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Looting Matters. Early Bronze Age Cemeteries of Jordan’s southeast Dead Sea Plain in the Past and Present

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CHAPTER 38

LOOTING MATTERS
Early Bronze Age Cemeteries of Jordan's
Southeast Dead Sea Plain in the Past
and Present

MORAG M. KERSEL AND MEREDITH S. CHESSON

INTRODUCTION

The complex interplay between archaeological research into mortuary practices and ancient and modern looting of cemeteries and tombs creates challenging methodological and ethical situations for archaeologists investigating the past. This chapter describes a work-in-progress, our current and ongoing research project in Jordan (entitled ‘Follow the Pots’), as a platform for exploring several methodological, theoretical, and ethical challenges faced by archaeologists whose research area was/continues to be the focus of intensive and long-standing illegal excavation.

Extensive Early Bronze Age (EBA, in this subregion spanning c.3600–2000 BCE) cemeteries on the southeastern Dead Sea Plain in Jordan represent a unique opportunity to study both settlement and mortuary patterns at a time when the social landscape was changing dramatically—for the first time populations fortified their towns and invented a new type of settlement (Fig. 38.1). Mortuary evidence is an integral part of the archaeological record of past cultures and behaviours, providing information about past lifeways and social interaction. Archaeological remains at the three EBA cemeteries and two town sites in the region allow for the examination of the assumption that changing settlement systems and distinct burial customs may indicate increasing social differentiation within this 3rd millennium society. Unfortunately this particular landscape has been the object of systematic and sustained plunder for decades due to the unbridled demand for EBA pots from these cemeteries. The illegal, unrecorded excavation of burial sites results not only in the removal of saleable pots for the marketplace, but in the indirect (or direct) destruction of human remains, which ultimately means a loss of knowledge about burial customs and practices. Valuable information about mortuary traditions has been lost and our interpretation of the past may be skewed.
While archaeologists develop new methodologies for recording and reconstructing the archaeological evidence of looted cemeteries (see e.g. Sneddon 2002, Webb and Frankel 2009, Contreras 2010, Contreras and Brodie 2010), the other side of the story, that of the looted artefacts that have been purloined to be sold on the market, often falls by the wayside as a question outside the purview of traditional archaeological practice. Our project in the Dead Sea Plain of Jordan attempts to explore the social lives (sensu Appadurai 1986) of these Early Bronze Age pots: first lives as utile grave goods and second lives as both archaeological

FIG. 38.1 Location of Early Bronze Age settlements and cemeteries on the southeastern Dead Sea Plain of Jordan
evidence for past mortuary practices and as current objects of desire in the antiquities marketplace. 'Follow the Pots' employs a conventional archaeological investigation of the emergence of prehistoric urbanism and increasing social complexity, and an ethnographic inquiry into the multiple and contested values of this archaeological heritage.

We begin with a brief discussion of why looting matters and how illegal excavation can and does affect archaeological interpretation of past lifeways. Using the preliminary results of the 'Follow the Pots' project, we provide a theoretical discussion of how we make connections between the object biographies of EBA pots and the remaining archaeological evidence. 'Follow the Pots' arises from several years of preliminary analysis and fieldwork and emerges from our realization that only by integrating ethnography and archaeology can we hope to produce a holistic and cohesive story about the use and reuse of these EBA materials, uncovering a clearer picture of the mortuary practices of the Dead Sea Plain.

**Why Looting Matters**

The illegal excavation of archaeological sites happens everywhere there are ancient locales. In 2006 Roosevelt and Luke (p. 179) reported that of the approximately 400 tumuli they surveyed in western Turkey, 90% showed signs (holes, looter's tools, back dirt piles, broken pottery damage to the architectural remains) of looting. Using satellite imagery, Stone (2008) concludes that evidence indicates that recent archaeological site looting in Iraq has been pervasive. Archaeological sites of all sizes and periods have been affected in various parts of Iraq. Stone (2008: 129) suggests that the focus of looting activity tends to favour larger sites and those dating to periods most likely to generate cylinder seals, cuneiform tablets, and, to a lesser extent, early coins—all artefacts in demand in the marketplace. Looting is not limited to west Asia and the outlook is dreary for the global picture of looting (Atwood 2004, Brodie and Renfrew 2005, Contreras 2010). Comparison of Gordon Willey's 1940s accounts of the looting of the Virú Valley in Peru with recent satellite imagery led Contreras (2010) to confirm the earlier looting and to add that additional and extensive illegal excavation has taken place since then, some holes dug as recently as 2006. These recent studies and those in progress clearly demonstrate the loss of knowledge due to pillage and plunder, but also provide information to counter claims from the dealing and collecting communities that looting has no relationship to the market. Contreras's (2010) study also illustrates the importance of studying looted landscapes through systematic study of archival and aerial photographs and satellite imagery. He was able to identify previously unrecorded, albeit looted, cemeteries.

