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Source: *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Winter, 1995, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter, 1995), pp. 48-59

Published by: University of California Press on behalf of the Institute for Palestine Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2537733>

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CULTURAL BIAS IN THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF PALESTINE

ALBERT GLOCK

“ . . . there is no great harm in a little honest prejudice. It may at least stimulate the wiser judgment of those critics who are devoid of bias.”
—Mortimer Wheeler.¹

One of the positive developments in archaeology in recent years is the increasing awareness of the role of “bias.” I am not referring here to “operational bias”—the way in which natural and cultural forces (e.g., climate and sediment cover, the presence or absence of scavenging living communities) distort the archaeological record.² Rather, I want to discuss the cultural bias of the archaeologist that distorts our understanding of the past.

The cultural and academic soul-searching in the Anglo-American West in recent years has confessed to numerous distortions in the archaeological record traceable directly to the political and economic interests of those who paid the research bills.³ Donning the finery of scholarly “objectivity,” archaeologists and historians—comfortable with their inherited values—disconnected blacks, aborigines, and native

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Journal of Palestine Studies XXIV, no. 2 (Winter 1995), pp. 48-59.

Americans from the achievements of their respective pasts in order to continue their own domination of the present.⁴

Despite the new awareness, the impact of the colonial period on the archaeology of regions with alien rulers has been insufficiently studied. Even more important, in regions where archaeology has been taken over by the people whose past is under investigation, little has been done to examine the differences between the old and new styles of archaeology or the problems resulting from the adoption of an academic skill developed elsewhere. My aim here is to explore the difference it makes to the archaeology of a region when its own people are in charge.

In general terms, bias is produced by uneven sampling of total data possibilities. Translated into the practical terms of field archaeologists, this means that we excavate and save only what we think is important. Further, it is only what we save that we analyze, classify, and describe—and this only in the terms that we inherit. Our interpretation thus limits new data to answering old questions. The result is often little more than a quantitative expansion of knowledge and the perpetuation and perhaps deepening of bias as an acquired scholarly tradition. The conviction that archaeology is above politics—a conviction most effectively transmitted by the charismatic scholar for whom bias may be an operational problem but certainly not a cultural, much less a political one—makes complete the loss of awareness that the ethnocentrism and political interests of the investigator produce bias in archaeology.

Does this mean that the archaeologist should have no ethnic identity or political agenda when working in the field and attempting to be “scientific”? My contention is that it is impossible *not* to be biased. Bias is an inescapable academic reality, but it can be made useful by harnessing it to serve the needs of the people whose past is being investigated and whose cultural self-understanding is at stake. In order to do so, however, bias must be both explicit and controlled, which means that we must first be aware of it.

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I shall attempt to illustrate bias in site selection, data collection, and interpretation. Most of my illustrations will come from Palestine where, according to Mortimer Wheeler, “more sins have probably been committed in the name of archaeology than on any commensurate portion of the earth’s surface . . . [an] unflinching source of cautionary examples.”⁵

Bias in Site Selection

It has been asserted that bias in selecting what site to excavate and what problem to research is a function of an intellectual agenda created by the ruling elite in support of its own cultural, political, religious, and socioeconomic interests.⁶ I submit that there will be a measurable distance between the agenda of socially conscious archaeologists working on their own past cultural traditions and the agenda developed by scholars in a foreign country serving an alien social or academic need.⁷ The history of excavation in Palestine provides a good example.

Palestine is a small land, 10,800 square miles under the British Mandate. As of 1944, 2,048 abandoned sites and tells⁸ had been registered as protected monuments. There were also at the time 1,051 living villages, many of them built on ancient sites. By the end of the Mandate, 3,780 antiquity sites had been recorded.⁹

Apart from salvage excavations, most of the major expeditions in Palestine not only focused on biblical sites (the more than 600 settlements mentioned in the Bible) but were directed by archaeologists from England, Europe, or the United States. Even though mostly Christian, they can hardly be said to have represented the Arab Christians (10 percent of the population in 1922), though perhaps they did represent a very small fraction of the Jewish population. The almost 80 percent of the population that was Muslim Arab, most of whom had been rooted in Palestine for centuries and whose cultural traditions were visible everywhere, were represented in the archaeological ventures only by uneducated laborers who assumed that the foreigners were unsuccessful in their search for gold.

