Cultural Sociology of the Middle East: Archaeology

The recovery and study of ancient objects and sites from the Middle East is one branch of the global discipline of archaeology. Scholars tend to refer to work in this region as "Near Eastern" archaeology – a term reflective of European world views in that the region is nearer to Europe than the “Far East” or Orient. The archaeological boundaries of Near Eastern archaeology do not exactly align with the limits of Middle East geopolitics either. Egypt, Libya, and Cyprus are part of this academic area, along with the swathe of land stretching from Jordan to Iraq, and Yemen to Turkey. This vast region comprises many different religious, cultural, and linguistic groups, consistent with the heterogeneity that has existed here for thousands of years.

This essay is divided into four main topics: places; history of the discipline; politics and archaeology; and archaeological practices. The first refers to the symbolically-charged historical sites within the region while the second and third focus on the role of archaeology in territorial or identity disputes. The fourth examines the methods, tools, and organizing principles of field work.

Places

The Middle East has the distinction of birthing three of the world's major religions and several language groups and socio-political practices that persist to this day. Jerusalem (Israel), Mount Sinai (Egypt), Bethlehem (Israel), and Mecca (Saudi Arabia) are iconic places, holy to
Muslims, Jews, and/or Christians. They are important to archaeologists too, although archaeological projects in these sites are often politically charged undertakings (see below, Politics). But archaeologists are also attracted to the Middle East by its constellation of “firsts” and “oldests.”

Çatalhöyük in Turkey is the largest and best-preserved Neolithic site in the world. Archaeologists believe it dates to at least 7500 BC (Hodder et al. 2008). In addition to revealing important information about construction and craft techniques, it is also significant for its path-breaking archaeological methods that emphasize reflexive practice and community involvement in the knowledge-building process (see below, Practice).

The Arabic-speaking countries east of Egypt (the Mashriq) also hold key sites from earliest known human settlements. The Fertile Crescent refers to the marshy wetlands of Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Israel, Syria, and Turkey. The favorable ecology allowed human beings to settle and farm the land; archaeologists believe that the first agricultural communities in the world were established around the Jordan and Euphrates rivers 11,000 years ago, among them Jericho. The Fertile Crescent is often called the “cradle of civilization,” but archaeologists now recognize that important advances in complex societies took place at a number of settlements within this region and over time; there was no single site of “progress.” Eridu (Iraq) and Susa (Iran) gave rise to important urban settlement patterns; Jemdet Nasr (Iraq) has produced evidence of the earliest writing technologies in the world (ca. 3000 - 2900 BC); and Byblos (Lebanon) seems to have been the first Phoenician city and the chief portal between the Greek-speaking world and the Near East. Since the 1970s, the rivers that fed the wetlands have been dammed so effectively that the footprint of the Fertile Crescent has been reduced by 90%.

Near Eastern archaeologists are interested in a range of time periods, not just the Biblical or prehistoric phases. Byzantine sites and objects provide important insights into the political and cultural developments of the region as Christianity became a major force in the areas associated
with modern-day Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Egypt (ca. 4th through 7th centuries BC). Ottoman archaeologists focus on the materiality of the hugely powerful and culturally influential empire that lasted from the beginning of the 14th century to the end of the Turkish war for independence in 1922. Istanbul (Turkey), Aleppo (Syria), and Damascus (Syria) are key sites for the study of medieval Ottoman societies.

**History of Middle East archaeology**

Archaeology emerged as a practice and science in Western Europe during the Enlightenment period as European states and societies studied their past in order to forge a modern identity. Although they traced their material lineage to the Roman and Greek civilizations, the universal vision of the Enlightenment also empowered them to trace the origins of humankind to eventually earlier sites. Given its proximity to Western Europe, the Middle East provided a site for exploration both in relation to ancient Greek and Roman civilization and to Biblical lands.

As Edward Said aptly describes, western European archaeologists came to see the Middle East only in relation to their own past, thereby overlooking the Islamic civilizations that succeeded the Greek, Roman, and Christian periods (Said 1978; see also Fagan 1979; Marchand 1996). Likewise, they regarded the native inhabitants of the Middle East as stereotyped simple and naïve descendants of ancient civilizations that had not achieved civilized, modern identity. As a consequence, not only were European archaeologists not interested in the contemporaneity of Middle Eastern peoples; they also did not regard them as capable of researching and identifying their own historical roots. As a consequence, into the mid-19th century Middle Easterners configured in archaeological work mainly as hired hands to shift and sift dirt. European and North American scholars directed excavations and produced Near Eastern materiality.
With the emergence of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, local inhabitants took on more active roles in studying the material record (Gathercole and Lowenthal 1990; Hobsbawm 1990; Hutchinson and Smith 1994). Archaeology practiced in this area was thus expanded by local Middle Eastern archaeologists who started to own the ancient, pre-Christian pasts discovered in their regions as their own: while the Turks drew imagined lineages to the Hittites and Assyrians, the Iranians forged national roots in the Acheamanids and the Egyptians in the pharaohs (Goode 2007; Reid 2002; see also Bernhardsson 2005; Fawcett and Kohl 1995; Silberman 1989). In this sense, Middle Eastern archaeology mimicked western European practice. Such endeavors were closely supported by the state in both cases. After the Second World War, with European and Middle Eastern resources diminished, American archaeologists grew in prominence and influence in the field. They introduced new methods, techniques, and standards for scientific excavations.

