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## **Priceless but precious, how residents feel attached to a city ruin: the ancient city of Shekhem (Tell Balata, Palestine) as living heritage**

Dries, M.H. van den; Boom, K.J.H.; Daoud, I.; Fares, D.; Rhijn, A. van; Linde, S.J. van der; ... ; Jinadasa, U.

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# LIVING (WORLD) HERITAGE CITIES

*Opportunities, challenges, and future perspectives of people-centered approaches in dynamic historic urban landscapes*

MAAIKE S. DE WAAL, ILARIA ROSETTI, MARA DE GROOT  
& UDITHA JINADASA (EDS)



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## Priceless but precious

How residents feel attached to a city ruin.  
The ancient city of Shekhem (Tell Balata,  
Palestine) as living heritage

Monique H. van den Dries, Krijn Boom,  
Ihab Daoud, Dergham Fares, Arnout van Rhijn,  
& Sjoerd van der Linde

### Abstract

In 2013, after having been a ruin and garbage dump for several decades, the archaeological site of Tell Balata (Nablus, Palestine) was revived as a visitor-friendly site park. The site was listed on Palestine's tentative list for World Heritage (Taha, 2009) and needed preservation work to prepare it for a potential future nomination process. It was anticipated that the site's transformation and potential new status as a place of outstanding universal value could have far reaching implications for the local community. Through a public survey among residents the Tell Balata project team gained insight into these implications and how the villagers experienced the on-going developments. Results show that what many people might regard as an abandoned or 'useless' place, turned out to be *living heritage* playing a vital social function in community life and people's wellbeing.

*Keywords: Heritage conservation, resident survey, social wellbeing, place attachment, living heritage*

### Introduction

This chapter discusses the values of the heritage site of Tell Balata (Nablus), and the impact it has on the people living next to it. The site is located in the northern West Bank (Occupied Palestinian Territories). It consists of the partly excavated ruins of the ancient city of Shekhem, a fortified town which had its most intensive habitation phase during the Middle Bronze age, ca. 1750 BC (Taha & Van der Kooij, 2014a). This chapter sheds light on the role this site plays in current every-day life for the local community. Using a public survey, the authors analyze the perspective of the residents with regard to this site; focusing on their general and emotional perception of Tell Balata, and their needs and prospects for the future. The results illustrate how much a seemingly abandoned city ruin can be loved by the local community.

As Tell Balata is not a touristic hotspot or famous living heritage city, it may appear somewhat ‘off topic’ to dedicate a chapter of this volume to it. Why would we want to discuss the importance of a tiny archaeological site in a small village in Palestine, which is located in an area that may seem remote to many?

Indeed, Tell Balata (Nablus) is not generally well-known, although its historical name, Shechem (or Shekhem) may ring a bell to some. In biblical texts, a city called Shechem is mentioned, which some researchers have connected with the remains found at Tell Balata (see Taha & Van der Kooij, 2014b). It is also true that the tiny village of Balata is hardly comparable with the big and popular living heritage *metropolises* like those discussed in other chapters of this volume. Moreover, there are surely crises elsewhere which endanger living heritage on a much larger scale, like the impacts of global warming (e.g., floods, hurricanes, bush fires, rising sea levels) and the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives of indigenous people due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonetheless, the story of Tell Balata and its neighbors deserves to be told. This place matters just as much to its residents as famous heritage sites matter to the people who live in them, maybe even more. The authors believe these ‘small’ heritage stories, of communities who are not the focus of the global community and will not get massive international media attention, need to be told. These written words provide a vital podium for the heritage values and interests of the poor, isolated, and deprived.

A second reason to discuss the Tell Balata survey in this volume on living heritage cities, is that the survey results emphasize the importance of the ‘living heritage’ concept as a heritage management approach. The term ‘Living Heritage’ is usually being linked to ‘communities’ and the ‘continuity’ of traditions and practices (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2015). However, based on their data, the authors advocate a wider use of the ‘living heritage’ concept. Precisely this approach may provide an important additional dimension to the big questions posed in this volume. The question thus addressed in the discussion is why scholars, heritage managers, or authorities – anyone who takes a responsibility in safeguarding heritage – should consider historical remains as *living heritage*.

### **Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project**

Tell Balata has a long habitation and research history. In its prehistoric glory days, it was a fortified Bronze Age settlement. Its rediscovery and research started in the early 1900’s, but it got neglected after the last excavation in 1973 (Magen, 2009). However, it was not forgotten, and the Palestinian authorities placed it on the ‘Tentative list of Palestine’ as a key component of the ‘Old Town of Nablus and its environs’ (Taha, 2009). Thanks to financial

support by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs, a project was started in 2010 to save the site from further decay by turning it into a user-friendly site park, including a visitor center, signage and site panels. This project was a joint venture between the Department of Archaeology and Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA-DACH), the local UNESCO representative, and the Faculty of Archaeology of Leiden University.

