CHAPTER 1

Living Communities and Their Archaeologies in the Middle East: An Introduction

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the theme and aims of the volume *Living Communities and Their Archaeologies in the Middle East*. The history of archaeology in the Middle East is deeply rooted in its original colonial enterprise. Hence, 'doing' community archaeology is very different from what is practised in countries in Europe and North America, where this archaeological sub-discipline first developed. Therefore, this chapter also serves as an introduction

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to and contextualization of community archaeology in the Middle East in relation to its development elsewhere globally.

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Introduction

Community archaeology has been growing for decades and has been explored in countries all over the world. One of the issues that has sprung up in this research and practice has been the fundamental issue of what we understand as 'community archaeology' (see, e.g., Pyburn 2011; Thomas 2017). This seemingly simple question refers to both the 'communities' and the 'archaeologies' concerned, and to the interrelations between them. Which communities are archaeologists and heritage professionals addressing when doing community archaeology – and which are being ignored? What approaches to archaeology do they employ – from intrusive excavations, to field surveys, to remote satellite imagery analysis? Does the community engagement end when the fieldwork season is over? How are communities involved in remote research methodologies? How do archaeologists and heritage professionals affect the community in which (or with which) they work – and how does the community affect them? And is it possible to measure or explain the success or failure of 'community archaeology' projects?

The above questions have been explored at length in some parts of the world, but are still to be expanded upon in much depth in other contexts – including the Middle East (Badran, Abu-Khafajah and Elliott 2022; Lorenzon, Bonnie and Thomas 2022; Okamura and Matsuda 2011). The history of archaeology in this region, as elsewhere in the Global South, is deeply rooted in its original colonial enterprise. Hence, 'doing' community archaeology is very different from what is practised in those countries in the Global North where this archaeological sub-discipline first developed. The majority of contributions in this archaeological sub-discipline remain quite centred on Europe and North America (Moshenska 2017b; Skeates, McDavid and Carman 2012; but see now Badran, Abu-Khafajah and Elliott 2022).

In Europe, North America and Australia, community archaeology developed hand in hand with the professional developments of cultural heritage management (Marshall 2002; McDavid 2014). By embedding archaeology and heritage matters into national legislations, the political decision-making body across these democracies – the local people – became direct participants and stakeholders in the process (Skeates 2000, 84–87). Archaeology in the Middle East, on the other hand, has been shaped by foreign colonialist/imperialist involvement and decision-making since its start in the nineteenth century (e.g., Kathem and Kareem Ali 2020; Maffi 2009; Meskell 2020; Mickel and Byrd 2022). While locally led excavations and heritage research have radically expanded in recent decades, including both rescue excavations and academic fieldwork, much archaeological research is still conducted by foreign research institutions which come and go on a seasonal basis. Indeed, as Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi (2019, 92) argue in the case of Jordan, whether through a colonial or a neoliberal agenda, ‘shifts seem to have always come “from the outside”’ (see also Kathem 2020; Meskell and Luke 2021).

The years since the start of the twenty-first century have seen a clear increase in community archaeology projects in countries across the Middle East, including in Turkey (Atalay 2010), Syria (Moualla and McPherson 2019), Egypt (Moser et al. 2002; Lorenzon and Zermani 2016), Iraq (Isakhan and Meskell 2019; Zaina, Proserpio and Scazzosi 2021), Sudan (Humphris and Bradshaw 2017), Jordan (de Vries 2013) and Israel (Hemo and Linn 2017). More case studies from the region are being included in more general volumes on public archaeology (Thomas and Lea 2014), as well as in a recent edited volume dedicated to *Community Heritage in the Arab Region* (Badran, Abu-Khafajah and Elliott 2022). In a special issue, the *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* also touches on the theme (Dakouri-Hild 2017), with contributions from Israel and Egypt. In an eye-opening study, Allison Mickel (2021) demonstrates how archaeological fieldwork projects have been (and still are) exploiting locally hired archaeological labour for scientific knowledge production – a point that is touched upon in this book too (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

Archaeology remains entangled in the West's colonial history – and nowhere perhaps is this better seen than in its centuries-long political involvement across areas and communities in the Middle East (Luke and Kersel 2013; Meskell 2020). As such, public or community archaeology in the region is highly political and quickly touches on state politics, territorial claims and historical identity formations. European and North American archaeologists, often raised and trained in Western ideas of scientific knowledge production (i.e., 'authorised heritage discourse', in Smith 2006), have a hard time moving away from valuing the Middle Eastern landscape through this traditional 'expert' lens (Jones 2017). Engaging local Middle Eastern communities from the start of a project, however, or even prior to it, not only acknowledges the social value of this landscape but brings to the fore new opportunities for all involved (see, e.g., De Nardi 2014; Lorenzon and Miettunen 2020).