While looting poses a serious threat to the preservation of sites, there are few diachronic, systematic studies of actual looting from particular areas. Bowman (2008: 228–9) suggests that the reason for this paucity in research can be attributed to two factors: (1) looting is a clandestine activity; researchers rarely come into contact with looters and if they do make contact looters are reluctant to share their 'stories' and (2) looting involves both recorded and unrecorded sites—those yet to be discovered—making assessment of damage to the archaeological record very difficult. 'Follow the Pots' seeks to rectify these lacunae by addressing both of these issues—recording a looted, previously unpublished site and interviewing the local looters about their interactions with the mortuary landscape.
The motivations behind looting vary (Matsuda 1998, Kersel 2007), but ultimately most of the by-products of looting (archaeological objects) end up passing through a number of hands before finding their eventual resting place in a museum, in a private collection, or in an educational institution.

Looting Matters and the Mortuary Record in Jordan

In the Dead Sea region of Jordan there were reports of looting as early as the 1920s when Mallon and Albright first identified the cemetery and settlement site of Bab adh-Dhra’ as EBA. Albright (1924) asserts that ‘Père Mallon discovered some cairns which the Arabs had opened, disclosing pottery of the Early Bronze Age, and it was this unearthling that led them to investigate the area, finding monoliths, large amounts of pottery and flint covering the surface, architectural foundations and enclosures. For archaeologists and physical anthropologists the site lay unexcavated for some 40 years, but for illegal excavators the site was a virtual gold mine. In the late 1950s archaeologist Paul Lapp’s attention was drawn to the area after he watched the trickle of unmistakable Bab adh-Dhra’ pots appearing in the antiquities shops in Jerusalem and Amman turn into a virtual flood by 1965 (Lapp 1966). The listed provenance (archaeological findspot) of the material in the antiquities shops was reported to have come from the Hebron area, an often used descriptor for laundering looted artefacts (Kersel 2006). Lapp enlisted the aid of local experts (suspected looters) when he embarked on a rescue excavation to the area.

That evening we had a session with another local expert, who told us that he knew of tombs which had yielded a truckload of pottery. The next morning he did his best to show his ability as a diviner. His formula was simple: to find large, smooth black stones with faces emerging at the surface. This formula worked very well, and we soon discovered the truth—the cemetery had been so intensively used [during the Early Bronze Age] that we were almost bound to hit something wherever we dug. (Lapp 1966: 105)

Looting intensified in the region in the 1970s—after the Jordanian government allocated the rich alluvial lands along the Dead Sea for agricultural development and military activity in the region decreased. Reports of the devastating looting in the region gained global attention after a series of documentaries appeared in the international news in the mid-1990s. The archaeologically rich area was being plundered at an alarming rate and the Jordanian Department of Antiquities (DOA) was powerless to stop the destruction (Politis 1994). Increased looting was attributed to development work undertaken by an Italian construction company. A number of artefacts were recovered as a result of the deep trenches cut as part of an irrigation system. Through archival research Politis (2002: 259) suggests that the ancient artefacts were taken back to Milan by various Italians as reminders of their work in Jordan. Recognizing demand for archaeological material, local villagers increased their illegal excavations in the area in order to find material to sell to the Italians. The movement of grave goods was carried out at the local, state, and international level, passing through numerous hands and crossing a number of national and international borders. Looted
material was sold directly to Italian construction workers and/or transported to Israel (where the sale of artefacts was legal) and Europe. The Jordanian Provisional Antiquities Law no. 12 of 1976 made it illegal to trade in antiquities, forcing local Jordanian looter and dealers to find other markets for the material.

