

APPROACHES TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY

OF BEIRUT

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Different heritage realms generate different conflicts. Endemic to archaeology are disputes over national or ethnic primacy, the validity of famed remains, preferred prehistoric or historic epochs, the repatriation of ... skeletal remains, the primacy of scholarly versus sacred values of relics. Those who would restrict excavation rights to nationals are at loggerheads with international scholars. The allocation of finds among national, regional, local and *in situ* display sites is bitterly contested. Impassioned disputes attest the close linkage of heritage and habitat, the felt fusion of identity with locale. (Lowenthal 1995)

INTRODUCTION

The demolition and refurbishment of war damaged buildings and the construction of new buildings in the Central District of Beirut (BCD) revealed to the world what a number of archaeologists had long suspected; that beneath the existing city a deep and complex stratigraphic sequence survived, attesting to the city's long history as an important regional centre and trading port. The recent history of international archaeological involvement in the city has been marred by a series of controversies generated by the differing intellectual traditions of archaeological practice and research and by the various perspectives of local archaeologists, politicians, journalists and the developers. The different points of view have been aired in a number of publications, both printed and electronic, but without the acknowledgement (or in some cases, it would seem, even the awareness) that many of the conflicts were due to fundamentally different conceptions of archaeology as an intellectual discipline. In this short paper I shall discuss some of the issues behind one particular conflict; that between an antiquarian approach to the past and a contextual approach.

My own involvement in Beirut was based upon my role as a finds manager employed by the ACRE / American University in Beirut / Leverhulme Archaeological Project team excavating sites BEY 006 and BEY 045 adjacent to the Rue Weygand. The excavation of these two sites, conducted according the principles and practices which are standard in (and can be said to partially constitute) British archaeology, and the controversies generated by these practices form the background to this paper. Not being a

specialist in the archaeology of the eastern Mediterranean, but having had experience of a number of different regional traditions of archaeological research, I took the opportunity to observe the processes of conflict and negotiation which surrounded much of the archaeological work carried out in the BCD. This resulted in two papers in which I attempted to set the situation in Beirut into wider theoretical frameworks. The first of these papers was a discussion of methods of the recording, preservation and presentation of archaeological remains in which I questioned the prevailing local orthodoxy of preservation *in situ*, characterising it as an essentially antiquarian response to the discovery of archaeological remains (Cumberpatch, cf. *Berytus*, 1995-1996). In the second paper I focused on attitudes to Classical antiquities in Lebanon more generally and characterised them as fetishistic, involving an overdetermination of value (in cultural terms) and a commodification of knowledge subsequently deployed to support particular socio-political attitudes (Cumberpatch in prep, cf. Dant 1996).

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ANTIQUARIAN IMPULSE

In this paper I want to develop some of the themes set out in the earlier papers and to emphasise particularly the view that archaeological knowledge should be regarded not as the discovery of unambiguous facts about the past, but as a contextually situated intellectual and cultural construction, pertaining to the past but fundamentally constrained by the social, political and personal perspectives of the analyst(s) as well as by the nature of the data. This is, I feel, a point of view with significant implications for the many situations in which archaeology forms part of a past contested by different elements in a society and in which the past forms part of contemporary discourses concerning the nature of present identities, ethnicities and nationhood.

The acknowledgement that there is no one, single, meta-theoretical archaeological orthodoxy to be universally applied to archaeological data and its interpretation is critical if we wish to resolve conflicts between local people, the archaeological authorities, visiting archaeological teams and developers. Only if we do this can we begin to search for some form of mutually acceptable practice in which the outcomes acknowledge the existence of different perspectives on the past and its material traces with

out doing violence to any one of them. In parallel to this it must be acknowledged that, while there are different ways of encountering and knowing the past, some of these are richer than others in that they allow the formulation of broader and

more inclusive interpretations or explanations of particular sets of archaeological data. The resolution of this apparent conflict between liberal pluralism and methodological and intellectual rigour is one of the most pressing problems in contemporary archaeology. It is also one with very real political implications.

The particular example which I shall consider is the debate over preservation by record versus preservation *in situ*, an issue which was the cause of considerable debate (both official and informal) between the AUB/Leverhulme team, the UNESCO scientific committee and employees of the DGA. It encapsulates some of the distinctions between an antiquarian and a contextual archaeology.