**Politics**

Archaeologists who work in the Middle East face some of the same problems that afflict their colleagues working in other regions. There are tensions between form and content or material objects and their meaning. There are tensions between excavators and the nation-states that regulate their work. There are difficulties, too, in trying to construct theories and methods that satisfy the interests of disparate sets of actors: scientists, art historians, heritage managers, historians, nationalists, and tourists, among others. In sum, archaeology matters (Meskell 1998). How the past is recovered, what is privileged, and who constructs the past have real consequences for contemporary identities and knowledge-building efforts. And yet, archaeological work in the Middle East matters differently than it does elsewhere. Since the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the region has been the site of violent territorial disputes. Israel and Palestine, Iran and Iraq, Turkey and Armenia: in each of these, material instantiations of past
peoples were used to bolster modern claims to land, settlements, and natural resources. Territorial disputes and archaeological work both require soil; it is the archaeologist's laboratory and the nation's power base.

Critical studies of archaeological methods and theories have revealed the extent to which archaeology and politics are imprecated in knowledge-building process. To take one example, archaeology in Israel is much more than an academic discipline – it is a populist endeavor through which the modern nation's identity has been substantiated (Abu el Haj 2001). Youth groups are encouraged to volunteer on excavation sites, and tourist groups can visit famous sites associated with Israel's Judeo-Christian past. These practices are value-laden everywhere, because which sites to make famous or how to instruct young archaeologists require subjective judgments. But in light of Israel's nation-building project, premised on historical claims to a Jewish homeland, such judgments can be seen as particularly fraught. Some archaeological sites hold importance to both Muslims and Jews. The scholars who are able to access sites and objects have a significant advantage in constructing narratives about the past. Accordingly, politics and archaeological disputes are easily conflated.

**Practices**

There is great debate among archaeologists over the ontological nature of their work, whether it is truly a science or is, rather, “scientific” in method and practice but essentially humanistic. Another concern is predicated on the epistemological boundaries of the profession: at what point does the archeological endeavor begin – with the formulation of the research question, the preparation of the proposal, or the actual field work? What about writing up the discoveries or displaying the material objects (Clarke 2005; Shaw 2003)? Each of these activities is shaped by the practitioner's judgments and biases. Because Middle East archaeology was dominated by western scholars for generations, archaeologists native to the region have called
for critical examination of the field procedures and methods that were bequeathed to them by British, German, and French excavators. Some tools and technologies – trowels, pick-axes, brushes, stratigraphic units – are in widespread use and considered uncontroversial. What have been called into question are certain organizing principles of the field team (who gives orders, who influences decisions); and the set of categories that are traditionally used to evaluate and interpret a field site and its “finds”.

Along with this shift has come recognition that archaeologists should have respectful interactions with local communities. At the Çatalhöyük project in Turkey, archaeologists attempt to integrate local, living people’s interpretations of the site into the broader knowledge-building process. Since 1993, a team of archaeologists headed by Professor Ian Hodder (now at Stanford University) has invited nearby residents to explore the dig site, join in some of the work, and share their knowledge about the historical and cultural significance of the site. The approach requires time and resources not available to every field project, but it does point to potential benefits (new theories, culturally-sensitive procedures, richer interpretations) of engaging a broad group of stakeholders in field practice.

Even where there is agreement on form and material objects, it is their content and meaning that can become problematic. In particular, the temporal and spatial parameters within which they are interpreted are complex and fluid. Archaeological practice takes place at a particular time and within particular spaces, but it produces polysemous objects that are interpreted differently by the archaeologist as well as the local inhabitants, and the larger nation-state within which the site is located. Middle East archaeology is not simply an exotic variant of European or North American archaeology. Local knowledges, nationalist politics, cultural practices and certain historical factors give the region its own archaeological significance and field work parameters. More work needs to be done on how the key components of archaeological work – site selection; team formation; field practice; the interpretation and display
of objects – play out differently here, and on how archaeologists from the Middle East conceive of their craft.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bernhardtsson, Magnus *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* Austin, 2005.


Shaw, Wendy *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* Berkeley, 2003.