Early efforts by the Jordanian DOA to lessen or halt the looting were unsuccessful. In response to the worsening situation and the 'lunar-like landscape' of the region, an independent strategy for cultural heritage protection was established. With the approval of the Minister of Tourism and Antiquities and the Director-General of Antiquities, archaeologists were provided with financial backing in order to purchase some of the more important antiquities directly from the tomb robbers. This had a double effect. It helped gain the confidence of the local looters and disrupted the intricate dealing network (Politis 2002: 263–4). For the archaeologists the justification for initiating the buyback programme was the 'saving the artefacts for the public' argument, assuring all those concerned that the artefacts were being purchased to be placed in a museum in the Ghor es-Safi region, which would bring valuable tourist dollars to the area. At the same time the archaeologists were disrupting the traditional trade networks by buying directly from the looters, bypassing the middlemen and dealers in the surrounding towns and cities. Unfortunately, our recent visits to the region and to the antiquities market in Israel indicate that the looting of this EBA mortuary landscape is ongoing, despite efforts by the Jordanian DOA and archaeologists to ameliorate the problem.

**Facts on the Ground in Jordan**

Archaeologists have long known about archaeological resources on Jordan's southern Dead Sea Plain, and the earliest published report of an archaeological survey in the region appeared in the early 20th century (Albright 1924, Glueck 1935). Paul Lapp (1965, 1966, 1968a, 1968b, N. Lapp 1975, Schaub and Rast 1989) conducted the earliest systematic excavations at Bab adh-Dhira', focusing on the cemetery, and he noted that the appearance of southern Ghor Early Bronze Age I (EBA I) pottery in the local antiquities shops in Amman influenced his decision to dig at the site (Lapp 1968b). Rast and Schaub (2003: 2) cite a similar experience in 1972, which spurred them to conduct a systematic survey on the southern Ghor in 1973 (Rast and Schaub 1974). Thus, extensive amounts of research has been conducted in the region, with excavations at EBA Fifa, Numayra, Khirbat Khanazir, and Bab adh-Dhira' in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (P. Lapp 1966, N. Lapp 1975, Bentley 1987, 1991, Bentley and Perry 2008, Chesson 1999, 2001, 2007a, 2007b, Chesson and Schaub 2007, Ortner and Fröhlich 2008, Schaub and Chesson 2007), salvage operations at Bab adh-Dhira' in 1995 (McCready 1996) and Naqa and Fifa in 2001 (al-Najjar, personal communication 2001). Excavations at the town sites (Bab adh-Dhira' and Numayra) and the cemeteries (Bab adh-Dhira', Naqa, Fifa, and Khirbat Khanazir) offer unique opportunities to explore the use of material objects in daily life and in mortuary practices throughout the entirety of the dynamic EBA in which people created a new type of living space: the walled town (Greenberg 2003, Philip 2003, 2008, Chesson 2007a).

Due to space constraints, we limit our discussion to the EBA I material culture and mortuary practices. In the EBA I (4300–3100 BCE), when the earliest walled communities were
established throughout the southern Levant, people travelled to the southeastern Dead Sea Plain to bury their dead in secondary mortuary rituals at Fifa, Bab ad-Dhra’, and Naqa: the first EBA settlers to the Dead Sea Plain were the long dead. The living deposited the segmented remains of their dead in shaft or cist tomb chambers, following guidelines for sorting the skeletal remains and grave goods. Three distinct burial practices with corresponding settlement patterns can be identified at Bab ad-Dhra’. The EBA I (c.3600–2950 BCE) occupation of Bab ad-Dhra’ is characterized by shaft tombs carved into the Lisan mud. To date no associated settlement has been discovered at or near the site, and the general consensus is that the secondary burial remains in these shaft tombs were carried by people who travelled to the Dead Sea Plain to bury their dead. While we do not know where these people were living, or if they were fully sedentary or fully nomadic or somewhere in between, we do know based on the analysis of dental morphology by Bentley and Perry (2008; see also Bentley 1987, 1991), that they buried their dead in kin-based groups in shaft tombs. Shaft tombs generally consist of a central circular shaft and between one and five hemispherical chambers radiating from the base of the shaft (Rast and Schaub 2003). Typically, in these graves, the crania were lined up along the left edge of a reed mat; the long bones and other remains were heaped in the centre of the mat, and grave goods were stacked to the right of the opening of the chamber (Fig. 38.2). The EBA I mortuary toolkit usually comprised of ceramic vessels, ground and polished stone vessels, shell bracelets, beads, stone maceheads, wooden items, unfired clay anthropomorphic figurines, and textiles (Chesson and Schaub 2007: 255). Chesson (1999: 141) has suggested that the vessels and objects placed in mortuary contexts, like Bab ad-Dhra’ hold multiple significances, evoking memories and powerful meanings. These meanings and significances carry on to today’s antiquities markets where collectors wish to purchase artefacts imbued with the spirit of the place and time.

