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Allison Mickel

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Allison Mickel

Lehigh University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bethlehem, ajm717@lehigh.edu

Whether because of the lack of funds or personnel, or the flooding, or intensifying hostilities that ultimately resulted in the deaths of several site workers, William Kennett Loftus's excavations at Susa during the 1850s were far from an absolute success. This is not to say that the undertaking was an utter failure either; Loftus, after all, produced a detailed plan of the site and oversaw the uncovering of the Apadana – the audience hall of the Palace of Darius (Loftus 1857; Curtis 1993). He is also credited with identifying the site as the biblical Shushan. But after Loftus finished digging at Susa, British researcher and diplomat Henry Rawlinson stated that Loftus “had turned the mound of Susa topsy-turvy without finding much” (Curtis 1993: 15).

Rawlinson was not the only one to feel this way. When the Dieulafoys arrived at Susa in the 1880s, Jane Dieulafoy politely described Loftus's work as a series of “awkward attempts to secure an inscription” (J. Dieulafoy 1890: 42). In contrast to this, the Dieulafoys prioritized planning their expedition to be accurate, systematic, and thorough. In Jane's own words: “it does not enter into my husband's views to dig any holes whatever and to *search*, in the dark, for ‘museum-objects;’ excavations executed with method alone can give scientific results” (J. Dieulafoy 1890: 89).

Their contemporaries, too, recognized the Dieulafoys' excavation for its exacting execution and control. In an 1884 review of Marcel Dieulafoy's *L'art antique de la Perse*, Auguste Choisy called M. Dieulafoy's work and publication “*vraiment scientifique*” (Choisy 1884: 395). In 1886, Ernest Babelon deemed M. Dieulafoy to have broken new empirical ground, saying that “no one, until now, had studied and classified scientifically the ancient monuments of Iran, or carried on methodical excavations on sites” (Babelon 1886: 53).

As a result of this adherence to systematism and the evidence thereby collected, M. Dieulafoy mounted a case that Persians had borrowed their artistic techniques from other cultural groups – primarily the Greeks. M. Dieulafoy (1884) argued that although many of the architectural forms visible at Susa and other Persian sites were unique because of the particular climatological conditions in Persia, many of the foundational construction practices evident in Persian sites were fundamentally Greek in origin.

While such a diffusionist standpoint is now quite outdated, it was conceived with the utmost commitment to what was at the time objective and scientific evidence-gathering and interpretation. This is perhaps why Babelon claimed that M. Dieulafoy has provided “a certain *proof* that the Persians learned from the Ionian Greeks the secret of their art” (Babelon 1886: 56, emphasis added).

But the use of scientific methods and data to make an argument does not make it apolitical. M. Dieulafoy's claims that Persian art and architecture were not indigenous inventions take on a sharp edge when viewed in light of Jane's descriptions of the “Dizfulites,” a contemporary Iranian population whom she refers to as “the last representatives of the old Susian race” (J. Dieulafoy 1890: 90). Jane says that the Dizfulites are “the scum of the population,” and:

“They are small, puny, weak, badly formed, afflicted with purulent diseases, adorned with bandages and plasters, ugly in appearance, covered with a light chocolate-colored skin, and present the striking characteristics of certain black races. The forehead, two fingers high, is surrounded by hair cut straight around it; the skull is small, the mouth thick-lipped, the heel protruding... [Their] poverty would account, to a certain extent, for their moral and physical infirmities.” (J. Dieulafoy 1890: 90)

M. Dieulafoy's conclusions, despite their scientific basis – or perhaps even because of it – were not agenda-free. The thoughtfully-placed trenches and thorough excavation served to motivate the cultural dispossession of both ancient and contemporary Persians. This was, in 1886, an activist archaeology. It was also a scientific excavation; these are not exclusive categories.

There are archaeologists like Randall McGuire who have stated that “archaeology is always political” (2008: xii; see also Panameño and Nalda 1979; Hamilakis and Duke 2007; Boytner et al. 2010). Archaeology-based claims and archaeological practice itself are both implicated in power dynamics. Nationalist archaeologies serve to re-trench state power, while archaeologies of marginalized communities hold liberatory potential. Whether reinforcing or challenging contemporary hierarchies and structures, archaeology is political.