The use of the term 'Middle East' to describe the countries located geographically in south-west Asia should be touched upon, however. We acknowledge that this term (including its related term 'Ancient Near East' to describe its past pre-Islamic cultures) remains controversial and ultimately is founded in twentieth-century Western geopolitics (for discussion see Scheffler 2003). The 'Middle East' is a top-down, Western-centric, abstract space that somehow does not conflate well with the bottom-up participatory angle that community archaeology provides. It should be said, though, that much geographical terminology is geopolitically laden and has problematic connotations that are not visible per se on the ground. While we have decided to use the term 'Middle East' in the title of this volume and in this introductory chapter and the conclusions, an explicit critical engagement with the meanings of this and other terms remains important. Furthermore, the authors of the different chapters in this volume have been given free hand to describe the region in terms they most feel comfortable with.

Our decision to use the BCE/CE (Before Common Era/Common Era) calendar notation throughout this volume requires a brief note as well, particularly in a region where various calendars remain in use today.[1] In academia the use of BCE/CE is generally rather uncontroversial, often even preferred (over BC/AD, Before Christ/Anno Domini) because of its appearance as religiously neutral. Yet, by observing the same Gregorian calendar and in the use of ‘common’, BCE/CE does normalise the imposition of an essentially Western Christian conceptualisation onto others. Hence, like the term ‘Middle East’, the BCE/CE calendar notation can equally be seen as top-down and Western-centric, and rather abstract. However, we have chosen to use it in this volume particularly because of the sensitivity it has over the BC/AD notation, and because using multiple calendar notations was impractical. At the same time, we acknowledge that a community-concerned archaeology should be more critical towards its use of standard scientific terminology, and where possible and appropriate, as much as possible adapt its calendar notation to that in use by the communities it engages with.

This volume presents theoretical ideas for, practical uses of, and reflective insights on community archaeology across the Middle East, with contributions by scholars from and working in Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Palestine and Syria. The chapters represent reflective insights from contemporary public archaeology practice – drawing on theoretical frameworks and discussing the realities of challenges and opportunities presented by opening up archaeological experiences to wider publics in different social and political settings. Relying on different questions, problems and solutions, our hope is that this volume will provide useful examples for the sub-discipline of community archaeology as a whole.

Archaeologies, Communities and Our Approach to Both

For the title of this volume, we intentionally use the plural for both ‘communities’ and ‘archaeologies’. This is to acknowledge not only that there are multiple types of community but also that there is more than one understanding of archaeology. In particular, the volume focuses on the following three themes: (1) defining and reflecting on ‘community’ in community archaeology; (2) which archaeologies to employ in community archaeology; and (3) measuring the success and failure of community archaeology. In addressing these issues, the chapters reflect different historical trajectories and cultures that enable us to find similarities and differences in the theory and practice of community archaeology.

To start with the last of these themes, up until very recently archaeology in this region was largely undertaken by foreign expeditions from Europe and North America, often coming from the same former colonial powers that eventually divided up the Middle East into individual states. The ideas and values that local communities had about the archaeological sites were not considered. Instead, local communities were primarily a workforce, and Western archaeology projects and campaigns provided seasonal employment. Archaeology as an enterprise thus fell into the same ‘orientalist’ stereotyping, something well exemplified in the photographic record of the Dura-Europos excavations from the 1920s and 1930s (Baird 2011). Even worse, entire village communities were displaced in order to reach and ‘save’ the archaeological evidence of past civilisations. While examples of this abound in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Israel/Palestine, probably the strongest example is the Syrian village of Tadmor being moved out of its original location, where it had developed around the ruins of the Roman-period Temple of Bel of ancient Palmyra, by French forces in the early 1930s (Baird and Kamash 2019).

In more recent decades a shift has been noticed among both national authorities and foreign archaeological expeditions, with more emphasis on the heritage experiences of local communities. However, this has often taken the form of guiding and introducing communities to ‘their heritage’, a term primarily defined by national authorities and Western understandings of the past and closely related to a growing global tourism industry around archaeological sites (Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019). It is only since a few years into the twenty-first century that local voices have been more heard in definitions of heritage and decisions on preservation matters, with more projects tying these voices in to their research objectives. Are such current projects successful in their endeavour of ‘doing’ community archaeology? And how do we measure such success? In the book’s first section – ‘Living: Local Involvement in Heritage Creation’ – these questions form points of departure to reflect upon different community archaeology projects in Iraq and Jordan.

