Community Archaeology 1984: At the Interface between Practice and Theory

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THE "1984" IN OUR TITLE does not refer to George Orwell's novel. It was simply the year we began excavations at Tell Mozan, Syria, which proved to be ancient Urkesh. The reason for including it here is to stress the significance of chronology. From the very beginning of our work in 1984, we engaged in what is now called community archaeology. We did not set out to undertake a specific program in that direction. We relied on plain common sense as we developed an approach that was very simple and practical.

The trajectory of this approach is interesting in two regards. On the one hand, starting from a very practical set of needs, we came to reflect more and more on the theoretical implications and presuppositions of our work. On the other hand, and more importantly, our whole effort was put to a severe test by the war in Syria beginning in 2011, and in this test we found an unexpected validation of our basic procedures and goals. We will not review here the specifics of these procedures, as we wrote about them in detail in the 2015 issue of *Backdirt*[1]. Suffice it to say that since the beginning of the conflict, our four main areas of activity have continued unabated, just as we described them in 2015 and in some cases with considerable enhancement. These areas are:

1. Conservation: The exposed architecture continues to be in perfect condition, thanks to the simple but very effective conservation system we developed at the start of excavations in 1984, entirely based on local resources and know-how.

2. Site presentation: Our extensive signage system has been fully reactivated with around 200 signs explaining the site to visitors. In addition, in December 2016 we published an 80-page booklet in English, Arabic, and Kurdish. We get a considerable number of visitors at the site, all from the surrounding region.

3. Research: Three of our local assistants continue to work on the data in our archives and on the ceramics stored in the expedition house. Together with the local university, we host seminars where students can work on our material, both at the university and at our site, which is the only excavation site effectively available for such purposes.

4. Economic development: We support local women who produce traditional handicrafts (clothes, dolls, jewelry), which they can sell locally or ship to us.

1. For a recent update, see G. Buccellati, "From Urkesh to Mozan: The Itinerary of a Project in Wartime," forthcoming in a volume edited by Tomasz Waliszewski.

Figure 1. Tourists visit Tell Mozan in April 2015.

A close look at three photographs taken at Tell Mozan is instructive. In succession, we see a group of what we might call lay visitors, the parasols give it away; a group of local university students at the conclusion of a study trip; and a class on surveying, part of a two-day workshop we sponsored for 25 university students. These are different groups engaged in different activities, spending either free or educational time at the site. The dates also tell a tale. These visits all took place at the height of the war. This shows the coherence of a program that has remained fully active for more than six years. During this time, we maintained a very close and direct engagement, even though we could not be physically present at the site. While the war did not affect the site directly, it came close enough—about 60 km (40 miles) away. The main problems at other archaeological sites in the area have been the weather and looting rather than the direct impact of the war. That the architecture at Tell Mozan is in perfect condition, that no vandalism has occurred, and that the signage system still elicits widespread interest is indicative of the success of our efforts. The site's impact on the community throughout this period is the best validation of what community archaeology has come to mean in a very concrete sense.

It is not just the direct consequences of a full-blown war that must be considered. A sense of fatigue and the reordering of priorities in life would normally affect any interest in visiting mere ruins. These photographs show that our communities are really nourished by archaeology and find in it far more than passing entertainment. They find a source of hope.

Our whole effort was put to a severe test by the war

We can draw larger implications from this. To the extent that fanaticism and terrorism feed on a need for values and propose a perverse measure of ideology, our response should point in the direction of what we believe to be true values. Archaeology, if rooted in a sense of community, can indeed do this. It is clear that none of the young men and women in these photographs will ever join the so-called Islamic State or any of the comparable fundamentalist groups that are wreaking havoc in their country. Here the term *community* finds a larger meaning than the one typically associated with it. It emerges as the reservoir of shared ideals that give strength in moments of crisis, and of extreme crisis at that.

Figure 2. Local university students pose on the monumental staircase during a study trip to Tell Mozan in April 2016.

Of course, we have never been taught to think in terms of community archaeology. Nor did we consciously set out to develop a method. Yet in practice we did. As mentioned above, the steps we took led us to reflect on the work we were doing and in this sense to give shape to the general principles that inspired us as we conducted our project. In articulating them here, we do not refer to an established body of research. We simply describe a personal experience.

THE LEGACY OF THE TERRITORY

There is a special dimension in the relationship to the territory that uniquely affects the people who live in it. Their sense of the environment does not compare to our sense of it, as we are guests for a limited period of time. Theirs is truly a legacy of which we are not heirs. In this regard, then, community archaeology means that community members embrace us and offer us a share of the insight derived from their loyalty to this territory. Their identification is not with just the material remains of the past but with the matrix within which these remains are embedded. There is no direct continuity with the people who lived there. In our case, at any rate, it is very much a broken tradition, because no one has lived at the site for the last 3,000 years. But there is the continuity of the land, of the territory as a resource and as a landscape. It is the continuity of the response people give to conditions that affect us today as they affected the ancients.

Superimposed on the broken traditions there are new, living traditions that are rooted in the same territory and that respond to the same triggers. This extends beyond the geography of the territory. It reaches customs and habits that are dependent on the available resources. We see here the common presupposition of what we have come to call ethnoarchaeology, where *ethno* refers not to an ethnic identity but rather to the folk or vernacular aspect of culture. If

these customs and habits help us in seeking an explanation for ancient phenomena, it is by way of analogy; but an analogy that rests on solid ground. For while there may be no continuity in the community as a subject, there is continuity in the setting within which the community of today, like the one of the past, operates.

