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2010

Postcolonial, Neo-imperial, or a Little Bit of Both?: Reflections on Museums in Lebanon

Neil A. Silberman, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



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Postcolonial, Neo-imperial, or a Little Bit of Both? Reflections on Museums in Lebanon

Neil Asher Silberman

It is gratifying and enlightening to read these three quite different perspectives on museum practice in Lebanon. This journal will continue to benefit from ever-greater attention to political and social contexts of archaeological work and its cultural by-products, not merely as “popularization” or “outreach” but as essential outcomes of scholarly activity. For while research reports and historical monographs reach at most a few hundred readers, public representations of the past in museums, school textbooks, and “official” national histories—further echoed in the subtle imagery of postage stamps, political speeches, and public commemorations—move millions. They move them to war, peace, xenophobia, or peaceful co-existence. Institutions such as those described in the preceding articles are nothing less than the modern machinery of collective identity.

Few nations on earth possess as fragmented and contentious a brand of identity politics as Lebanon. It is to the credit of the authors of the preceding reports that they face the problems of Lebanon’s museums squarely and openly, in the context of recent history and contemporary life. Some of the challenges they describe are shared with museums all over this globalized world in our era of mass media, Internet communications, and declining museum visitation. In Lebanon, as elsewhere, curators have been forced to move away from didacticism toward livelier “edu-tainment” offerings. Exhibits need to be slicker, packaged more creatively, and aimed at a wider range of potential audiences—from bored and restless school children to bored and impatient adults.

Of course, Lebanon’s recent history of civil war, internal political upheavals, and external threats makes it a special case. Its museums, like every other public institution in the country, still bear the burden of religious conflict and colonial oversight. While those elements of modern political life are certainly not absent from Israel and Jordan and other Near Eastern nations described in this journal, the presentation of the past in those countries have been firmly controlled and authorized by their central governments, each with their own orthodox ideas of history and ethnic identity. Yet in Lebanon, with its tenuous balance of power between communities, identity is often in the eyes of

the beholder—and what is dearest to one community may be anathema to the rest.

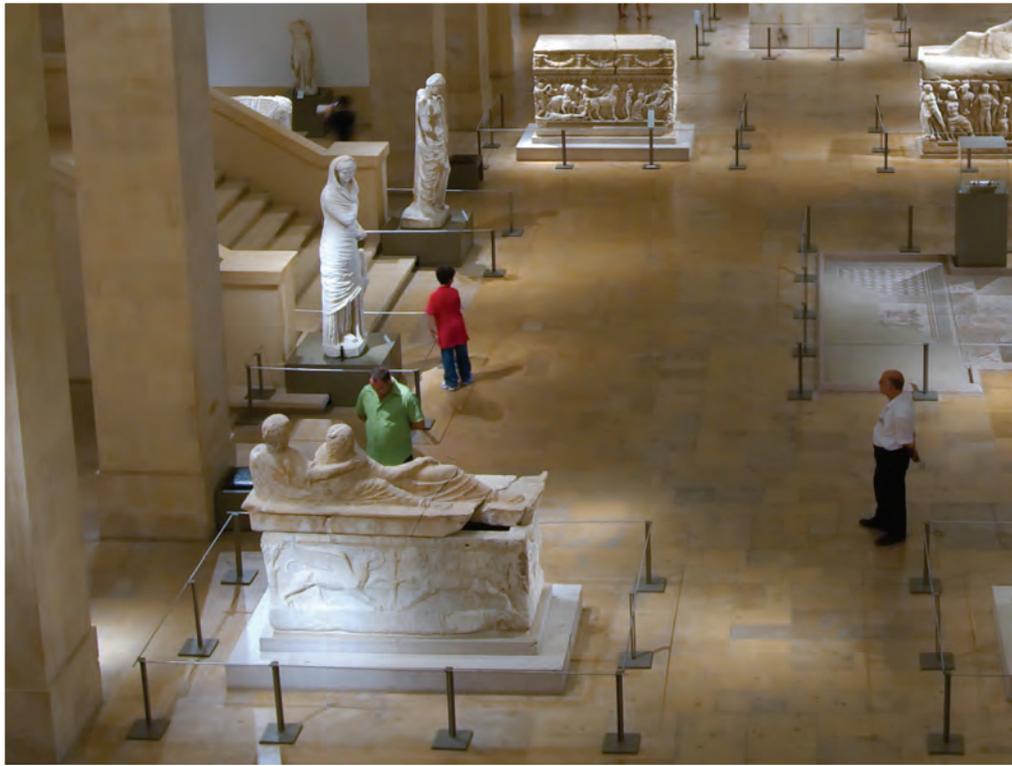
All three of the commentators recognize this challenge and attempt to point the way to policies and techniques that may enable the museums of Lebanon to serve as positive, unifying cultural influences in the wider society. I would like to highlight a few aspects that strike me as worthy of further discussion.