The project applied a value-based approach, in which the values and interests of the local community are taken into account (see also Taha & Van der Kooij, 2014a; Van den Dries & Van der Linde, 2014). As safeguarding archaeological heritage is an almost impossible and unreasonable mission unless local communities living by this heritage feel that it matters to do so, the team aimed to integrate the voice of the local community into its management plans. The heritage work thus commenced with a stakeholder analysis and a value assessment that formed the basis for a management plan (Van der Linde & Van den Dries, 2014).

The project’s set-up was holistic, taking the various life stages of the site into account, including its original construction, adaptation phases, destruction, abandonment, rediscovery, present-day state, and future reuse. Moreover, we analyzed the site as a ‘cultural landscape’ with social and economic meanings, and with environmental and ecological concerns. This also embraces the natural environment, including its plants, birds, and insects.

From the start, in 2010, the project team developed activities to include community members in the project. With the help of Palestinian and Dutch students, on-site activities were organized with the community, such as garbage cleaning and weed clearing campaigns, summer school lessons, family days, and a logo competition. With financial support from the Archaeology in Contemporary Europe project, promotion material and a teachers handbook (Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project, 2014) for local school teachers were produced (see also Van den Dries & Van der Linde, 2014). Since there is never a one-size-fits-all solution to safeguard archaeological heritage and simultaneously support the local community, one needs to understand the circumstances and challenges, and therefore the needs and wishes of the people involved.

Moreover, as the team was writing a management plan, the project aimed to take the existing relationship between the communities and the archaeological heritage into account. To help achieve this, an oral history project was conducted in 2011 (Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project, 2011; see also Van den Dries & Van der Linde, 2012). The residents shared the local perceptions of the site, its values, and their needs. The opinions and thoughts voiced by the residents were eye-openers for the team as they clearly expressed how the place had a function and meant a lot to the people the team members spoke with.

The community used the site extensively and for some it was an intrinsic part of their live. As this oral history project only included a relatively small group of people (N=28), the question remained whether the rest of the community also felt this way about Tell Balata, and thus the wish to talk to all residents was born.

## The survey

The team completed the Balata Park-project with the official inauguration of the visitor center on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2013, alongside an edited volume on the results and lessons learned (Taha & Van der Kooij, 2014a), a guidebook for visitors (Taha & Van der Kooij, 2014b) and a management plan (Van der Linde & Van den Dries, 2014). The opening of the park, of course, was only the beginning of its management. The plans of including Balata in a UNESCO World Heritage nomination also still existed, and the project managers intended to keep working with the community.

The NEARCH project (Funded by the European Commission's Culture Programme, 2013-2018), in which the Faculty of Archaeology was a partner, provided additional opportunities to work on the heritage aspects of the site and with the community in Balata village. For instance, it facilitated knowledge exchange and capacity building activities through a 'bursary of mobility' for one of the Palestinian site managers and the participation of two site managers in an international NEARCH workshop on sustainable development (held in Leiden in 2015). We further promoted the site and its values for the Balata villagers by including a video documentary on the oral history project in the Archaeology&ME exhibition in Rome 2017 (Guermandi, 2016; Van den Dries, Van der Linde & Boom, 2016).

In order to assess the impact of the conservation work and to further prepare for the future, the systematic input of the local community is necessary. Our motivation was that one cannot decide what is useful for the community members without asking them, nor is it ethical or efficient to decide on community involvement without knowing whether there is support for it and whether it is feasible. Moreover, the aim was to comply with UNESCO's contemporary guidelines on managing heritage sites *with* the people it concerns and to base nominations on their free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC).

The Balata team devised a public survey to query a representative sample of local community members. This survey was not yet meant to get consent for a nomination, but rather served as a first step to start a dialogue with local community members and to gather insights in potential issues that would have to be addressed. The first author organized a co-created design process for a questionnaire, together with the Palestinian colleagues and members of the NEARCH-project. The result was a survey designed to provide insight into the perceptions and feelings regarding the site of the people living close to

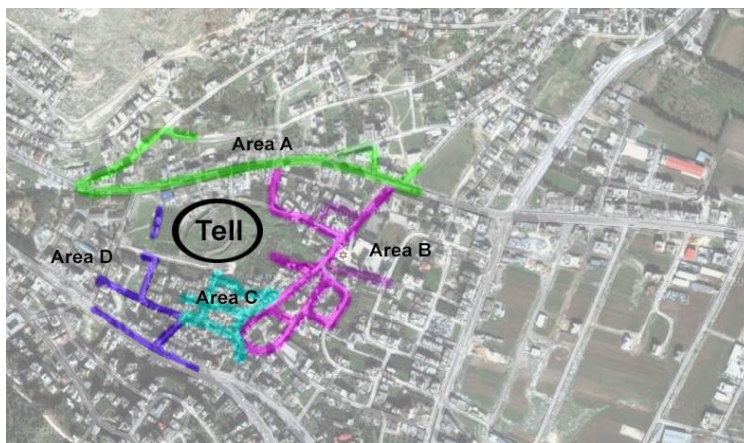
it. It queried what the residents think of it, how they use the site, how they feel connected, how they would like to be involved, what benefits or drawbacks they experience from the developments, whether and why they would like the site to become world heritage, and what they expect of that. As different (groups of) people may perceive things differently, we aimed to include citizens of both gender groups, of all (adult) age categories and of various socio-professional background.

