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Archaeology and the Israel-Palestine Conflict

Despite the seismic changes occurring throughout the greater Middle East, the Israel-Palestine conflict seems frozen in amber. The politicization of archaeology by both sides merely reinforces the status quo, or so argues Jennifer Wallace.

By Jennifer Wallace for ISN

Last October, the Palestinians were controversially granted membership of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The United States, Canada, Israel, Germany and ten other countries opposed the motion while 107 countries voted for it (the United Kingdom abstained). Washington subsequently followed through with its threat to withdraw substantial funding for UNESCO and Israel reacted by announcing the building of a further 2000 homes in the Occupied Territories.

The Palestinian campaign for UNESCO membership is widely regarded as the first step towards nationhood and, eventually, full membership of the United Nations (UN). Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority, commented:

“This vote is for the sake of peace and represents the international consensus on support for the legitimate Palestinian national rights of our people, the foremost of which is the establishment of its independent state”.

In response, Israel complained that the move was a “unilateral Palestinian manoeuvre which…further removes the possibility of a peace agreement”. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that membership of UNESCO will lead to a reversal of the United States’ decision to veto Palestine’s full membership of the UN.

Yet despite such objections, Palestine’s membership of UNESCO also suggests that territory recognizes the international significance that ancient heritage in the region carries. There is a real concern about the conservation of a number of sites in the West Bank. But this is complicated by the intimate relationship between heritage and the nation state - a state which the Palestinians long for, and which the Israelis insist must still be the subject of negotiations.

A ‘National Hobby’

In 2002, the World Heritage Committee expressed concerns about a number of important sites of “outstanding universal value” in the West Bank and offered funding and assistance to the Palestinian Department of Antiquities to identify sites at risk and in need of conservation. But although the list

was published in 2005, it could not be presented to UNESCO since only members can nominate sites and membership is officially restricted to nation states.

These problems were further complicated in 2010 when Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, drew up a list of key sites as part of *his* national heritage plan. The list included two sites in the West Bank - the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. In effect, Netanyahu was laying a territorial claim to these areas (which under the 1993 Oslo Agreement are officially under the control of the Palestinian Authority), supported, as he saw it, by biblical history and archaeological fact. "The patriarchs of the Jewish people, our forefathers, are buried there. This is an existing fact", he declared when interviewed on Israeli television. Accordingly, his argument was based on the widely-held notion that archaeology lies outside politics. "This is neither a diplomatic decision nor a political decision", he went on. "It seeks to preserve heritage and this heritage has existed with us for close to 4,000 years. We are not determining anything new".

In fact what was "not new" in this case was Israel's use of archaeology to forge its sense of national identity and to justify the occupation of the whole of the Promised Land. Since the earliest years of the establishment of Israel, archaeology was considered a "national hobby", prompting the survey of the Upper Gallilee by Yohanan Aharoni in the early 1950s and excavations at Hazor (1955), and Masada (1963-5) by Yigael Yadin, former head of the Israel Defence Force.

"There was a need in the beginning to give something to the immigrants, to the melting pot," says Israel Finkelstein of Tel Aviv University, one of Israel's most prominent archaeologists. "Something to connect them to the ground, to history, to some sort of legacy."

Reconfiguring the West Bank

After the Six Day War of 1967, Israel began an excavation of the area around the Temple Mount, attracting large numbers of Jews to volunteer as diggers. Meanwhile an "Emergency Survey of Judea, Samaria and the Golan" was commissioned in the territory, looking for sites described in the Old Testament. According to the American anthropologist Nadia Abu El-Haj, this effectively reconfigured the landscape of the West Bank in terms of the Biblical period. Settlements in the conquered territory followed biblical precedent and supposed archaeological evidence. Communities sprang up at Ai (sacked by Joshua), Shiloh, (home of the Ark of the covenant for 369 years), and Shechem, known to non-Zionists as Nablus (where Abraham camped on his first night in Israel). Menachem Brody, a West Bank settler originally from Maine, USA, who offers archaeological tours of the Occupied Territory, explained to the ISN the intimate connection between archaeology and the controversial occupation of land, as we stood in the West Bank settlement of Shiloh:

"Shiloh was so important a place in the Bible that we said it's not possible that there wouldn't be a Jewish settlement in Shiloh. So how did we do it? A group of men came here and set up tents and the army came to take them down. And the settlers said 'no, no, you can't do that, we're archaeologists'. Several weeks later the army came back and they saw that there were women and children also in the tents. But the settlers just said 'well, we're archaeologists but we have families'".