Since the middle of our century, the Palestinians' cultural connection with the past has deteriorated significantly. More than half of their villages have been razed, their inhabitants made refugees. Towns for immigrant colonists have replaced the destroyed villages. One of the depopulated villages left more or less standing (Lifta, near Jerusalem), presumed to be on the site of the biblical Mei Neftoah, is being restored by an Israeli government agency as a natural history and study center emphasizing the Jewish connection with the soil of Palestine.¹⁰

It is clear that the story communicated by the winners is heavily biased, filtering out the unwelcome "noise" of the vanquished. If it is true that the cultural heritage of a land belongs to all its inhabitants, it would seem to follow that the task of excavating, interpreting, and presenting the archaeological evidence of the past should fall to agencies less eager than governments to defend claims to legitimacy. Such tasks could be entrusted to university scholars representing the diversity of living cultural traditions in any one land, while governments should continue to have responsibility for protection and preservation.

It was in London that the archaeology of Palestine was launched with the establishment of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF) in June 1865. According to its founding principles, the PEF was to be scientific, nonreligious, and noncontroversial. Still, it was no accident that the centenary exhibition of the PEF at the Victoria and Albert Museum was entitled "World of the Bible," rather than "Palestine through the Ages" or the like.

Until 1925, when the first evidence of Pleistocene hominids was uncovered, all excavation focused on biblical sites of interest to Jews and Christians, whose religious attachment to Palestine generated financial support for PEF projects. The chief interest of the PEF's supporters was the illumination of biblical texts. Even the late nineteenth-century survey by Charles Warren and Claude R. Conder¹¹ of Jerusalem, a largely Muslim-built city, appears interested in the Haram al-Sharif, one of the three most sacred spaces in Islam, only to the extent that it was presumed to be the original site of the tenth century B.C. temple of Solomon rebuilt by Herod in the late first century B.C. British concerns about the authenticity of the Bible supported such excavators as William Flinders Petrie (Tall al-Hasi in 1890 and Tall al-'Ajjul, 1931-38), R.A. Stewart Macalister (Gezer in 1902-05, 1907-09), and the German Old Testament scholar Ernst Sellin (Tall Ti'innik in 1902-04, Tall al-Sultan in 1907-09, and Tall Balata in 1913-14 and 1926-27). Similarly, the interests of those who backed American excavators George Reisner and Clarence Fisher at Sebastiya (1908-10) included little that might have stimulated the cultural and historical awareness of the Muslims who had dominated Palestine for the past 1,300 years.

Since 1925, the interest of excavators has broadened only slightly. A few Islamic sites or strata have been excavated and published, but none with the care required even to date the ceramics with certainty. No site of the 400-year Ottoman period preceding the British Mandate has been excavated, with the possible exception of our own work at Ti'innik (1985-87). There can be no doubt that this hiatus is a function of the foreign excavators' strong cultural bias against the Muslim tradition. The negative view of the native population, reflected in the accounts of pilgrims since the fourth century A.D., reached its apogee in the nineteenth-century travel writings that emphasized the duplicity of the inhabitants and the squalor of their living conditions.¹²

Archaeology has been allowed to contribute virtually nothing to the refinement, testing, or elaboration of the cultural traditions that preserved the integrity of the community in its rich diversity at least through the last millennium. If we are to preserve an understanding of Palestine's cultural history, we cannot allow the Arab people of Palestine to continue as the losers in the archaeologist's cultural conquest. Until this situation is rectified, the popular image of Palestine will be

biased by the chronological provincialism of the archaeological establishment.