The survey took place in August 2015. Like all other heritage work on the Tell, it was a team effort, carried out in collaboration with the site managers and heritage authorities. The fieldwork team consisted of two staff members of MOTA-DACH, four Dutch researchers, and eight local volunteers. The latter were particularly invaluable to the project; they not only acted as translators for the non-Arabic speaking team members, but being familiar with the area and culture, they could further explain the questionnaire to respondents in case of questions. The group was split in four teams of two, which each worked in a separate area, roughly located north (area a), east (area b), south (area c), and west (area d) of the tell (figure 3.1). A door-to-door strategy with interviewer-administered data collection was applied. This is not the fastest way of working, but it does allow for maximum inclusivity. This approach anticipated the inclusion of illiterate (with whom the questionnaires could be filled out), and the inclusion of women (see below). The campaign lasted for nine days, in which a total of 205 local community members were interviewed. It was relatively easy to include participants since most community members were happy to contribute.

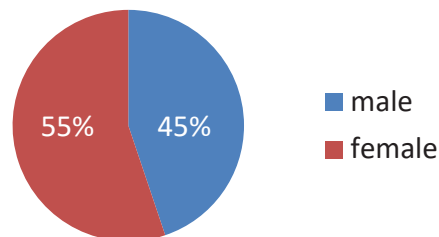
## Survey sample and results

In terms of demographics, the survey obtained a fairly balanced representation (figure 3.1). At first, the team was worried not to be able to gather the opinions of a comparable number of men and women, as the latter could be more difficult to reach. On the basis of World Bank and United Nations reports, as well as the data of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, it was expected that women would be included less in public life. Married women would perhaps not even be in a position to be interviewed by foreign male researchers. Each of the four teams therefore included at least one female researcher or interpreter to increase the chances of including all women in the survey. Moreover, a door-to-door survey strategy was applied which would enable the researchers to visit women at home, as well as elderly and young people. This led to a sample with 55% female respondents.

The age categories were relatively evenly distributed as well (figure 3.1). This distribution, however, does not fully correspond with the overall population demographics of Palestine (Palestinian Central Bureau



### Gender



### Age Categories

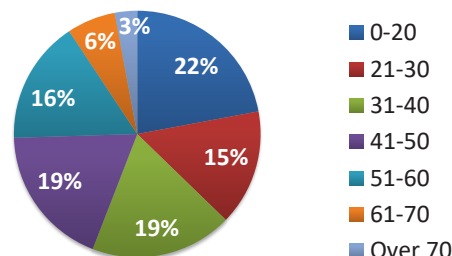


Figure 3.1. Tell Balata located in the village and the areas included in the survey. The pie charts show the distribution of the 205 respondents (Google maps; Krijn Boom).

of Statistics, 2018). The West Bank has an expansive population pyramid, with a broad base and narrow top, which is characterised as young and growing. Young people (up to 20) have a share of 49% in this (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018), while in our sample they had a share of only 22%. Thus, our survey included a relatively large number of middle aged and elder people (the group of 50+ represents just over 10% of the living population, while in our sample their share is 25%). Moreover, our sample composition differed from one area to another; for example area A had more middle aged people (20-40) as this area consists mostly of shops and the interviewees were primarily shop owners.

Moreover, the survey did not target specific socio-professional categories, nor the socially deprived, or people with disabilities. The sample therefore is inevitably biased regarding those groups. We also missed out on the (over 17.000) inhabitants of the large United Nations (UNRWA) refugee camp in Balata, which is located at a few hundred meters south-east to the site (<https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/west-bank/balata-camp>). We already knew from some people living in the camp, whom we spoke with when we conducted the Balata management plan (Van der Linde & Van den Dries, 2014) that the site is important for them as well, but strict safety regulations set by the authorities unfortunately kept us from including camp residents in the survey. Due to these biases the sample is not fully representative for the inhabitants of Balata village. Moreover, it is not known what the exact population size of this area is (demographic data concern the entire city of Nablus, not its suburbs). Therefore, the results do not allow for extrapolation.

### Use of the site

First, the survey queried the way the respondents use the site and the frequency of their visits. This showed that no less than one third used to visit the site often, *i.e.*, weekly to daily. Another 45% visited it occasionally, and only 21.5% said to never visit the place. People living south of the site (section C), where access to the site is easier, turned out to visit the site more often. Men were reported to visit the site more frequently than women; 46% said they go often to daily, versus 22% of the women. Of the men 17% said they never go, against 25% of the women.

This may reflect the more out-going style of living by men and may relate to the fact that the men own the shops (mostly garages) near the site. Women are known to be more restricted in going outdoors, in particular on their own. According to the United Nations Women organization (<https://palestine.unwomen.org/en>) and the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, women in Palestine continue to be under-represented in decision-making bodies and processes at various levels of public life (Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Participation rates of women in the labor market are much lower than of men; in 2015, the labor market consisted of only 19.1% women and their unemployment rate was nearly 40% (versus 22.5% for men) (Palestinian Central Bureau of statistics, 2015). This lower visiting frequency among women therefore does not imply they value the place less (see below).