What we understand as the community in a community archaeology project, however, is not always a given. This becomes especially clear in regions where different groups are in conflict with one another. Unfortunately, today’s Middle East still presents many such cases, which to a considerable degree is something caused by the colonial legacy of its early modern past. The ongoing civil war in Syria forms a clear example of the complexity of relationships and power balances between different Middle Eastern cultural groups, but similar situations exist more in the shadows across the Middle East and the Global South (Greenberg 2009; Kletter 2019; Poser 2019). One such area where archaeology obviously struggles with such shared narratives and engagement is in the region of today’s Israel and the Palestinian Territories. The book’s second section – ‘Communities: Shared Narratives and Engagement?’ – provides practitioners’ contributions reflecting on community engagement in archaeology from different perspectives.

An unexpected and unforeseen development that impacted the progress of this volume, felt across the globe in a shared, truly life-changing event, was the impact of the SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic. As a bottom-up approach, community archaeology has traditionally been highly dependent on building up face-to-face interactions between locals and professionals. Especially given the number of international teams working in the Middle East region, this has often required international travel. This has of course become more difficult, sometimes impossible, in the face of closing borders and stay-at-home orders. Across the world, archaeologists have had to adapt to the new situation, with many turning to digital tools and media, as well as greater open access to literature, to continue to develop educational activities and maintain contact with communities and with each other (e.g., Crawford et al. 2021; Jones and Pickens 2020). Several of our contributions touch upon the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for their respective projects (see Chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9). While COVID-19-related consequences in community engagement for cultural organisations and heritage knowledge production have been touched upon in very recent academic literature (e.g., Cecilia 2021, Lorenzon and Miettunen 2020), our focal point of communities across the Middle East, a region formed by Western imperial intermingling, adds novel points to this discussion. For the most part (aside from exceptions such as the global study of Ginzarly and Srour 2022), the emerging literature has so far instead focused on the Global North.

Finally, the question should be asked: which archaeologies should be employed in community archaeology? Conventionally, excavation has been the method par excellence of archaeology for documenting and understanding the past. Yet this method provides only a narrow timespan for communities to engage with the archaeological remains, and the method is put to use still in preserving heritage largely dictated by Western research agendas. Here museums and their practitioners can come to the rescue, since these cultural spaces should be, in essence, centred around communities and can open up heritage agendas beyond Western historical themes. Making use of the digital realm forms another approach that in recent years has developed to engage different audiences with archaeological heritage. The decision about which approaches ultimately to employ to interact with communities remains highly context-bound. In the book's final section – 'Their

Archaeologies: Archaeological Parks, Museums and Beyond' – different cases and approaches are presented and reflected on.

By focusing especially on the Middle East, we shed light on the current state of the art for public and community archaeology in this unique and complex region, adding to the already rich literature from the rest of the world. The Middle East has a long, fascinating, but also complicated history of archaeological investigation, deeply entrenched in colonisation, and more recently in the decolonisation process. The involvement and social values of the associated communities have until very recently been overlooked in academic discussions. This book aims to redress that imbalance, to present original research that reflects on the work of current scholars and practitioners and draws similarities and differences from diverse cultures. In what follows we provide a brief overview of the volume's contents.

Living: Local Involvement in Heritage Creation

The involvement of living communities in their own heritage can foster the creation of community-driven narratives, sustainable development possibilities and site preservation (Little 2007; Lorenzon 2015; Lorenzon and Zermani 2016). However, heritage may often take second place for living communities in developing countries due to other priorities, such as economic opportunities and socio-political issues. Therefore, it is important to connect these two spheres to advance the relevance of heritage among contemporary communities (see Chapter 4).

The link between living communities and heritage is not always self-evident, as through the centuries communities have migrated, changed and flourished as complex social organisms often do. Therefore, it is often essential in archaeological work to involve living communities from the start in order to allow participation and interest in local heritage to grow naturally and organically (Lorenzon and Miettunen 2020; see also Chapter 3 in this volume).