COMMUNITIES

The notion of community refers generically and vaguely to people connected with an excavation site. But different individuals, different communities, have varying degrees of interest, which potentially even conflict with each other. Nor is there an obvious organizational table that spells out from the beginning for the archaeologists what the various alignments are. In our case, we had the villages around the site, with competing interests among them. There were the towns and cities in the immediate vicinity, where the site was generally viewed with a distant interest. There were the authorities, at different levels, who had specific responsibilities regarding the site and therefore our presence in it. There were the visitors from elsewhere in Syria and from abroad, who traveled some distance because our site is out of the way of normal itineraries. These were all communities of one type or another, and we had to be responsive to all.

Our approach was to nurture a basic respect for all. And this respect, being authentic, was invariably met with an equal form of respect. On occasion, we had to take positions that were counter the interests of one community or the other; for example, recommending against granting building permits or excavating and moving contemporary burials. The common ground we could offer was the value of the territory as the repository of history, a history that properly belonged to them and into which they were admitting us as guests. It was as if we could offer them one more community, that of the past. And in this new community they could find, as we could, a common ground for a deeper sharing of interests.

SYMMETRY AND ASYMMETRY

With our staff, we were in fact a parallel community ourselves. Recognizing this was important: maintaining our identity was the best way to relate to the identities of the other communities. Integration does not, anywhere, mean the flattening of identity. Rather one is reciprocally strengthened through the affirmation of the values proper to each. Never trying to be more local than the locals, we came in fact to be fully local in a properly symmetrical way. It is, we may say, the symmetry of asymmetry: by recognizing the asymmetrical nature of the relationship in a variety of single details, we could enjoy the symmetry of the relationship when it came to fundamentals.

As archaeologists we have an obligation to local communities, but upstream of that also to scholarship and even to legal requirements. For instance, we could not abdicate control over the treatment of antiquities. Taking a strong stand in this regard—which in one case meant opposing a local notable who had assembled a private collection—meant that these other communities came to absorb fully the conviction that protecting the territory was a shared responsibility. To this we attribute the total lack of vandalism at our site during these six years of war. The communities have come to share in the belief that being the guardians of the site is, in effect, not so much a duty as a privilege.

> Being the guardians is not so much a duty as a privilege

THE PROCESS OF EDUCATION

This takes us to the last point, one that gave us a lot to ponder, simple though it may seem at first. We felt an obligation to educate the communities with which we were in contact, at their different levels. But how could we not project an image of superiority, of neocolonialism; one we wanted specifically to avoid? The notion of a symmetrical asymmetry helped us in this regard. Acknowledging an expertise that objectively sets us apart, we also acknowledged, and intensely so, the fact that we shared beliefs in deeper values resulting in a full measure of commonality. The perceived sense of responsibility helped to place in the proper light situations that seemed at first perilously negative.

In one such case, members of one community believed that they were the direct descendants of the population that had inhabited the ancient city of Urkesh, which we were excavating. There were large festivals held at the site, with thousands of people taking part. But there is no factual basis to this claim: the ancient city was abandoned some three millennia ago, and the population that hailed from it, the Hurrians, completely disappeared from history. The explanation we gave was received with disbelief at first. It was the coherence of our message, the effort at presenting all

Figure 3. A class on surveying during a two-day workshop at Tell Mozan, September 2017.

the facts regarding the site with scholarly integrity, that gained the full acceptance of the local community involved.

LET MY CITY BECOME A TELL

The word *tell* refers to a cultural hill, an archaeological site that is immediately recognizable in the modern landscape of Syria and Iraq. The many tells that dot this region are at the root of the territorial legacy we have been discussing. By way of conclusion, we wish to quote a Sumerian text that in some ways also speaks to the issue of community archaeology. The Arabic word *tell* comes from the Akkadian word *tillu*, which in turn derives from the Sumerian *dul*. A Sumerian text (the epic of Enmerkar and Ensuhgirana), which very likely dates to the middle of the third millennium, contains (at line 133) the following remarkable verse: "Iri-mu *dul* hé-a, ĝá-e *šika-bi* hé-me-en" ("Let my city become a *tell*, let me become its *sherd*").

This is spoken by the ruler of Aratta—a city in what is now Iran—who against the advice of his elders decides to wage war against the Sumerian city of Uruk. He takes this course of action, he says, even though it might cost his own ruin and that of his city. Let the city become a tell once it is destroyed, and let him end up being no more than a mere pottery sherd within the matrix of the earth. It is a very powerful statement, all the more so if one considers that we are,

A sharp sensitivity for the archaeological dimension of life

at that point in time, only a few centuries after the beginning of cities as a result of the urban revolution. Yet there were already ruined cities that had become mere tells.

There were already, in other words, ruined cities buried under their own collapse. And there was, accordingly, a sharp sensitivity for the archaeological dimension of life. The tells were visible as features of the landscape, but more than that they suggested a continuity of life. They were hills, but at the same time they were the repositories of history. They contained pottery sherds, and a single sherd could be chosen as a metaphor for a spent life. The archaeological dimension is even more apparent in a later Babylonian wisdom text, the so-called *Dialog of Pessimism*, where at some point we read (lines 76–78, in a somewhat free rendering): "Go up any of the ancient tells and walk about, see the skulls of people from ages ago and from yesteryear: can you tell the difference?" The legacy of the territory was already felt then. There was already, we may say, community archaeology.

it might cost him his own life and the very existence of his city
(or, if too long:)
it might be the cause of his ruin and that of his city