The main purpose of the residents' visits (question B3) turned out to be enjoyment (31% of all reasons given) and to take friends/family out (22%); 17% uses it as a through-route, to go from one side of Balata village to the other. For 13% the site also functions as a place to get in touch with visitors and tourists. This was almost the same

for men and women. It is striking that economic reasons were hardly mentioned; only 1% of the reasons given was 'to sell things'. Interestingly, this was 0% for men and 4% for women, which suggests there are opportunities for women to benefit economically from the heritage site. This is something worthwhile to investigate further if the site managers or local authorities would want to support the empowerment of these women. It would in any case be important not to jeopardize this economic activity (through site management objectives), as women are an economically marginalized group (<https://palestine.unwomen.org/en>).

The fact that the site first and foremost has a social function and that its use may add to the respondents' social wellbeing is also shown by the response of a majority of 91% saying they visit the site in the company of others (53% visits with family members, 36% with friends (question B4). Only 9% said to pay visits alone, for women this was only 6% (against 14% of men). Almost all of the women go with family members (64%) or with friends (28%).

This confirmed our observations from the early stages of the project, when we saw many people using the site to socialize. For instance, people would visit the site for Friday picnics, after having been to the mosque. We also observed a lot of children were playing at the site; biking, flying kites etc. The site was in use as an outdoor space to relax and enjoy. This clearly relates to the local circumstances. Palestine (the occupied territory on the West Bank and in particular Gaza Strip) is one of the most densely populated areas of the world, with 774 people per square kilometer (in 2017). It is roughly the 7th most densely populated country in the world (<https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/palestine-population>). Many (large) Palestinian families live in small apartment complexes (or refugee camps), and outdoor space is extremely limited. Parks hardly exist as land is badly needed for food production. So people use any outdoor public space to relax and enjoy, including historical sites.

From a management perspective, which aims to contribute to societal wellbeing, it is important to acknowledge this social function of the site and to facilitate its continuation. A people-centered approach would for instance avoid confining people in their use of the place if this would mentally hurt them while not harming the place's fabric and material remains. The community's wish to keep using the site, which we learned of through the oral history project, had already been documented in the management plan. It had also led to an adaptation of the plan to put a closed fence around the site. The authorities had intended to close the site for unsupervised public access in order to prevent damage and waste deposits. This plan was abandoned as it was assumed that confronting people – who already feel imprisoned and bound by check points – with yet another fence, would probably not help to strengthen their mental wellbeing, nor the relationship with the site managers. It was therefore encouraging to see through the survey results

that the inhabitants had been able to continue using the site. The survey also showed this free public accessibility was important for almost all respondents.

### *Opinions on developments*

The respondents' opinions about the park and the developments that took place since 2010 were fairly positive. In response to an open question (B1) on what they think about the park, 69% expressed positive comments. They said for instance 'it is a nice place' or 'it is beautiful', and some indicated 'it has improved' or 'it is better than it was before', or that they are happy with the project. Several people also referred to the site's importance for them personally, by saying for instance 'it's good, it's our old city', 'it is our culture', 'it is a center for local people', 'I feel proud of it' or they 'like to go there to play and have fun'.

The project enquired into how they felt about having such an archaeological park in their neighborhood by means of a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932), with answers ranging from 'I don't like it at all' (1 point), to 'I like it very much' (5 points). This confirmed the rather positive general public opinion; the female respondents scored an average of 4.5, the men a 4.7.

However, there were some critical comments as well. These were particularly informative as they provide insights on what needs to be improved. Respondents said for instance: 'it is beautiful, but nothing happens there', or 'it is a good place for tourists to visit, but it lacks care'.

### *Connectedness*

Another question which provided valuable insights concerned the residents' feelings of connectedness with the site (C1). A large majority (85%) answered they indeed feel connected with the site, 60% of them 'very much'. Interestingly, women showed a slightly stronger connectedness (64% said to feel very much connected), despite the fact that they physically visit it less often than men. Young adults (21-30, N=30) showed the lowest connectedness, with 43% indicating 'very much' and 30% 'not at all'. With this question we aimed to measure what in environmental psychology is called 'sense of place' and place attachment (Kudryavtsev, Krasny & Stedman, 2012); whether there is a relationship with the site beyond its functional meaning as a through-route or place to relax.

A sense of place emerges through knowledge of the history, geography, geology of an area, its flora and fauna, the legends of a place, and after living there for some time. The existence of a strong sense of place was found in the oral history project (Tell Balata Archaeological Park Project, 2011; Van den Dries & Van der Linde, 2012), but this bond, the place attachment, turned out to be remarkably strong for a large group. Not only the people who visit the site felt this connection, but even of those who indicated to never visit the site, still 41.5% said they feel 'very much'

connected. Place attachment therefore does not have to translate into physical engagement. It implies that places which residents do not visit may still be highly valued and may play an important role in peoples' life, their feeling of belonging, or wellbeing.