Simultaneously, in the nearby cemeteries (c.20 and 25 km to the south, respectively) at Naqa and Fifa in the EBA IA they used rock-lined cist graves for the secondary interment. And while the mortuary toolkit at these sites was similar in make-up to that of Bab adh-Dhra’, there is notable divergence in the forms and decoration on the ceramic vessels. Are these differences related to people from different ethnic groups, lineages, or regions? The classic model of pots = people—pottery as a passive reflection of social identity—has gone in and out of fashion in archaeological discourse and analyses. But whether or not one subscribes to the pots = people paradigm, the important point here is that the absence of pots due to looting affects the way in which we interpret the past. Is there really a difference between the pottery assemblages from the sites only 20 km apart, or has the looting of ‘unique pots’ from Bab ad-Dhra’ (perhaps similar to those from Fifa and Naqa) biased the way in which we read the archaeological record? How can we make inferences about the people and society of the Early Bronze Age Dead Sea Plain if we are missing a huge piece of the archaeological puzzle?

In a preliminary analysis of human skeletal remains from EBA I shaft tombs, Fröhlich and Ortner (1983: 262) note that a hard-pointed instrument was forcefully pushed into the sides of a shaft tomb in order to locate further burial chambers—looters searching for further chambers and saleable material. They also mention that in the process of obtaining grave goods, thieves broke up the fragile human remains. People pillaging cemeteries are not particularly interested in human remains, instead concentrating their efforts on the marketable pieces—the pots, maceheads, metal objects, shell bracelets, and the like. As skeletal remains are moved aside in an effort to reach the prized possessions, remains become commingled and our assessment of distinct burial groups is compromised. At Bab adh-Dhra’ this pattern...
of moving the human skeletal material was confirmed by McCreery (1996: 58) in his 1995 salvage project of Area X: 'unfortunately, many of the burials were disturbed or destroyed when dirt from other chambers was thrown into the robbed-out chambers but most of the human material is left lying around.' McCreery noted that, as a result of looting between the 1980s and 1995, 39 new shaft tombs had been uncovered. A salvage campaign was mounted in an area referred to as X to (1) map the location of the looted tombs, (2) recover the bones, pottery, and other artefacts that still remained, (3) determine the chronological relationship of this area of the cemetery to previously excavated areas, and (4) formulate an estimate of the extent of the cemetery (McCreery 1996). As part of a pilot project to test methodologies for recording a looted cemetery, the 'Follow the Pots' surveyors mapped the looted tombs
recorded by McCreery (1996), while noting the discrepancies between 'barren' or unsuccessful looters' pits with those in which looters had successfully discovered and looted an EBA tomb. Our team found that any estimates of looted tombs in cemeteries needed to incorporate a ground-truthing programme: looters' pits do not always indicate a looted tomb.