Bias in Data Collection

For the field archaeologist, the “archaeological record” is the preserved and retrieved fraction of the collected data. The part that is selected—that is, observed and measured—becomes the data base. Collected evidence comprises artifacts, ecofacts, plans of architecture and installations, section drawings, photographs, and written observations systematically transferred from a stratigraphically excavated sedimentary matrix to a laboratory for further analysis and synthesis.¹³ While bias in the collection of physical evidence in excavation or survey may appear to be a function of technical competence, actually it is as culturally deliberate as site selection.

The key issue is what is selected and why. The answer to the first question is relatively straightforward. The answer to the second may reflect a variety of contingencies, but it may also indicate a limited scope in the stated aims of the excavation, which ultimately means that the reasons for selection and deselection are hidden in the implicit philosophies of archaeology at work in the individual investigator.

The research agenda is the generative force for data collection. It could be argued that the archaeology of Palestine today has several research agendas, but even a cursory review of articles in the leading journals reveals that the central trend continues to be shaped by questions arising from biblical interpretation. It is true that the recent work of young anthropologically trained archaeologists has emphasized the value of data relating to social and economic systems, but the focus of their work remains cultures of interest to biblically oriented scholarship.

The fact that the research agenda has been largely set by biblical rather than archaeological scholars can be illustrated by a listing of topics that continue to enjoy prime research time and support. Some of these are as follows:

- The development of urban and pastoral Bronze Age culture as a foil against which Israelite traditions are viewed.
- The transition between the Late Bronze and Iron Ages, the period of the formation of the twelve-tribe league called Israel, the destruction of cities, and the formation of villages presumed to be Israelite in the mountains of central Palestine.
- Distinctive artifacts and architecture of the Iron Age through the Byzantine period, presumed to represent the Israelite and later Jewish occupation of Palestine.
- Formal, macroscopic, two-dimensional studies of artifacts, especially pottery, viewed as static symbols of culture change.

It may also be illuminating to note topics that receive scant attention or are not discussed, and for which data are usually not collected:

- Studies in the background of the material culture traditions of the living Arab villages in Palestine today.
- The transition between the Byzantine and Umayyad and between the two succeeding Islamic periods; tribal boundaries and groupings as well as the nature of village life in these periods.
- The distinctive material culture traditions of the polyethnic communities that formed the population base of Palestine in most periods to the present.
- Ethnographic and technological studies of artifact groups which emphasize social and economic implications.

It is noteworthy that reexcavations, too, have focused on prima biblical sites. The aim of the reexcavations is to reevaluate earlier work and make archaeology more reliable in a scientific age, but its continued application to interpreting the biblical periods, primarily the last three millennia B.C., shows that the understanding of the purpose of Palestinian archaeology remains the same. The results of the reexcavations are often much the same as the original ones, but with clearer demonstration (compare the Marquet-Krause and Callaway excavations of the “sanctuary” Tall al-Tall) and often considerable redating (e.g., Jericho, Ti’innik, Gezer). In other cases, the data are catalogued but rarely exploited to the full, much less synthesized.

Maturation in excavation technique and greater care in observing and recording the sediments concealing artifacts and architecture bring us potentially closer to a cultural history of Palestine. There has also been some interest in intersite and intrasite settlement patterns and the history and technology of various features of the archaeological record. But the perspective from which all of this work proceeds continues to be the affirmation of a Judeo-Christian heritage that satisfies the needs of history-minded Christians and Jews, predominantly Western in origin and orientation. There is little room for Palestinian Arabs in a research agenda often motivated by the desire to connect the Israeli present to the Jewish past in Palestine. It is thus that data collection for the later periods is sparse to nonexistent: the biblical archaeologist has disinherited the Palestinian by a process of carefully selected data collection.

This work proceeds from the perspective of affirming a Judeo-Christian heritage that satisfies Western Christians and Jews. . . . There is little room for Palestinians in a research agenda motivated to connect the Israeli present to the Jewish past in Palestine.