The preservation of archaeological remains *in situ* carries several possible meanings. It can cover the total statutory protection of an unexcavated site or a part of a site with the intention of preserving it for future generations of archaeologists. A second meaning, and the one which was strongly advocated by UNESCO and the DGA with regard to Beirut, refers to the retention, in a partially excavated state, of sections or phases of a site while limited excavation continues on other parts of the site. The final intention is that the elements left *in situ*, normally parts of monumental buildings and architectural elements, will then be stabilised and conserved prior to their incorporation into the contemporary urban landscape.

In contrast, preservation by record implies the complete excavation of a site with the archaeological features recorded (in written form, graphically, photographically and electronically) and the artefacts, animal bones, seed and plant remains and soil samples collected to form a complete archive, to be analysed, published, curated and made available to future generations of researchers.

The distinctions between these two perspectives involve more than just alternative approaches to the same body of data. They represent two different approaches to the possibility of knowledge of the past.

Preservation *in situ* is essentially concerned with structures, specifically stone built structures, and an encounter with the monumentality of a past society. This inevitably entails a focus on certain chronological periods and architectural practices. The concentration on these elements is at the expense of the archaeological strata which lie beneath them and behind them, to the extent that the approach can be described as conservative rather than investigative. It is antiquarian in that the focus is on the preservation of particular material elements which come to stand for the presence of the past in the present and serve to exemplify a certain type of technical achievement which we recognise, through our own experience and sets of values, as being of particular significance.

Under such an intellectual regime, pre-existing assumptions regarding cultural significance are employed to determine which elements of a site are of the greatest importance and it is these which are then designated for preservation. That this inevitably restricts the further investigation of earlier periods, sealed beneath the preserved architectural elements, is not deemed as significant as the fact of the preservation of particular items of immediate, visual, impact. The inevitable corollary of such an approach is the downplaying of the significance of the stratigraphic record and the contextual aspects of the site as a whole. It is antiquarian in that it is essentially object-orientated and conservative as opposed to analytical, contextually sensitive and investigative.

Preservation by record is, in complete contrast, a contextual approach. Here the interrelationships between different types of objects (from the smallest bone pin or fragment of flint debitage to the largest column fragment) and between objects and their stratigraphic (chronological / spatial) and environmental context (as deduced from soil and sediment characteristics, plant and animal remains), are deemed to be of greater interest and interpretative potential than are individual, isolated, architectural elements. The essential distinction between this approach and antiquarianism lies in the investigative nature of the encounter with the past and the attempt to identify and interpret a broad range of phenomena through the acknowledgement of the essential difference and 'otherness' of the past and past societies.

Preservation by record aims to record as much information about the site as possible (within budgetary constraints) through a process of complete excavation, the structured collection and analysis of artefact and ecofact

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assemblages and the taking of a variety of types of samples for scientific investigation. The context of, and inter-relationships between, archaeological strata and finds assemblages is given the highest priority and architectural elements which might be preserved under an regime of preservation *in situ*, may be removed after full recording. Rather than preserving only objects of immediate visual impact, full excavation aims at exploring the hidden and concealed aspects of the site, as well as those which are more obvious. The backbone of the approach is context in its various incarnations; stratigraphic, chronological, spatial, relational and interpretative.

Inevitably the extent to which the theoretical aims of preservation by record can be achieved varies with the site and the situation. Under conditions of financial and political pressure, where the desire to build anew is paramount (as in Beirut), decisions may have to be made about priorities and various kinds of sampling methods may have to be adopted to resolve the conflicts between archaeology and finance. Such conditions, however undesirable from an archaeological perspective, are a fact of life. While they may impose restrictions on the scope and extent of an excavation, they generally rule out preservation *in situ* altogether, as the case of BEY 045 shows only too clearly (Thorpe, in prep 1).

Through its ascription of a position of privilege to stone-built architectural remains, preservation *in situ* acts to favour certain historical periods and particular aspects of those periods. In the case of BEY 006 and BEY 045 this involved the later Roman and Byzantine periods, and, although there are obviously exceptions to this (the Phoenician glaxis discussed by Finkbeiner (1997) being one example), it is these periods which generally appear to benefit, at least superficially, from the institution of a preservation *in situ* regime.

To the archaeologist trained in the traditions of British prehistoric archaeology, this practice raises a number of problems related both to the understanding of the site in archaeological terms and also from the point of view of the presentation of the site to the non-archaeologist.

