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019; Hallward 2013; Sharp 2013). Archaeology and cultural heritage projects in Jordan, and generally in south-west Asia, are not exempted from this rhetoric that fosters a patronising attitude towards the host communities. Mickel (2021, 17) documents how over the last two centuries, community members in the Middle East have been mostly involved in the manual fieldwork of archaeology but absent from the scholarly activity of recording, processing and analysing the

archaeological materials. Furthermore, Mickel (2021, 93) reports that archaeological workers in Petra ‘portray an archaeological industry that rewards those who claim not to have archaeological expertise and present themselves as less knowledgeable than they are’ and introduces the concept of *lucrative non-knowledge*, which immediately recalls the image of a vulnerable other. Lucrative non-knowledge is characteristic not only of archaeology but also of cultural heritage management and tourism. In Petra, for example, since resettlement, the Bdoul have gone from utilising tourism as a means of continuing their semi-nomadic existence to undergoing the pressure of the expectations of international tourists to live the ‘genuine Bedouin experience’ (Angel 2011).

The passage from colonial archaeological exploitation to the contemporary rhetoric of development projects aiming to transform cultural heritage into a product (mostly through mass tourism) has been shaped largely by the predominance of foreign institutions, practices and cultural assumptions (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019; Addison and Ronza 2018; Corbett and Ronza 2022). Even if development projects call for job creation, capacity-building and community engagement, they are nested within the larger patronage system of the aid industry, which creates and fuels a culture of welfarism in which the condition of vulnerability of the other constitutes the foundation of the new aid-driven order (Sharp 2013). This practice deepens the gap between donors and beneficiaries, resulting in a situation in which no one acts as a genuine stakeholder (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019), but in which both contribute to the status quo. Such a status quo, which all too often aims to perpetuate economic and cultural dependency without empowering local residents either to advocate for themselves or to build sustainable income, is well represented by Freire’s (2005, 45) definition of ‘false charity’. Freire affirms that false charity is nourished by an unjust social order, which constitutes the fount of the oppressors’ generosity that perpetuates the injustice in order to force the oppressed to continuously extend their hand.

Can community archaeology invert this continuing trend of attempting to overcome the colonial past by pouring money into the countries that once were colonies?

### **Towards a Decolonised Future**

Community archaeology projects have the potential to unleash an *unlearning* process by involving host communities in the management of their heritage and in the definition of the narrative associated with it (Davis 2013, 41–42). In particular, archaeological sites are meaningful to communities as the tangible representations of their past; by fostering an active engagement with the heritage, new collective memories related to the site will enhance the bonding potential that that heritage could play within such communities.

Nevertheless, many community archaeology projects in Jordan, and elsewhere, are promoted, supported and led by foreign bodies (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019, 101). Where this is the case, notions of the vulnerable other persist. Thus, host communities are assumed to be in continuous need of guidance and support to even be able to appreciate and understand their own heritage. Within this scenario, the power lies in the monopoly of knowledge (Gaventa and Cornwall 2019, 122–23) in the hands of a limited number of experts who produce this knowledge, who determine what is useful and relevant knowledge, and who regulate access to it.

Hollowell and Nicholas (2009, 143) define the work of decolonisation as ‘the taking back of control over what others have defined as a community’s relationship to the past in the present – i.e., its “heritage” – and the representation, interpretation, and caretaking of this heritage – i.e., its “management”’. In this perspective, community-based participatory research (CBPR) can modify the dynamics of power by granting local access to decision-making. The approach of global history, with its attention to multiple narratives, can accelerate this process by enabling communities to construct their own knowledge and determine what is relevant

knowledge. Power-sharing as the underlying principle of CBPR (Atalay 2010, 420) redefines the role of the researcher but also the identification of the community as the other. CBPR projects have the potential to influence social capital.

Archaeologists and heritage professionals on the front lines of engaging with host communities would do well to be reminded of Putnam's (1995) notion of social capital. As reported by Leenders (2018, 1763) in the *Encyclopedia of Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 'Social capital ... refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and reciprocity, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.'

Being mindful that Jordanian society is strongly based on trust, reciprocity, and many written and unwritten norms aimed at maintaining social order, community-based archaeology could serve as an incubator for building social capital by giving new centrality to the heritage discourse within the daily life of the communities. Jordanian communities, and specifically those in rural and semi-rural areas, can be described as 'dense social networks' (Coleman 1988, S102–S103) and therefore are more likely to produce social capital in the short term. Cultivating and building this social capital is at the core of community-based archaeology and fosters the active engagement and participation of the community in heritage management, as opposed to the 'aid-induced, NGO-brokered passivity' (Hallward 2013, 290) imposed by the donor culture. Over the past two decades, Jordan, and south-west Asia in general, has witnessed an increasing number of projects that have pursued a participatory approach. Andrews University's project at Tall Hisban in Jordan is an excellent example of such a transformation. Over the past 25 years, the archaeological mission, which started in the late sixties as the Heshbon expedition searching for the 'biblical past', has fostered a grassroots approach to the investigation, narration, presentation and management of the archaeological site by initiating several collaborations with local stakeholders, including numerous local civil society organisations, the municipality, schools and others (LaBianca and Ronza

2018, 624–25). Several other projects in Jordan have fostered a similar approach over the past two decades, such as the Dhiban Excavation and Development Project (Bailey Kutner et al. 2020) and ‘Our future, our past, all together in Faynan’, led by the University of Reading and Petra University (Mithen and al Namari 2022).

Even if the majority of these projects are still led and/or funded by foreign missions and institutions, new collaborations with local public and private actors are fostering in the host communities a shared sense of ownership of the past and heritage that is a form of social capital to invest in.

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