Bias in Interpretation

In Palestine, where the Bible remains the foundation of the dominant culture's political ideology, the archaeological priority is often to relate new data to the Bible, the main focus being on success stories from the first millennium B.C. This has produced a data glut. The vast array of new data types cannot be accommodated without more flexible social constructs or more diverse interpretive scenarios. As a result, final field reports tend to contain many autonomous essays by specialists with little attempt to produce an integrated picture of a living society. Even where a summing up attempts to include results of the analyses of diverse material evidence, the view of history that dominates is essentially the "conquest" and "settlement" of alien land by a distinctive ethnic population, to the virtual exclusion of serious alternatives.¹⁴ There may be disagreement in details, but the need for broad consensus on national aims permits little tolerance for reassessment.

To illustrate the problem I would like briefly to review current interpretations of the archaeology of the thirteenth to eleventh centuries B.C. in Palestine. In biblical terms, this is the period of the Israelite "conquest" and "settlement." In archaeological terms, it is the end of Late Bronze Age II and the beginning of Iron Age I. The image of the conquest of Palestine described in the Bible long functioned in the Christian West as a powerful myth, for example in supporting the New World colonists' self-perception as "constituting a New Israel and of the Indians as Canaanites whose possessions God was delivering into their hands."¹⁵ In our more scientific times, the conquest period was the focus of the seventy-fifth anniversary symposium of the American Schools of Oriental Research held in Jerusalem in 1975.¹⁶ A decade later, in 1984, the seventieth anniversary of the Israel Exploration Society was celebrated with an International Congress on Biblical Archaeology; the first session, after general considerations of the state of biblical archaeology today, dealt with "The Israelite Settlement in Canaan."¹⁷

The Bible describes a systematic conquest of Palestine west of the Jordan River by the united tribes of Israel led by Joshua. This event presumably occurred in the late thirteenth century B.C. when, according to literary sources, there was a general collapse of preexisting social, economic, and political structures in the Eastern Mediterranean accompanied by demographic displacement. Three explanatory models are currently used to interpret the literary (mainly biblical) and archaeological evidence: conquest, immigration, and revolt.¹⁸ Conquest is the traditional view of scholars who regard the biblical story as essentially correct and who see confirmation in the collapse of Canaanite cities in the late thirteenth century.¹⁹ This view was also supported by the erroneous assumption that nomadic life on the desert edge was precarious and that there was a natural desire to settle on arable land—the so-

called conflict between the desert and the sown. Others interpret the biblical account of the “conquest” as an ahistorical ritual explanation from a later time when the land was politically unified.²⁰ Still others, drawing on sociological studies of periods of turmoil and change, find the key in the “outright rejection of the agrarian tributary system by which city-state apparatuses exacted taxes of compulsory labor, military service and in kind from their peasant subjects.”²¹

The archaeological record in this period reflects change, sometimes drastic. The evidence is always uneven and the sample is inevitably small, but this does not dampen the eagerness to identify all recently identified unfortified villages in the mountain country as Israelite.²² A few years ago it was common to hear that the four-room house, the collar-rim storejar, plastered cisterns, and field terraces were markers of Israelite villages of the twelfth to eleventh centuries B.C. Today we know that most of these markers were older or found in areas not presumed to have been occupied by Israelites: the force of new evidence has gradually brought about a revision of entrenched interpretations.