Damage caused by the illegal excavators, whether they successfully plundered a tomb or merely disturbed the site's surface with pits and commingled spoil heaps, placed severe limitations on attempts to accurately describe the orientation and original condition of the tomb chambers. In some instances robbers came down through the roofs of tombs or the sides, obfuscating the shaft and chambers of the tomb, making it virtually impossible to determine the associated chambers and structure of some of the tombs or to establish which remains were intentionally deposited together or separately. Fill from looted chambers was (and still is) commingled with geologically silted chambers, making it difficult to discern intentional deposits from a pillage spoil heap. McCreery states (1996: 54) 'the absence of pottery from well preserved chambers like X23W is probably due to the fact that all of the grave goods in this chamber were found intact and therefore removed; but how can we ever be sure? Were there pots in the original mortuary deposit or was this the burial place of some individual(s) buried with little or no fanfare? Evidence from similar graves suggests that there were artefacts, but looting has created a lacuna in this archaeological record. McCreery also notes (1996: 56) a total absence of basalt vessels, maceheads, figurines, beads, bracelets, and metal objects from tombs in the archaeological salvage area. In preliminary surveys of internet sales websites and brick-and-mortar stores in Jerusalem, we found ceramic vessels, basalt bowls, and stone maceheads for sale. In visiting these sites several times in the last two decades we have seen broken ceramic and stone vessel fragments, whole and broken shell bracelets, as well as beads of various materials scattered across spoil heaps from looters' activities. Even at this preliminary stage, we find that these artefacts are all differently prized commodities in the antiquities market, and thus looters make decisions to collect or abandon different items based on their salability and their preservation. For us, therefore, it is difficult to discern their original distribution in tombs in all three EBA IA cemeteries. Were these objects part of the original toolkit for all tombs, or differentially used within and between these cemeteries? Once again illegal excavation has potentially altered the interpretation of the archaeological record.

The second type of discernible burial practice is first identified in the transitional late EBA IB/early-EBA II (c 2950–2800 BCE) when a small village was established adjacent to the cemetery at Bab adh-Dhra. The associated sedentary phase in which people began living on site, farming and raising livestock, witnessed the expansion of burial practices to include both shaft tombs, containing both primary and secondary burials, and above-ground circular burial structures—mud-brick chamber houses (McCreery 2003, Rast and Schaub 2003). Chesnoy and Schaub (2007) have suggested that these earlier circular chamber houses bridged the span between shaft tombs and the later rectangular above-ground body-libraries of the EBA II–III (c 3100–2500 BCE). The mortuary toolkit of this period still contained ceramic pots, stone vessels, beads, maceheads, figurines, and bracelets, as well as wood objects and textiles.

Inhabitants built the first fortification walls at Bab adh-Dhra around 3000 BCE, concomitantly abandoning fully subterranean burial practices in favour of above-ground rectangular chamber houses, the third example of mortuary practice at Bab adh-Dhra. In many ways the houses for the dead resembled the houses for the living—rectangular mud-brick structures
with stone thresholds and occasional cobble flooring (Chesson 2007b: 114). Debate continues over whether the semi-subterranean charnel houses were for primary or secondary burial, but associated grave goods were still prevalent. The state of preservation of the charnel houses is not as good as most of the shaft tombs due to their above-ground setting, erosion, and looting, but charnel houses fall into two basic sizes and are also differentiated by type of grave goods present. In the larger houses there is clear evidence for greater access to non-local prestige items connected with trade and exchange—metal, ostrich egg, faience, alabaster, carnelian, lapis, and crystal. As Chesson (1999: 155) has stated: 'this is not a case of haves and have nots, but rather one of greater and lesser access to local and non-local craft items and by extension, to status and authority'. This demarcation supports the theory that there was differentiated status in the burial record. But can we state this with authority if many of the charnel houses have been pillaged and the archaeological record tainted by illegal excavation? What more might we have learned about the EBA I or the EBA II–III society and mortuary practices had these cemeteries not been so severely impacted by looting to supply the antiquities market? Based on preliminary analyses, we see no real discernible pattern of which grave goods accompany what people—the guidelines for the mortuary toolkit maybe be masked by the commingled nature of the material in antiquity or by recent looting. Due to depositional activities—both intentional and geological—we will never know if a particular individual was buried with a certain pot or macehead.

In the final report on the skeletal remains from the Smithsonian excavations at Bab adh-Dhra EBA I shaft tombs and an EBA IB charnel house (G1), Ortner and Fröhlich (2008: 305) suggest that during the process of establishing the EBA IB village the community may have experienced an increase in interpersonal conflict and violence. In skeletons from EBA IB tombs and the charnel house, they documented an increased number of lesions and depressed fractures to skulls, in all cases fully healed and not contributing to the death of the individual. They suggest that the simultaneous increase in interpersonal violence and the construction of large fortifications around the town at Bab adh-Dhra may be interpreted as indicating increased violence and conflict within and between walled towns in the EBA II–III. However, preliminary analyses suggest no increase in perimortem fractures and blows to the head in the EBA II–III charnel house A22 when compared with other EBA I remains (Gasparetti and Sheridan forthcoming). While it may be difficult to surmise whether there is evidence for progressively increasing violence in the EBA from the artefacts, every time a skeleton is disturbed, destroyed, or dumped as a result of looting activity important osteological information is lost that might support or deny such claims about violence.

