

BOOK REVIEWS

Facts on the Ground. Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society

By Nadia Abu El-Haj, Chicago:University of Chicago Press, 2001, 352 pp.

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The close relationship between archaeology and the construction of national ideologies and myths has been long recognized by critical theorists. In this context, Nadia Abu El-Haj's *Facts on the Ground* provides little genuinely new in way of theoretical insight. Instead, it offers an in-depth examination of the specifics of this relationship in a case study of the state of Israel and the development of its archaeology. Unfortunately, the scholarship is flawed by biases in the selection of the materials reviewed as well as in those ignored or dismissed.

For the most part the study follows a chronological organization, attempting to characterize different periods in the history of archaeology in Israel/Palestine by focusing on dominant and classic projects. Thus, for the archaeology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Survey of Palestine conducted by the British Palestine Exploration Fund is the primary example used to demonstrate the tight relationship between imperialist perceptions, religious motivations and the conduct of the science. The biases inherent in that archaeology resulted in fundamental misapprehensions of the nature and place of the indigenous peoples and cultures of the region - indeed their virtual dismissal from history - with ramifications for both the science and the politics of Palestine. This theme recurs throughout Abu El-Haj's study.

The seeds of Israeli archaeology, sown in British Mandatory Palestine, are next examined in their institutionalization in the academic discipline. It is in the mandate period that one can first track down the use of archaeology for the legitimization of Jewish claims to the land and no less importantly, for the construction of a Jewish identity linked to it. In particular, the activities of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society are examined, for example in the organization of *yediat ha'arezt* [knowledge of the land] conferences, the establishment of the *tiyyul* [hike] as a national sport, in the composition of the Antiquities Law and, most notably, in the renaming or Hebraicization of the landscape. Abu El-Haj's conclusion that archaeology was part and parcel of the Zionist enterprise *seems* inescapable. The corollary, that this enterprise worked both to erase evidence of

Arab presence and legitimacy, as well as to (re)construct a Jewish national myth, follows.

The succeeding two chapters, 'Positive Facts of Nationhood' and 'Excavating Jerusalem', review the State of Israel's first 25 years of archaeology by focusing on two large scale projects, the excavation of Hazor (with its attendant controversies) and the excavations conducted in post-1967 Jerusalem. In these chapters, the archaeological emphasis on "Jewish" periods, indeed the construction of certain periods *as* Jewish periods, is well documented. With respect to Hazor, Abu El-Haj astutely notes the structural parallels between the bitterly contested claims made by archaeologists Aharoni and Yadin concerning the origins of Israelite settlement. She concludes, for example, that both accepted the biblical account in its basic features, flawed as it was in retrospect. Aharoni and Yadin established an early baseline for Israelite - (read: *Israeli* in Hebrew) - presence in Israel. Analysis of the post-1967 excavations in Jerusalem demonstrates clearly the unholy alliance between the state and archaeology.

The book's remaining chapters pursue the same themes through the late 1990s. Discussions of the Tower of David Museum, the Western Wall Heritage Tunnel, archaeological excavation methods (especially at Tel Jezreel), and the conflicts with haredi [ultra-orthodox Jewish] groups over the excavation of burials, are drawn upon to demonstrate the co-option of archaeology, not only to service the state, but essentially to bolster reactionary elements within the state. The bottom line, as implied by Abu El-Haj, is that Israeli archaeology is ultimately a corrupted science, unable to escape its past and unwilling to embrace a different future.

The problem with this analysis is in the polemic. In presenting her basic argument, Abu El-Haj has studiously avoided data, factors and narratives which might suggest alternative or even complementary interpretations of the development of Israeli archaeology. In isolating Israeli archaeology from the rest of the discipline, she implies that flawed methods and logic are only the result of an insidious link with Zionism, and not an integral part of the discipline worldwide. Finally, in employing methods based on informant ethnography, without offering justification or discussion of sampling strategies, we can only wonder at her choices and the picture derived from them. A few examples will not suffice, but will serve to illustrate some of these problems.