Leila Badre’s review and prospect of the role of private museums in Lebanon offers a glimpse at the legacy of the nineteenth-century Western religious missionaries in the country, with a brief closing review of the new wave of private museums that have been established in recent years. Badre touches on some of the problematic issues now recognized in the circumstances of the older museums’ founding, namely, their basis in collections gathered (plundered?) systematically by Western diplomats and clerics as a part of the colonial appropriation of the Middle East. Today, of course, such a situation would never be tolerated, but it is interesting to note how the colonial legacy survives in some subtle yet highly influential ways. The basic emphasis on the Phoenicians in the archaeological exhibits—whether they are understood in their biblical or classical context—and the reliance on a chronological sequence of technological innovation and steady stylistic development reveals a continuing orientation toward selective visions of certain influential historical peoples and steady technical progress as the hallmarks of history.

It is therefore significant that even with the thorough updating of the American University of Beirut Archaeological Museum in 2006, the main narrative of the “charming” presentation of bygone days was retained. Still focusing on the Phoenicians and still based on a rigidly linear chronology, only the infrastructure of lighting, signage, security, and design has changed. There is still a decided distance between past and present. The exhibitions remain didactic—relying mainly on the achievements and skills of the ancient Phoenicians in technology, craft, cult, trade, and literacy, as a unifying element for Lebanese society today.

The updated exhibits at the Lebanese Prehistory Museum at St. Joseph’s University are likewise faithful reminders of the upward-and-onward march of civilization from barbarism to domesticity, illustrated with a sequence of flints and a parade of replica Stone Age houses from various sites. A chronology-based bridge is also featured in the crypt of the Greek Orthodox cathedral, demonstrating architectural (and implied cultural and spiritual) continuity to the earliest centuries of official Christianity. These subtle storylines assert contemporary political claims—about the centrality of Western civilization, about the inevitability of technological and economic development, even about a modern community’s historical claims. In traditional eyes, archaeological facts are objective; yet the emphasis on certain characters and certain stories within a museum context teach *modern* religious lessons as well.

If the museums of the American and St. Joseph’s universities



“The National Museum of Beirut was explicitly dedicated to displaying antiquities from within the boundaries of modern Lebanon.”

Above: National Museum of Beirut.

are seen as necessarily didactic, the Beirut National Museum is described by its former curator, Suzy Hakimian, as a metaphor of survival and rebirth. What is being reborn, exactly? In the museum’s founding by officials of the French Mandatory Government and its design by French-trained architects, it embodies an art-deco, Orientalist vision of modernism in the Middle East, parallel in spirit to the “Rockefeller” or Palestine Archaeological Museum being built in Jerusalem at precisely the same time. That vision was one of empire (whether it was French, British, or American hardly mattered, except in a few architectural details). What was being constructed was not a psalter of flints and potsherds but a modern institution in which ancient wisdom, rational organization, and efficient administration were combined.