As a result of ongoing looting and the demand for archaeological artefacts, we will never fully be able to reconstruct the mortuary record of the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan. Understanding the archaeological record of a looted site has become the object of inquiry for a number of recent studies (e.g. Al Hamdani 2008, Stone 2008, Webb and Frankel 2009, Contreras 2010, Contreras and Brodie 2010). But studies focusing on the objects of desire—the looted items—in order to complete the picture are rare. By examining the social lives of the EBA pots that are the object of the intense looting we can gain an awareness of the multiple phases of an object's life history. Stahl (2010: 158) suggests that a key insight that has emerged as a result of object biographies is that artefacts are not static and made immutable by their various incarnations. They may sustain essential qualities like 'ceramicness' in their various lives, but their value and use is context dependent, often highly variable, and adds to
our understanding of the past. It is with this in mind that we are undertaking the 'Follow the Pots' project. By examining the first (EBA mortuary grave good) and second (unearthed artefact—either through looting or systematic controlled excavation) lives of these objects, we hope to develop a robust set of insights into the original uses and reuses of EBA pots.

**Social Lives of EBA Pots: Materiality and Human Behaviour**

For our research, the key to linking the ancient mortuary practices and the modern looting of these cemeteries relies on a universal human behaviour: the production and use of material culture. In our examination of the social lives of these EBA archaeological objects—the artefacts have at least two lives: as looted and excavated artefacts in the present and as associated grave goods from the past. The project combines archaeological and ethnographic methods used in the practice of an engaged anthropology (Erikson 2006) with ground-truthing of the archaeological record in order to better understand both the ancient and modern use of a prehistoric mortuary landscape. In seeking to integrate modern voices and understandings about heritage resources (Franklin 2001, Wilkie 2001, Loosley 2005, Porter and Salazar 2005, Steele 2005, Kersel 2006, Little and Shackel 2007, Emberling 2008, Greenberg 2009), we adopt a critical self-reflexive stance by investigating archaeological practice and looting as equally valid subjects for interrogation. In investigating the second lives of these artefacts, we approach looting and archaeology as behaviours equally worthy of investigation—both practices remove archaeological materials from sites and both groups of stakeholders place values on these material goods. Meskell (2005) and Lafrenz Samuels (2009) argue that the link between the archaeological past and the present rests on two things: (1) the materiality of archaeological evidence, and (2) people's varying use and/or valuing of material culture, especially in terms of telling stories, crafting identities, and surviving the challenges of daily life (Miller 1998, 2005, Brumfiel 2003, Joyce 2005, Meskell 2005, Kus 2007).

Nowhere is the materiality link clearer than in the complex intersections between archaeological field research and extensive looting of the archaeological heritage in the southeastern Dead Sea Plain of Jordan. With the heady combination of looting, antiquities markets, traditional archaeological practice, and modern heritage management, Appadurai's (1986) and Miller's (1998) models for the social life of things brilliantly come to life: meanings and values of archaeological material culture shift swiftly, depending upon context, stakeholder, and intended (or even unintended) destination. Additionally, we can gain an understanding of the multiple lives of these objects. Lafrenz Samuels (2009: 84) asserts that we can learn a great deal about the intersection between past and present meanings of material culture by tracking the objects' movements and contexts of meaning and making, and values associated with them. Exploring the reuse of these objects, we examine why and how they and their landscapes experience a 'second life' as studied, excavated, trafficked, reappropriated, and employed by researchers and looters alike for purposes different from their originally intended use and context (Appadurai 1986, Miller 1998). Excavating and looting force a rebirth or re-production of the object and an entirely new life course (cf. Holtorf 2002), with
actors and agents staking claims and assigning values (potentially oppositional in stance) to the artefacts. For Appadurai (1986: 15), both excavated and looted archaeological artefacts become what he would consider things intended for uses other than their original purposes. In this 'second life' of objects, looted for sale or excavated for study, people's interests, values, and relationships to this heritage vary widely.