I argue that it is also activist, in the sense of intentionally trying to effect a certain social or political outcome. Colonial archaeology was activist, working to both ideologically and materially enable conquest and colonial administration. The archaeologies of newly independent nations in the early 20th century often sought to establish national narratives and identities. But even positivist archaeological work such as that of the Dieulafoys at Susa has aimed at questions relevant to contemporary social structure and power dynamics. It is a false dichotomy to imagine that only archaeological work aimed at overturning inequities is activist, but archaeological work serving – even implicitly – to uphold and justify those same inequities is not.

In the Middle East it is particularly clear how archaeological sites are always imbricated in contemporary politics. Monuments have been destroyed and artifacts sold by extremist groups such as the Taliban and Da'esh for both ideological and financial ends (Flood 2002; Brodie and Sabine 2017). Archaeological sites in countries such as Egypt and Jordan are popular tourism destinations for visitors from all over the globe, driving a vital sector of the national economy. And in the Gulf archaeology and cultural heritage have become a key state strategy for projecting a more cosmopolitan and liberal identity to the world (Ouroussoff 2010; Hanounik Huth 2014; Abuhjeeleh 2019). Throughout this region, archaeology, society, and economy are intrinsically married to one another.

It is therefore unsurprising to see archaeological sites and symbols show up across the range of activism in the Middle East. For example, in 2019, Egyptian whistleblower Mohamed Ali called for protestors against Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's presidency to congregate at the Great Pyramids in Giza. The iconic ancient remains were, in his mind, an ideal staging ground for visible political demonstration (Middle East Eye 2019).

Palestinian activists have utilized similar strategies, as in 1993 when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) centered on a scale model of the Dome of the Rock (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996). In this case, it was a representation of a cultural heritage site rather than the site itself which signified the protestors' demands. Museums, too, play an important role in activist curation and storytelling in the Middle East. Lina Khatib (2012) describes the museumification of material culture from uprisings in Egypt and Libya, in which tear gas canisters and protest signs are being preserved in cases and contextualized with labels. Khatib states that this process is a means for citizens to lay claim to power; the museum and its relationship to cultural heritage transform trash into material culture and legitimize the struggle as a whole. Archaeology and cultural heritage function both materially and ideologically as flashpoints and pathways for activism.

I witnessed this during my fieldwork in Petra, Jordan. In spring 2015, the Jordanian government shut down a money-laundering scheme that had been operating in southern Jordan for years. In the venture, families would lend property, usually cars, to Azmi Nasarat and his brother, who would pay amounts 30–40% in excess of the value of the property (al-Tweissi 2015). While the scheme had always been illegal, and many interlocutors told me it always seemed suspicious, families in the south believed that the government was aware of it and was allowing it to continue. They perceived it as an open secret with minimal risk if they chose to participate. But the end came swiftly and unexpectedly when the government seized all of the property lent to Nasarat at the time. Families throughout southern Jordan lost huge amounts of savings and property overnight – everything from cash to cars to sheep and goats. The impact on the town of Wadi Musa, where I was living, was immediately apparent. Streets ordinarily blocked with gridlock were suddenly empty; the usual sounds of honking and diesel engines rumbling were replaced with eerie silence. The loss was devastating and the communities living near Petra organized to pressure the government to return the seized property. They decided to shut down the highway leading to Petra as well as the Park's main entrance.

The choice to close off access to Petra was, of course, in part economic. Although 2015 saw a slump in tourism to Jordan, there were still around a half million visitors that year – most of whom would come to Petra and pay the 50–90 JD entrance ticket (AlArabiya News 2020). More recently, visitorship to Petra has surpassed a million people annually (Arraf 2020). Some have even estimated that Petra alone supplies around 10% of Jordan's GDP (Bille 2019: 13). Closing off the entrances to the Park would send a powerful signal to the state, depriving it of much-needed and significant revenue.