From this perspective it is not surprising that many young people showed a less strong connection. It is often found in public surveys that young people value things differently than older generations, and that a 'sense of place' may evolve over the course of a lifetime (Russ, Peters, Krasny & Stedman, 2015). It underlines that young generations may need to be addressed differently in terms of participation and inclusion strategies.

The rather strong attachment to Balata was also echoed in the residents' attitude towards mobility. Of all respondents 81% indicated to consider the presence of the site a reason not to move to another place (question C4). This was almost equal for men and women (83% and 80% respectively), but not for all age categories. Young adults (21-30) showed once more a bit less connectedness; 67% would consider the Tell a reason to stay.

### *Increased use*

Following questions asked if the residents thought more people were coming to the park due to the heritage conservation work (question C5), and if so, how they felt about that (C6). It was indeed noticed by 59% that more people were visiting the site since the site was turned into a visitor-friendly park. This seemed to have further strengthened their place attachment, as all except one said this made them feel even more proud of the place. One person indicated however that the increased visitor numbers also caused feelings of stress. Another four people felt angry. In their opinion the maintenance of the site was inadequate and they believed developments had taken place at the expense of family members, from whom land had been taken.

### *Potential values*

In response to the question if the community members would want to get more closely involved with the park (C7), 71% of the interviewed confirmed and 16% said 'maybe'. Residents from section C (the area roughly south to the site, which has the easiest access to it) were interested most, less so in section A, the more business-like area to the north. Interestingly, women showed a stronger interest than men once again; 74% said 'yes' (against 69% of the men). Only 9% of the women said not to be interested, versus 17% of the men.

To the question 'how' they would want to get involved (C8), 41% answered they would want to pay more visits. Some (14%) longed to learn more about the site and its historic meaning, but what is most interesting is the 34% indicating they would want to help (such as with social

events, with the promotion of the site or with management activities). Given the bad economic circumstances and prospects for the people in Palestine (on which the United Nations and the World Bank repeatedly report), one would perhaps expect people to look for economic benefits, but in Nablus this was not the outcome of the survey. .

This focus of the interviewees on the social rather than economic motives had already been noticed during the oral history project, when more than once participants suggested to turn the visitor center into a multi-purpose facility which they could use for family gatherings and social events like weddings. To learn how widely dispersed such wishes were among the wider community, this option of using the site for events was explicitly included in the questionnaire (question C9) and it turned out that a large majority of 79% would be in favor. This was the same for both gender groups. Another 88% of all respondents indicated they would certainly visit such events (C11). Women were slightly more hesitant (13% said 'maybe', against 5% of the men), but hardly any of them (2%) said 'no'. This more discrete reaction perhaps reflects these women's social position within the family and not being used to taking such decisions by themselves.

The residents were once more explicitly questioned about their aspirations to develop business activities in connection to the park (C16). Again, a majority said not to be interested; 59% of the male respondents and 51% of the female respondents. It was interesting to note, however, that women showed the strongest interest; 36% said 'yes' and another 13% 'maybe'. This was almost half of the female respondents group. It could mean men already had a job or business and women in particular saw new opportunities. This would match the existing data on high unemployment rates for women and their low participation rate in business, as discussed above. Given the fact that women mostly work in services, a service like managing and running a site park might provide ideal participation opportunities for them. This was another useful piece of information for the site's future management, as it revealed a potential opportunity for capacity building and generating income.

### *Impact*

The respondents could indicate if they (or their family members) experienced personal benefits from the site in economic terms; either through employment, capacity building, business opportunities, tourism, or anything else (question D1). Interestingly, tourism was mentioned as the prime benefit (selected by 53%), followed by employment (12%) and capacity building (10%). However, as very few experienced business opportunities (6%), 'tourism' in this case does not seem to reflect business opportunities or employment. The Balata residents seemed to connect mainly social values to tourism, such as meeting visitors.

When we asked about social benefits (D3), a large majority indicated to experience several, in particular opportunities for leisure and meeting other people (figure 3.2). Only 10% did not indicate any social benefit.

To gain insights into the social and economic effects people had experienced from the recent developments on the site, we asked if they experienced a loss or gain of these factors since the developments (question D2). Indeed, 73% experienced a gain, 15% a loss. For women this was once more a slightly higher number (75%) than for men (70%). In relation to the social benefits (D4), 76% said to have gained them.

A next section of the questionnaire investigated if residents experienced an impact of the developments on the area or community (rather than individually). This was checked against a predefined list of potential positive (question D7) or negative (D8) effects. It turned out that the residents first and foremost felt the area to be less neglected (Figure 3). Both gender groups replied identically (33% for both) as to this aspect. The second-best scored aspect was 'more community cohesion', which was selected by 21% of the men and 24% of the women. A few had also noticed an increase in services (9%) and businesses (5%). Again, the positive effects centralized around social rather than economic gain.