'First Lives' of EBA Pots

As part of this larger, comparative analysis, our current plans for 'Follow the Pots' centre on Fifa as a comparative base for analysing the past and present uses of the cemeteries of Bab adh-Dhra' and Naqa. We know from previous excavations, our visits to the site, a 2011 intensive survey and aerial photographs, that approximately 10,000 looters' pits exist at Fifa, many of which have destroyed stone-lined cist tombs containing secondary burials, ceramic and stone vessels, shell bracelets, stone maceheads, and beads. Currently the site resembles a moonscape, with looters' holes extending across rolling hills as far as the eyes can see, and the ground is covered with the spoil heaps of dirt, skeletal remains, and broken artefacts (Figs. 38.3 and 38.4). Such a scale of destruction makes total documentation of all looters' pits impossible; thus we concluded a non-random, systematic survey of the cemetery of Fifa in 2011. After the initial topographic survey, we selected ten sample units for intensive recording, allowing us to estimate the original number of tombs, the rate of 'success' of looters (distinguishing barren holes and actual looted tombs), and the range and numbers of grave goods abandoned by looters because they were broken, judged unsaleable, or otherwise not valuable. Based on this field season we created a comprehensive plan of the site of Fifa, mapping in all archaeological features (from all periods) visible from the surface and thoroughly documenting the extent of the 6.4-hectare site. We documented and created a typology for the three types of tomb constructions at Fifa, and we tested the Contreras and Brodie (2010)

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FIG. 38.3 Archaeologists Sean Bergin (foreground) and Khalid Tarawneh (centre) visit the salvage excavations at the site of Fifa in 2001

Source: Photograph by Meredith S. Cherson.
hypothesis regarding the use of Google Earth as a tool for monitoring archaeological site looting. We concluded that you can in fact use Google Earth to chart change over time but in order to estimate the loss of culture heritage groundtruthing is essential to a holistic picture.

'Second Lives': Looted Goods and Excavated Artefacts

Complementing the archaeological research, ongoing ethnographic interviews with locals document meanings and values of the EBA material culture to the various stakeholders (looters, archaeologists, museum professionals, collectors, dealers, and government employees). Following the pots through the specific economic activity of the antiquities market and as archaeologically documented artefacts is fundamentally a multi-sited effort, and this diversity in interests dictates the interview process and participants. While many of these people are situated in Jordan, earlier fieldwork has involved extensive ethnographic work with licensed and illegal antiquities dealers in Jerusalem where many of these pots are sold, as well as internet auction sites, including eBay, Sotheby's, Christie's, and at smaller firms located in the UK, US, and Israel. As part of this project, we are also documenting the distribution of EBA tomb groups in museums throughout the world.

Recent work by Brodie and Contreras (2012) examines the economic value of the pots looted from this area. Building on the earlier work of Rose and Burke (2004) on the economics of looting Roman-Byzantine tombs in the northern region of Irbid in Jordan, Brodie and Contreras provide some estimates of the amount of money that can be realized from the sale of EBA IA pots in the UK market. Both studies indicate that there are profits to be made from the sale of artefacts and that the local economies in both regions of Jordan have come to rely heavily on the practice of illegally excavating sites. Of relevance to
understanding this mortuary landscape is tracking the movement of EBA pots—both looted and legally excavated.

**Concluding Thoughts: Looting Does Matter**

We will never know the complete picture of the mortuary record in the Dead Sea Plain of Jordan, but do we archaeologists and physical anthropologists ever really get the entire story of past lives? That is both the mystery and the beauty of archaeological inquiry. What we do know from this brief analysis of the region is that looting and the destruction of the archaeological record can and does skew our interpretations of the past. McCreery (1996: 61) warns that 'it is dangerous to claim definitive conclusions from the results of a salvage operation, especially one that relies strictly on observation of robbing activity.' Looting of this area, once a rich necropolis, continues to this day, and pots from these Jordanian sites are still for sale in the licensed antiquities market in Israel. The myriad consequences of the illegal excavation at Bab adh-Dhra', Naqa, and Fifa on the interpretation of changing mortuary practices, social differentiation, and increasing violence and tension in these early fortified settlements may never be known; valuable data about mortuary practices has been lost and our understanding of burial customs may therefore be distorted. The question of how archaeology can proceed under these circumstances requires further consideration and a solution that takes into consideration the positions of the various stakeholders in the cultural heritage of the region.