In Chapter 2, Maria Elena Ronza explores the role of archaeology in Jordan and, by asking uncomfortable but important questions around community engagement, provides a path to a decolonised discipline. By the same token, Federico Zaina and his colleagues (Chapter 3) discuss a new project focused on improving education and enhancing cultural heritage by connecting Iraqi universities, heritage institutions, secondary schools, museums and local communities. To this end, the EDUU – Education and Cultural Heritage Enhancement for Social Cohesion in Iraq project implemented a wide range of activities using archaeological, ethnoarchaeological, cultural heritage and community engagement methodologies. Drawing on archaeological and ethnoarchaeological data as well as cultural heritage approaches, the chapter presents a positive case study providing a critical assessment of challenges faced in modern-day Iraq.

Communities: Shared Narratives and Engagement?

'Communities' is a key word in public engagement, but it is often undefined (Moshenska 2017a, 5; Thomas, Lorenzon and Bonnie 2020, 143; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). The debates created in this volume move beyond the theoretical definition of community to analyse in detail each stakeholder – foreign archaeologists, local people, local archaeologists – and their impact on creating a more collaborative and inclusive discipline. Specifically, we analyse practices in the Middle East to trace the current phenomenon in which community archaeology is becoming a bottom-up movement, enabling communities to reclaim, work on and define their own heritage (Mickel 2021; see also Chapter 5 in this volume).

Starting from these approaches, Päivi Miettunen (Chapter 4) examines the use of Bourdieu's theories of social structures, such as *field*, *capital*, *power* and *habitus*, and their concrete application in community archaeology in Jordan. The knowledge of social structures and practices becomes a field map that can be used as both a theoretical tool and an analytical framework. Einat Ambar-Armon (Chapter 5) reviews community archaeology initiatives in Israel and the impact of public outreach in connecting the youth and the general public to archaeology. Specifically, youth excavation is incredibly effective and rewarding, adding fresh energy and the wonder of discovery to archaeological fieldwork.

Their Archaeologies: Archaeological Parks, Museums and Beyond

Archaeological parks and museums play an essential role in engaging both local and non-local communities in heritage and a multi-layered past (Emberling and Petit 2018; Jones 2017). For a long time, a Western gaze over the Middle East's past has dictated the selection of histories and the manner in which they have been told and visualised. This not only happened in well-known museums across Europe (see various essays in Emberling and Petit 2018), but also influenced how archaeological parks and museums in countries across the Middle East were communicated to Western tourists (Addison 2004; Bauman 2004; see also Maffi 2009 and other chapters in Rowan and Baram 2004).

Changes are happening, however, and while the Western tourism industry still plays an important role for Middle Eastern countries, the multi-layered pasts of heritage sites are more and more being narrated along storylines that local communities find inspiring and relevant. The chapters in this section are in no way meant to be encompassing or exhaustive, but they well encapsulate the variety and diversity by which archaeological parks and museums narrate their heritage to local communities.

In their contribution, Hamdan Taha and Gerrit van der Kooij (Chapter 6) discuss the community archaeology project in Palestine at the site of Tell Balata, which has been transformed from a playground to a modern archaeological park. The project presents a case study for effective collaboration between the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University and the Ramallah office of

UNESCO the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), as well as the local community. The main goal was to create a modern archaeological park for the benefit of the local community, thus contributing to a new enfranchisement between community and archaeological heritage, as well as a heritage attraction for external visitors, with potential consequences for economic growth.

Arwa Badran, Shatha Abu-Khafajah, Maria Elena Ronza, Robin Skeates, Ross Wilkinson and Fatma Marii (Chapter 7) similarly engage in a community project with a focus on youth and museums, with the specific aim of better engaging the young in learning about their past in Jordan. The study also discusses the benefits of collaborative work across cultures within internationally funded projects, and the importance of maintaining equality in the decision-making process. Likewise, Safa' Joudeh and Marta Lorenzon (Chapter 8) provide a concrete case study on the benefits of digital applications to community archaeology, especially in engaging local communities' experience when visiting museums in Jordan. Finally, Giorgio Buccellati and Hiba Qassar (Chapter 9) describe the community archaeology approach in Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, as a way of connecting local diverse communities to this heritage and its sustainability in times of crisis such as the Syrian war and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a brief final chapter we, the editors, reflect once more on the contributions to our volume. As a response to these pages, we draw brief conclusions, offer suggestions for further research and close with a cautiously optimistic outlook on the future of community archaeology in the Middle East. Living communities and their archaeologies are dynamic entities, and this will continue to be the case.

Notes

1 Not all contributors were equally happy with our editorial decision. We thank these contributors for raising this issue and we hope that, with this note, we have opened up the discussion on this important matter.

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