Through a similar question on drawbacks (D8), the respondents could report negative effects (figure 3.3). Some indicated that they experienced increased pollution (25%) or noise (12%), but the most reported drawback (37%) was a more limited access to resources, like access to the land and the olive groves on the Tell. This probably relates to the fact that the park area (with the groves) usually closes for the night to avoid potential damaging or polluting of the site.

Given the fact that the site plays an important role in the social life and identity of many residents of Balata village, these are very important signals that need to be taken into account and investigated further. If site managers and local authorities intend to take the values-based approach to heritage management seriously and thus also the stakes of the community members, it is a moral obligation to try to mitigate such negative impacts and to monitor how this subsequently develops.

### *World Heritage status*

To the question (E1), if the respondents would like Tell Balata to gain UNESCO World Heritage status, an overwhelming large majority of 98% said they would. The reasons why they would applaud a World Heritage status (E2), were once again rarely economic (6%) or other personal reasons (11%). It appears to be more important for the villagers to have the site looked after and to share it with visitors than to have personal and financial benefits (figure 3.4). Their main motive was that it would make the site better known and thus attract visitors. They expected

this to bring positive change (question E5) in terms of a further development of the area (36%) and the site (23%).

With regard to the ambition to include Tell Balata in a World Heritage nomination procedure, it must be stressed that this response cannot be considered an informed consent from these respondents, nor was it meant to be. The team assumed familiarity among the residents with the concept of 'World Heritage' and its potential pros and cons, as Palestine had in 2015 already two sites on the list (e.g., the church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route in Bethlehem, 2012, and the cultural landscape of southern Jerusalem, Battir, 2014). Additional information on potential positive or negative implications of such a development necessary for informed consent was therefore not provided.

The survey results suggest that an informed consent by the villagers is required prior to a nomination. Whilst most respondents considered it an opportunity, it cannot be assumed all community members realize or have a comprehensive idea of what may happen to their way of life and their bond with this heritage. The local community therefore needs to be informed about potential consequences of a World Heritage status to safeguard what is their heritage. Given their bond with the place and the value it has for their wellbeing, they should also be empowered to develop future strategies to help them benefit from any such development.

## **Conclusion and discussion: Tell Balata living heritage?**

The heritage site that is currently known as Tell Balata (Nablus), used to be an important capital, where people lived for centuries. It was subsequently abandoned, rediscovered, excavated, and neglected. It changed into a city ruin, which then developed into arable land and a dump place for urban waste. However, it also became a habitat for a rich urban wildlife, including plants, flowers, birds, insects and reptiles. From observations by team members of the Tell Balata Archaeological Park project and an oral history project with local community members, it was established that the site, as a natural environment, is heavily used by local residents for outdoor activities. As such it adds to the health and mental wellbeing of the residents of Balata village.

A recent public survey among a group of 205 residents living close to Tell Balata confirmed that the site plays an important role for a remarkably large number of residents. Almost all respondents said they visit the site regularly and that these visits contributed to their social bonding and their wellbeing. The site is an intrinsic element of their living environment. For these people, the site has never been 'dead', nor has it been "just ruins". It is part of their every-day life, their landscape, stories, and memories. They use the place for family gatherings, as part of their daily commuting route, or to meet fellow residents and heritage visitors.