But Petra also occupies an important symbolic position for contemporary Jordanians. It is iconic, almost a metonym for authentic Jordanian identity. The singular architecture, the dusky desert landscape, and its position as a trading center all evoke pride in elements of what is supposedly most core to being Jordanian – innovation, strength, and most of all, hospitality. However unintentionally, archaeological work at Petra has fed into this perception of connection between past and present Jordanian identity. Excavations have illustrated the engineering acumen of the Nabataean population, and their ability to persist through extreme environmental conditions. Archaeologists have written about the Nabataeans feasting and about syncretic rituals and religious practices at the cosmopolitan trading center. These findings have fed into the pride and feelings of connection between modern Jordan and ancient Petra.

The work of archaeologists therefore contributed to the reasons why Petra served as such an ideal focal point for protest in Wadi Musa. The message was not only one of control over funds but also over past and narrative. The choice of Petra as a site for resistance was based in both material conditions and historical understandings. Archaeological work contributes to both of these, whether intentionally or not. In Petra, archaeological work underpins activism.

The history of archaeology is one of activism and in the present-day Middle East, activism makes use of archaeological spaces and claims. As such, archaeologists have no choice but to recognize their role in political struggle. Fortunately, there are ways to use this inescapable position to work toward emancipatory futures, and not to be co-opted into oppression and violence. What does that look like?

In Jordan, water availability is an activist issue (Zawahri 2012). Amidst protests against the current systems governing water management in Jordan, archaeologists are positioned to contribute to the science and infrastructure of water reclamation. Our excavations have revealed how communities in antiquity constructed dams, wells, terraces, and channels to collect and redistribute water – and successfully managed large-scale gardens and even pools. In the context of the contemporary water crisis, this is knowledge that can be marshalled for public benefit. Some archaeologists have begun doing just this – in Umm al-Jimal, in Udhruh, and in Petra (AbdulKhaleq and Ahmed 2007; al Zeez Shqairat et al. 2010; Abdelal et al. 2021).

Relatedly, landscape restoration can be as much a part of heritage conservation as of activist praxis. Increasingly, plant life and terrain feature in conservation and restoration plans, with the absorption, windbreak, and cultural value of flora all being considered as potential assets to site preservation (Restuccia et al. 2012; Scharf 2014; Margetts 2021). Planting and re-wilding a landscape also impinges on sustainability, food shortage, and even place-making. In Petra, deforestation has had dramatic effects both ecologically and culturally (Addison 2011); the loss of trees has contributed to the drought in the area, the loss of other plants, the shrinking of traditional grazing lands, and the depletion of wooded picnicking areas. Implementing landscape restoration as part of conservation practice in this context is activist, enabling social and subsistence practices to continue and ensuring public space for diverse community members.

Archaeologists' practices and decisions around how we organize our excavations are also inherently political and activist. Choices about accommodations, equipment rental and purchasing, as well as codes of conduct are all caught up in aspirational power dynamics. Labor conditions are a particularly salient focal point for activist archaeological practice. Choosing whether or not to make an effort to hire women, safety procedures, and pay scales are all political issues (Mickel 2021). Particularly in places with high unemployment and poverty rates, decisions about who to hire are fraught with issues of need, equity, and power-sharing. Furthermore, in a region where archaeology has been so entwined historically with conquest and extraction, treating and paying local workers as meaningful partners in all elements of the excavation process is ultimately activist practice.

Precisely because it is always political, and always *active* in the world, archaeology is inherently activist, as it has been since its inception. Archaeological work – from the questions asked to the methodologies implemented – takes account of the past and aims toward specific visions and ideals of the future. In the Middle East, this orientation has historically been one of foreign control over archaeological resources within the region, and thereby the territories and nations of the area. But today, archaeologists have a choice in whether they are swept up in this current – whether intentionally or simply by attempting to stand still. Instead, archaeologists can make investigations and interventions, redirecting the activist force of archaeology to serve liberatory futures for the diverse communities affected by archaeological work.

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