Demographic and economic factors in the growth of archaeology in Israel had major effects on its development. *Facts on the Ground* gives no sense of the tremendous growth of archaeology in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s and of the remarkably limited scope of the discipline prior to that time. For example, in the early years of the state, Yigael Yadin could be a profoundly dominant figure partly because the cadre of professional archaeologists was so small. In fact, there was only a single academic department of archaeology in the entire coun-

try. It is no wonder that Yadin's personal and often problematic opinions held such monolithic sway through the early 1970s. It is also no accident that Hebrew University remains a bastion of traditional biblical archaeology to this day. Nevertheless, the growth of the discipline, from the 1970s onward, combined with academic generational disputes and increasing economic input, especially through the establishment of the Israel Antiquities Authority (replacing the Department of Antiquities), all resulted in major divergences, diversifications, schisms and innovations in Israeli archaeology.

Abu El-Haj implies that these "innovations" are more apparent than real, but this is to dismiss or ignore, for example, the striking rise of Israeli prehistoric archaeology, which possesses tenuous or no ties to particularistic nationalism. Furthermore, even within the realm of biblical archaeology, the leading archaeological practitioners of the 'minimalist' school who discount the general historicity of the bible are Israelis.

Abu El-Haj fails to mention the Negev Emergency Survey, a project on a par with those reviewed in *Facts on the Ground* in terms of scope and budget. Yet, it is this survey and associated excavations, which has resulted in some of the most significant conclusions regarding the rise of Islam in Palestine, including explicit attacks on traditionalist perspectives concerning the Arab conquests and the role of the Arabs in regional history. Other overlooked, large-scale projects, such as at Caesarea, have also provided major new insights into Medieval times. Even a brief perusal of the distribution of excavation licenses and permits issued by the Antiquities Authority in the past two decades would reveal a major shift away from "Jewish" archaeology.

Israeli archaeology has never existed in any kind of archaeological vacuum. The pots=people equation so (correctly) contested in Chapter 5 as a particularly Israeli archaeological sin was and continues to be a problematic feature of archaeology the world over. Similarly, other disputed methods such as the use of heavy equipment on archaeological sites are debated all over. It is not clear if Abu El-Haj's particularistic critique is a case of disinterest, disingenuousness, or simply ignorance of archaeological methods by a non-archaeologist.

The use of informants in ethnography is a well-known and well-established method. So too are its limitations. Insights gained from informant interviews must be tempered by understanding the problems of informants' idiosyncrasies, knowledge and agendas. Interviews with yeshiva students working as tour guides at the Western Wall tunnel undoubtedly reflect specific ideological agendas, but these can hardly be classed as archaeological. Given this background, other aspects of Abu El-Haj's conclusions derived from more archaeologically-informed interviews are suspect as well.

Facts on the Ground, after all, is not ethnography, but polemic. The data presented, or rather those not presented, provide more grist for critique here. However, the linkages between archaeology and ideology, in this case Israeli nationalism, are really no longer at issue. The Israeli government, like most governments, continues to exploit the discipline to its own goals, and certain elements of the discipline are most ready and willing to be exploited. Yet, the power of archaeology as a symbol has declined. The *yediat ha'aretz* conferences which used to draw thousands of lay persons have degenerated to professional meetings that bring perhaps a few hundred professional archaeologists together. Disputes that once raged over the biblical record and its archaeological counterparts have devolved into questions over the very legitimacy of such questions. Generational conflicts between younger and older archaeologists have given way to entirely new realms of study, like gender, social structures and transformations and economic structures, etc. for the entire chronological range of settlement in the region. These important studies are, unfortunately, entirely ignored. In the end, for the archaeologist-reader with even marginal critical awareness, *Facts on the Ground* disappoints in that it promotes a caricature of the discipline rather than its characterization.