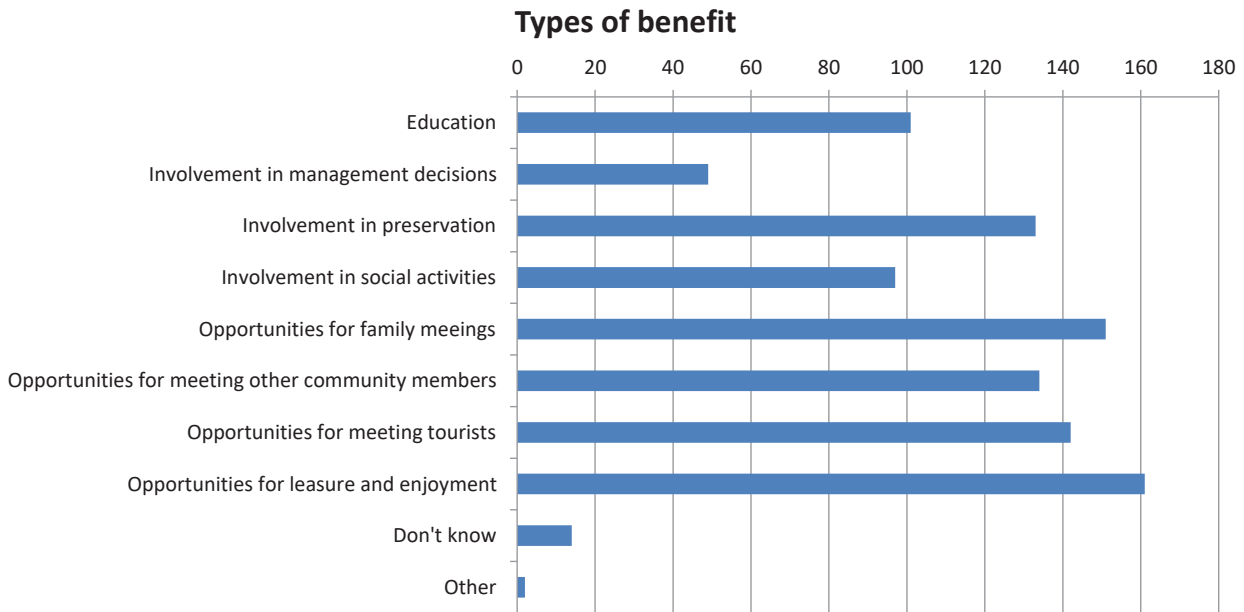


Figure 3.2. The social benefits residents experience from Tell Balata Archaeological Park.

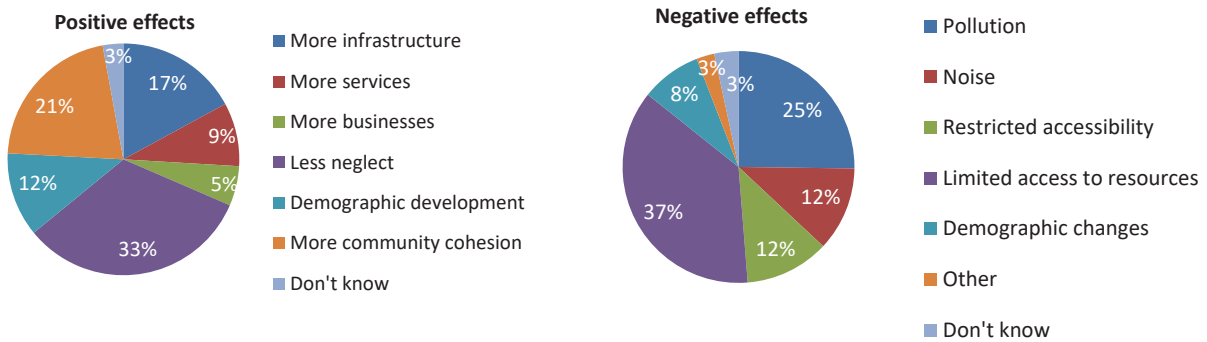


Figure 3.3. The positive and negative effects the survey respondents assigned to the development of the park.

The respondents also showed an exceptionally strong emotional attachment to the site, even though many did not know of its precise historical narrative. Having this heritage place in their living environment was highly valued by most villagers and added to their place attachment and identity, even for those who never physically visit the place. There were not many economic benefits, nor were these expected or wished for by most respondents. Rather, this heritage represents hope, ambition, and resilience; the residents are very proud of the place and consider the remnants from the past a gateway to escape from their poor socio-political situation of isolation. It offers them a prospect for a better future in which they will be able to literally connect and engage with the world outside.

The results clearly show that the members of the local community developed a strong sense of place and an attachment to a historic area that they did not built

themselves, and to which they are not even the so-called 'core community' as defined by the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2015). For these people, the past is simply part of the living present. This illustrates how ancient remains to which a community has no lineage can still be cherished, simply because they are a part of their living environment. Such a strong bond with an archaeological site is rather unique, as we often experience the opposite, with heritage managers having difficulties to encourage people to participate and engage in safeguarding ancient sites.

This strong attachment implies that limiting access to the heritage site (for instance by blocking access) could emotionally hurt and affect this society's quality of life. Moreover, to impede on the way these people live with the

heritage would intrude on the *right* to have access to it and to benefit from it, as stated in contemporary cultural heritage policies of the United Nations, which formally recognize “that the violation or abuse of the right of everyone to take part in cultural life, including the ability to access and enjoy cultural heritage, may threaten stability, social cohesion and cultural identity, and constitutes an aggravating factor in conflict and a major obstacle to dialogue, peace and reconciliation” (United Nations, General Assembly, 2016). This community therefore should be protected from negative impacts by a confined use of the site that jeopardizes their way of life.

This meaning attributed to their heritage by contemporary generations implies that a site’s safeguarding and management should start by looking at the people potentially impacted by it. As the key value here is the *wellbeing* of community members, this then asks for an even stronger people-centered approach than most heritage managers currently tend to apply. The value-based approach that the Balata team originally set out to apply, for instance, does not do sufficient justice to the specific needs of the community. In this approach, no values or stakeholders are *a priori* ranked above others (Mason, 2002). Moreover, it is often applied to sites that may not be considered of playing a crucial role in daily life. As such, it may not always take the living dimension of a heritage site sufficiently into account (see also Poullos, 2010).

Based on the results of this survey, self-critical reflection, and debates in multicultural settings, which all led to an enhanced awareness and new insights, the authors plead for cases like Tell Balata to adopt a people-centred method such as defined in the Living Heritage approach of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2015; and see Poullos, 2010). The core principle of this Living Heritage approach is ICCROM’s statements that ‘Cultural heritage has been created by people [...] for people’ (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2015, 3) and that as long as it is valued, ‘no heritage is dead’. It implies that if it keeps being valued (even though its function may change), if it is living heritage that matters to people, these living communities should come first.