Still, what is striking is the extent to which a religious document has made demands on the interpretation of the archaeological record. To this day, there is stout resistance on the part of many archaeologists to any but the essentially literal interpretation of the biblical record. Equally striking is the intense interest the biblical record continues to generate and the vehemence with which it is discussed. This being the case, it has been suggested that archaeology will not be able to contribute an authentic picture of the cultural history of Palestine until it is independent of the biblical myth.²³

The reasons behind this shaping bias are not difficult to discern. Many Western scholars regard the Bible as an essential source of their cultural traditions.²⁴ Modern archaeology was developed within Western culture, making some of its early spectacular discoveries in the Middle East a means of strengthening the status quo by demonstrating the West’s antiquity. Palestine, especially Jerusalem, was an early focus of archaeological attention because of its importance in the Bible: never mind that 80 percent of the population was Muslim and 90 percent Arab and thus only peripherally connected with Western culture. After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing military conquests, perceived by many as fulfillment of biblical prophecy, the Bible became even more crucial than before as the source of symbolic language and deeds.²⁵ Not least among these was the “conquest” of Palestine under Joshua. The scholarly defense of the biblical story became an essential means for preserving the meaning of the cur-

The scholarly defense of the biblical story of the Israelite conquest of Canaan became an essential means for preserving the meaning of the current conquest of the land.

rent conquest of the land. Any view which diminishes the heroic stature of Joshua and his deeds was perceived as hostile.²⁶

Controlling Bias

If it is true that cultural bias distorts the real world and distortion is undesirable, and if it is also true that cultural bias is inevitable in the selection, collection, and interpretation of the archaeological record, how is it possible to deal responsibly with this “crack in the mirror”?²⁷

I have seven suggestions for controlling bias. Some are cognitive, others interactive. Recognizing the problem of bias is relatively easy; solving it requires a change of mind and behavior.²⁸ But if we are to develop a usable archaeology, the task is a necessary one.

The first step in controlling cultural bias is to acknowledge how it affects our work as archaeologists. It is much easier to reject an influence when you are aware of how it operates in yourself. Thus, for example, because I used to be a professor of Old Testament history and literature, and because I therefore know precisely the nature of the biblical categories so common in the thinking and work of archaeologists in Palestine, it is easy for me to identify the Bible’s influence in my own work as an archaeologist. On the other hand, how my status as a skeptical white American tending to minority views affects my interpretation of the archaeological record is more difficult to analyze.

Unfortunately, even the most penetrating minds are often unable or unwilling to be explicit about their biases. The violent debates among scholars on the historicity of the so-called “conquest,” for example, owes more to nonacademic considerations than to a clear understanding of the various philosophies of history that inform the debates. In this regard, I suspect that Yigael Yadin rejected Manfred Weippert’s and Albrecht Alt’s views on the so-called “conquest” largely because he believed that no one has the right to impugn the integrity of the biblical record, least of all Germans, and because he believed the Bible is crucial to the identity of the Jewish citizens of Israel.²⁹

The second step is to be explicit in stating our assumptions and aims as we prepare a research plan. Proper homework, however, means that we should go one step further and identify the particular philosophical perspective that undergirds the assumptions and aims we announce. It is important that we make a conscious choice. More often than not we accept uncritically an intellectual tradition without even asking if it will produce useful new knowledge. If after examining the options we prefer to be eclectic, it will be necessary to elaborate some construct wherein the potpourri of views fits together. Only thus will a coherent research program emerge with most of its biases clearly visible.

A third step is to insist on beginning the archaeological task by examining the living cultural traditions closest to the elements of the extinct

(or nearly extinct) societies to be investigated. Ethnoarchaeology has become a field of study in its own right; in my view it offers significant insights for all forms of archaeology precisely because it deals with a present reality—invariably the starting point for all study of the material expression of human thought and action. Archaeology divorced from the living present produces a fiction, dangerous because unaware of the source and limits of interpretive ideas. Most of our ideas about the past are generated in the present and are of value only to the living.

The fourth step is to make certain that no period or part of a country's cultural landscape is scanted because it is of no value to the status quo. Archaeology should be able to stimulate a reevaluation of the establishment's view of the past. A usable archaeology in a land with a deep past will emphasize continuity and change through all time. Australia, South Africa, the United States, and Israel must acknowledge that although their cultural traditions were born in Europe, they must not diminish by neglect or undervaluation indigenous traditions: in lands of rich diversity, the archaeology of each ethnic, religious, or cultural tradition should be treated sympathetically. It is not possible to cover everything, but the choices made must be conscious of the problem of a valid representative sample.