Now there is a whole town on the hilltop, vineyards and a heavily guarded fence all around the Iron Age site of Shiloh. A site that was once regularly visited by archaeology students of the Palestinian University of Bir Zeit is now out of bounds for them.

Fact vs. Fiction

Archaeology and the Bible, then, were the driving forces behind the establishment of the nation state of Israel and the extension of its settlement into the Occupied Territories. The irony is that among

Israeli archaeologists, there is now a heated division about how far one can actually use the bible to interpret archaeological remains and indeed whether there is any archaeological proof behind the biblical founding myth of the nation. Professional archaeologists are agreed that the tomb of the Patriarch at Hebron is fictional. There is almost universal agreement that the exodus from Egypt did not happen and that there was no conquest of Canaan by the Israelites, led by Joshua. Indeed, for a growing number of archaeologists, led by Israel Finkelstein, even Solomon, David and the first temple at Jerusalem cannot be evidenced archaeologically.

But this professional scepticism among archaeologists is not filtering down to the popular Israeli imagination or to its politicians. Nimrod Barkan, Israeli ambassador to UNESCO complained about the politicisation of archaeology by the Palestinians: “UNESCO deals in science, not science fiction. They forced on UNESCO a political subject out of its competence”. Yet if archaeologists like Israel Finkelstein are to be believed, central sites in Israel’s national heritage, such as Solomon’s palace at Megiddo and most importantly his temple in the heart of Jerusalem, are more the stuff of fiction than of scientific fact. And certainly Abraham’s tomb in Hebron is pure romantic fantasy.

Palestine Responds

In this long heated debate about archaeology and nationhood, the Palestinians have been relatively quiet until now. Early tit-for-tat skirmishes saw the Palestinians rubbishing ancient remains rather than trying to preserve them. There was an outcry in 2000 when the Palestinians were thought to be throwing out Jewish archaeological remains from beneath the Temple Mount into the Kidron Valley. Israel suspected that the Palestinians were making way for an exit tunnel for their mosque. However, the Palestinians considered this retaliation for the notorious Israeli excavation of the Western Wall in 1996, which resulted in a deep incursion into Arab East Jerusalem and potential damage to the foundations of the Al-Aqsa mosque.

Meanwhile in 1998, Palestinian archaeologist Jalal Kazzouh claimed to have found evidence of Canaanite history in Tel Sofer on the outskirts of Nablus, positing a continuous Canaanite/Palestinian history going back 5000 years. Hamed Salem, Professor of Archaeology at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, is skeptical about this claim, “It’s just not serious archaeology to trace the continuity of a people back 5000 years”. Nevertheless, Hamden Taha, Director General of the Palestinian Department for Antiquities and Cultural Heritage in Ramallah, recognizes the political if somewhat naïve motivation behind Kazzouh’s move. “If some Palestinians are trying to identify themselves with ancient Canaanites, I believe this is part of an unconscious reflexive archeology, and a direct response to the Israeli practice of archeology”.

Accordingly, it seems that the Palestinians are increasingly recognising that the ancient remains in their land may prove useful to them in the international arena. The conservation plan for the Tomb of the Patriarchs at Hebron is almost completed. And the plan for the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is at risk as a result both of a long-term lack of funds and from the 2002 Israeli military siege, was submitted to the World Heritage Centre in Paris in January. “Palestine has the right to a place on the map”, commented Mahmoud Abbas last October after the successful UNESCO membership vote. Echoing the famous Israeli principle of “facts on the ground”, Abbas has grasped the powerful political implications of the imaginary connection in the Middle East between the land, archaeological remains and the nation state.

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Editor's note:

For more content on the Middle East, please see our dossier on the topic.

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