Why does it matter that places like Balata should be considered as living heritage? What difference does it make? It matters because in this approach there is no doubt or discussion as to whether the community associated with the heritage should be empowered to take decisions that may impact them. It is thus a status which acknowledges the rights of the people concerned and bestows moral duties on those in power. This implies that if people consider the heritage they live with as theirs and as part of the present,

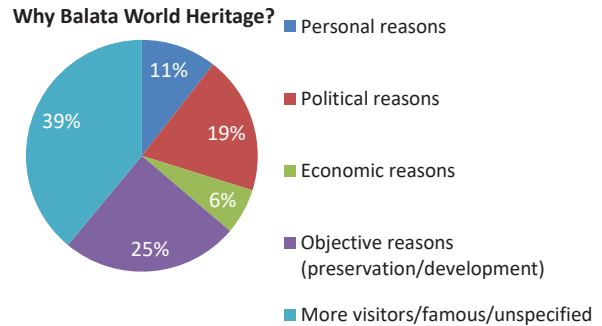


Figure 3.4. The reasons why the respondents would like Tell Balata gain World Heritage status.

it is not up to heritage professionals, authorities, or other stakeholders to *not* consider it living heritage.

This is also highly relevant in relation to the second main outcome of the Tell Balata survey, which is that change due to heritage conservation can surely have an impact on the surrounding environment. It may bring benefits to the local community, as well as new, perhaps unforeseen, challenges. This underlines how heritage development in the public domain is a *public affair* and needs to be lined up with public goals, such as sustainable development objectives. If it affects local development, heritage conservation therefore needs to emphasize providing communities with a genuine, self-driven role, like the living heritage approach suggests (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2015). For heritage places like Balata, which lack a descendant or core community, this is however not yet a common practice. It is in any case not considered as important as it is in other kinds of living heritage places that have a *core* community (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2015). Thus, adopting this approach and adding the people-centered management perspective to the value-based approach could mean a step forward in truly empowering communities.

ICCROM encourages readers to apply its living heritage approach in any context. The question then is how can we do this in places like Balata? Are we, as heritage managers, sufficiently equipped to do so? As archaeologists and heritage managers responsible for their safeguarding and management, we may know what is best for archaeological remains, but do we know what is best for communities? Surely not. Only these communities themselves know what is best for them. Therefore, they need to be involved and queried as to their needs and wishes, and empowered to take control over the development of their heritage. This implies that heritage managers should not merely look at external impacts on heritage, such as through the increasingly popular instrument of heritage impact

assessments. They should also include perspectives from the inside out and pay explicit attention to the potential impacts of heritage conservation and development on its users and their social environment. Instruments like social impact assessments therefore deserve a central role in heritage management.

This conclusion is supported by the third main outcome of the survey, which is that it proved to be a valuable management instrument. Asking the community for input was extremely informative. People clearly expressed what the site means to them and what their concerns, wishes and needs are, but also how they can play a role safeguarding it. It was a relatively small investment which strengthened the relationship with the community and created opportunities for collaboration. For the future, it enables a bottom-up management approach which helps to maintain existing social and economic benefits and create new ones for the community.

Collecting this kind of data is therefore crucial for a site like Balata. It could be turned into a potent tool for empowerment. In our case, a summary of the results was shared with the community by means of a brochure (in Arabic and English, Van den Dries, 2018) which was distributed among the residents. They may use the results to raise a voice in case their interests are at stake or jeopardized. Moreover, we even noticed that the survey had a value in itself. Participants felt proud and privileged to be listened to by representatives of local authorities and international scholars.

Unfortunately, it is still an exception rather than a standard procedure to conduct surveys like this in archaeological site management. But as they suit a people-centered approach, the authors recommend a wider use to discover if a site is part of the living environment and if a living heritage approach could do better justice to the people it concerns.

To conclude this chapter, the authors wish to emphasize that putting wellbeing at the heart of future heritage conservation and preservation work, goes far beyond putting the soul back in archaeology in our storytelling, as some of the authors advocated as well (Van der Linde, Van den Dries & Wait, 2018). Neither is it just about having people participate for wellbeing purposes in joyful activities, even though this adds to wellbeing too (Boom, 2018). It implies that we are almost completely re-inventing archaeology as an applied science servicing society. It is an 'archaeology of the heart' (see also Supernant, Baxter, Lyons & Atalay, 2020).

The authors also realize of course that this will surely not be an easy panacea that will solve all issues, but it may at least avoid some tokenism when it comes to participation and collaboration with living communities (e.g., Van den Dries, 2015). Even some of the challenges in living heritage cities as discussed throughout this

volume – like finding a balance between an authentic and a dynamic city life, and designing a sustainable urban future – may get an entirely new dimension if one looks at it from a living heritage perspective, putting the wellbeing of local communities at the core of safeguarding living heritage cities.

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