The fifth step requires testing the hypothesis that each land has distinctive culture traits. This does not deny the possibility of diffusion, but seeks the generative centers of cultural creativity that exist everywhere. The impact of these internal power centers on the material culture traditions of sixteenth- to nineteenth-century Palestine has never been investigated, yet therein may be found a key to the distinctive nature of Arab Palestinian cultural history. The prevailing view has been that because Palestine was a hinterland in the Islamic world, it was a cultural borrower rather than a generator. Yet there is considerable evidence that during the Ottoman centuries each region possessed a political identity strong enough to require the appointment of local notables instead of Turkish civil servants to collect taxes. The nature of foreign influence should be evaluated, as should the ways in which it is resisted: what changes least may be more important than what changes most in highlighting the distinctive nature of the indigenous culture.

A sixth step is to provide for an estimation of error and to find ways to validate results, a process implying the quantification of data that will often allow cultural bias to surface. Randomized error is less dangerous than systematic error,³⁰ cultural bias unquestionably being of the latter type. The extent to which our cultural pasts train us to differ-

The archaeological task must start by examining living cultural traditions. . . . Archaeology divorced from the living present produces a dangerous fiction.

ential observation is readily observable among researchers lacking experience with alien cultures doing ethnoarchaeology. While foreign observers may have the advantage of taking little for granted, they may collect much that is irrelevant. Without adequate knowledge of the language, the researcher has little ability to test observations.

A final step advocates the purposeful involvement of selected foreigners in planning and executing an archaeological project. The research program should be under the supervision of a native scholar, but the foreign involvement can consciously engage debate over the value of the proposed project for those whose past is being investigated. The reasoning is that only in the confrontation of opposing aims will the true nature of the local and foreign biases emerge into full view.

There exist numerous examples of joint local and foreign archaeological research programs. I know of none, however, that consciously pursues such aims. It is difficult enough to create a working team when the members have a common cultural background,³¹ the more so when national backgrounds are diverse. Nevertheless, we must use a variety of means to force to the surface for clear reflection the biases that inhabit our work programs. For some regions of the world, this is the only way to recover from a long and devastating period of colonialism.

Conclusion

One of the papers documenting the impact of western bias on the protection, recording, and interpretation of aboriginal cultural traditions³² presented at the Australian Academy of the Humanities' symposium "Who Owns the Past?" notes:

. . . the organizations [that] aimed at preserving the European heritage have a long history, are widespread, have strong popular support, and pay little attention to the Aboriginal heritage . . . Aboriginal sites have never effectively been regarded as part of the Australian heritage.³³

Nothing demonstrates so clearly the bias of the ruling elite as the suppression of that part of the cultural past that does not support the status quo. Responsible archaeologists will not merely protest, but will find ways to help confront the real world we struggle to live with.

The past, like memory, is selected to support the present. The brutal fact is that our archaeological analysis always distorts the past to fit the needs of the present. The archaeologist must ask: whose "present"? A land of multiple traditions embraces many pasts and many presents. National interest requires that none be ignored if our dialectic debate with the past is to be an honest one.

To call the past an anachronism is to dismiss its meaning in the present. To construct a past for the comfort of today ignores the change that is the mark of the present. In other words, whenever tangible arti-

facts of the past are identified, displayed, protected, reconstituted, and duplicated, the past is reshaped to make it attractive to the present.³⁴ Archaeologists who control data from the past must decide what use should be made of that evidence to provide for us a future.

NOTES

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15. B. Trigger, "The Past as Power," p. 13.
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33. S. Sullivan, "The Custodianship of Aboriginal Sites in Southeastern Australia," in McBryde (ed.), *Who Owns the Past?*, pp. 144-45.
34. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 263-362.