'Follow the Pots' represents one facet of a larger research project examining social differentiation and the emergence of EBA urbanism on the southeastern Dead Sea Plain (conducted by the Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain, directed by Tom Schaub and Walter Rast), involving the analysis of publication of primary data from excavations of the legacy sites of Bab adh-Dhra', Fifa, Naqa, Numayra, and Khanazir. Our project draws on this larger umbrella project for background and comparative data to rewrite the traditional archaeological interpretation of the past by considering how EBA peoples deployed material culture in graves in the past, and how archaeologists and looters reuse and re-value this same material culture in the present. By integrating archaeological and ethnographic methods into an engaged anthropology framework, this research embodies the spirit of holistic anthropological inquiry and practice. We hope that the results of our research will encourage archaeologists to rethink their privileged position of controlling how people value the past, forcing us as anthropologists to examine our relationship to people and things under study: one of the most crucial questions at the heart of the post-colonial focus of the discipline (e.g. Hamilakis 2008). The social lives of objects in the past and the present are inextricably linked and cannot be divorced from one another.

**Suggested Further Reading**

In this introduction to the edited volume on the exchange, circulation, and valuation of things, Appadurai presents the political links between exchange and value by tracing the movements or 'social lives' of objects through different 'regimes of value'.


Bisbeh, the former director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, discusses the impetus for the 1976 Antiquities Law banning the trade in antiquities.


A discussion of the competing positions of the museums and archaeologists/anthropologists regarding the looting of sites and the trade in antiquities. The focus is on the deafening silence of the archaeological and anthropological communities in the debate.


A remarkable report of analysis of more than 8,000 previously excavated graves in monastic cemeteries in Britain. The authors employ a methodology rooted in chathe operatoire and agency studies.


This article discusses the ethical divide between looters and archaeologists, with an emphasis on the practice of subsistence digging.


Using the legal market in Israel as a case study, this work examines how the market developed, what effect its legal and illegal aspects have on archaeological site destruction in Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, and how these circumstances impact archaeological practice.


This is an exploration of the multivocality of the various agents who make it possible for illegally excavated objects to go from the ground to the consumer. The paper identifies some of the reasons for looting in the Middle East.


This essay adopts a cultural biographical approach to the examination of an object from a collection of raw materials through use, discard, and reuse to final destruction.


This article addresses the relationships between archaeology, heritage, and development through the lens of value. The author suggests that archaeologists should recognize the economic value of heritage in order to understand better who benefits from heritage.

Following the unexpected death of Paul Lapp, his wife Nancy compiled and edited his notes and reflections on digging in Palestine. This volume provides insights into the social, political, and economic contexts of excavating in the region prior to 1970.


Popular article discussing excavations at Bab edh-Dhra' and Jordan's antiquities trade in the 1960s.


This is one of the first articles to discuss the concept of subsistence looting. By focusing on Latin America, the author is able to illustrate the competing interests in the looting of archaeological sites.


Excellent report demonstrating the methodological and ethical issues faced by archaeologists working on cemeteries on the southeast Dead Sea Plain.


This introduction offers a more politically balanced interpretation of consumer society that focuses on the agency of people using the goods.


Final report of the Smithsonian excavation and analysis of bioarchaeological remains in the cemetery of Bab adh-Dhra'.


Archaeologist Politis addresses the ongoing looting of the Byzantine archaeological landscape in which he works.


Pyburn covers the concept of community archaeology and the divide between local populations and foreign archaeologists.


Final Report of the Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain's excavations at Bab adh-Dhra' Early Bronze Age walled town.


In this article Rose and Burke recount their study of looted Byzantine graves from an area near the city of Hrib in Jordan. The authors attempt to quantify the loss of archaeological knowledge and the financial benefits to the looters.


Final report of Paul Lapp's excavations of the cemetery of Bab adh-Dhra'.

Explicit discussion of challenges and methodologies, coupled with a report of findings, in researching a heavily looted and reused cemetery of rock-cut tombs in Cyprus.

Additional References