Although monumental stone architecture in its archetypal 'classical' form dominates those sites preserved *in situ* in urban areas such as Beirut, monumental buildings formed only a small part of the urban landscape in which people lived and worked. In addition, the period of their existence is demonstrably short in comparison to the history of human occupation. However impressive such buildings may be and however much they may represent 'civilised' achievements (as defined by a world view which traces its ancestry from presumed Graeco-Roman forebears), they represent but a small part of the architectural and spatial experience of the people who have inhabited the area over time. Their presentation as archetypal of the period or the locale is inevitably misleading for the non-archaeologist and (literally) obscures earlier periods for the archaeologist. Thus to the contextual archaeologist a regime of preservation *in situ* both over-values the stone built elements of a site and simultaneously prevents the recovery of data of critical importance in understanding the wider issues surrounding the site. This is not to advocate the complete clearance of every archaeological site prior to modern redevelopment. Almost inevitably the stabilisation of ancient stonework requires some element of rebuilding and conservation and the reconstruction of particular elements of a site can be an evocative method of acquainting people with aspects of their past, whether the remains presented are those of monumental stone buildings or the more modest and ephemeral houses of the ordinary people. Such reconstruction and preservation should be essentially secondary to the recovery of the largest possible body of high quality contextual data from the site.

As I have argued above, an antiquarian archaeology over-values the monumental, the stone-built and the visually impressive. Typically (but not exclusively) this involves an over-valuation of the Classical period together with other prehistoric and historic periods in which power, prestige and dominance were asserted through the use of monumental architecture. Even within these periods however, the emphasis on such elements acts to divert attention from other aspects. While parts of townscapes are preserved, the wider context remains uninvestigated, whether at the level of the town itself or at the broader level of the relationship between the town and the rural hinterland from which supplies of food, firewood, raw

materials and other goods must have been drawn. How much do we know of, for example, the patterns of land division and landholding around late Classical Beirut? What types of relationships existed between the cult centres (represented by temples)

and the agricultural communities in the countryside around them? What was the relationship of the rural sites and ritual sites to the coastal cities? Such questions, central to a contextual archaeology are rarely considered in detail by antiquarians.

Analogous problems arise with policies concerned with the collection and archiving of artefacts. Central to a contextual archaeology is the analysis of substantial assemblages of pottery, animal bone, plant remains and other artefacts and ecofacts. Equally as important as the analysis and publication of the basic data is the retention and curation of such material in its entirety for later study, reinterpretation and the application of new analytical techniques and new interpretative perspectives.

THE FUTURE OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BEIRUT

It is clear from the many multi-party disputes which have plagued the archaeological work undertaken in Beirut since 1992/3 that our understanding of the history and archaeology of the city have not been assisted by the mutually conflicting intellectual and practical priorities espoused by the various groups involved in the archaeology of the city. As Reuben Thorpe, field director of the excavations on BEY 045, has recently made clear, there is a desperate need for much fuller and more open discussion of the objectives of archaeological research in the city (Thorpe, in prep 2). A crucial part of this will be the formulation of a comprehensive research and excavation strategy for the city. To succeed, this must be acceptable to private developers, archaeologists (both curators and contractors) and to the agencies involved in the rebuilding of the city, and must cover comprehensively the planning and execution of archaeological research within a rescue framework. Before this can be achieved we archaeologists must agree amongst ourselves as to exactly what it is that we consider to be our goals. Are we seeking to expose, reconstruct and present sections of the monumental buildings of late Classical Beirut and to use these as an embodiment of those aspects of the past which we find exemplary? Or are we to move beyond this antiquarian approach and to

try to understand the dynamics of the city of Beirut through time, to reconstruct the changing physical and experiential topography of the city and to interpret what we find in terms of the possible experiences of those who once inhabited it? These questions are also of wider relevance - as plans are made to redevelop the cities of Tyre and Sidon, we should be asking ourselves whether we are ready to handle the enormous archaeological wealth of these cities with the sensitivity which they deserve.

There is little doubt that the debates which must precede the adoption of any comprehensive research strategy will be intellectually painful for all concerned. Certain cherished notions concerning the aims and methods of archaeology might have to be examined in detail and subjected to modification, or even wholesale change. Underlying a comprehensive research strategy must be the acknowledgement that archaeology is not about the reification of received opinions concerning cultural significance or the search for the remains of exemplary ancestral civilisations. Nor is it about the quest for meta-theoretical truths about human society or the past. Rather it is a process of enquiry, involving the application of particular techniques, practices and routines with the aim of recovering sets of data applicable to questions which must be carefully formulated and justified. The archaeological data which we recover is characterised above all by its ambiguity, not simply in terms of our interpretations of its meaning, but also in terms of its complex relationship to the past realities which generated it. The recognition of these perspectives and the development of a critical and self-conscious attitude to our own practices and perceptions is essential if we are to develop a sophisticated archaeological practice which will do justice to the complexity and contemporary significance of the past.

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