Antiquity was harnessed to shape the modern nation and its unifying vision of national history. There is nothing uniquely Lebanese about this; on the contrary, every nation-state needs—and has established—a national museum to signify its sovereignty over its territory’s past. In sharp contrast to the AUB Archaeological Museum, which sought to collect the heritage of all the neighboring lands of the Bible, the National Museum of Beirut was explicitly dedicated to displaying antiquities from within the boundaries of modern Lebanon. Culturally at least, it was meant—like similar institutions in other new nations—to knit together divergent religious and regional communities

into a modernized citizenry. The displayed past was to have a unifying function, its iconic images flowing outward from the national capital, in the illustrations in schoolbooks and motifs for banknotes and postage stamps.

How appropriate, then, that when the nation began to splinter in the mid-1970s, the flow of past into present was reversed. Whether by intention or by sheer topographical coincidence, the Museum became a target for both sides in the struggle for sectarian supremacy in Beirut. The efforts of the curators to ensure the security of the collections in the midst of the fighting were nothing less than heroic. It might be said they were fighting to preserve the ideal of a “national past” as much as the individual artifacts. It is therefore appropriate that the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Museum since the 1990s has been seen—as indicated in its new welcome video *Revival*—as a cultural restoration and a symbol of national rebirth and sectarian rapprochement.

It is a noble story of cultural resistance to tribal fragmentation; time alone will tell if national unity will prevail in the long run. Yet the main interest of much of Hakimian’s article is to place the Museum in an international perspective, and here we can also

see, whether implicit or voluntary, a return to the spirit of the Museum's transnational, imperial roots.

The new empire is neither French nor British nor American, but global. Its citizens are tourists, consumers, and urban "children at risk." Its standards are the international best practices of the International Council of Museums. Its floor plan must now include a gift shop, cafeteria, and play area. Among its featured attractions is a cartoon "guide" (Baalitto!) for the children and its fine museum reproductions and other products for sale. Its role for the nation is now shared with its curators' perceived responsibility to the international museum community, for much of what Hakimian describes as the National Museum's challenges are challenges faced by all museums, and the strategies that have been adopted to counter them are globalized rather than strictly national.

Last we come to the postmodern perspective of Tahan, who readily applies the political epithet of "colonial" to the established museums and suggests "postcolonial" archaeology as a viable alternative. Yet she articulates these terms' distinctive meanings less clearly than might be desired. "Colonialism" is not just "the capture and seizure of another people's land and goods." It is a system of exploitation in which a colonial power operates by force and by ideological representations to itself and

its colonial subjects that the "mother country" is economically, technologically, culturally, and, in some cases, racially "superior."

It is this ideological dimension, more even than sheer force, that makes the colonial system seem normative and natural, even after the colonial period. And it is not just the colonizers who construct the colonial representations; the colonized—particularly the elites among them—eagerly consume and perpetuate them. In that sense, "postcolonial" is not just after the end of the colonial period, which in Lebanon came to an end in 1943. It would signify an end to the colonial consciousness, which she critiques as remaining in both the AUB Archaeological Museum and National Museum of Beirut.

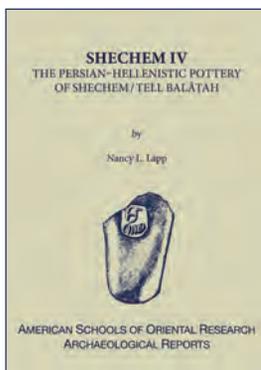
Her discussion of the "Protestant ethic" behind the AUB Archaeological Museum, based on a generic source about museum curatorship, can hardly explain the continued focus on Phoenician culture. Though it surely was introduced in the context of a biblical worldview, it also displays the kind of selective ethno-history that Lebanese nationalism (in its broadest sense) inspired. The National Museum of Beirut is, in her words, a former "colonial" institution, but in fact it was a part of the French *mission civilisatrice*, an imperial ideology proclaiming Lebanon to be a full part of the Francophone Empire, not an inferior to be exploited or tamed. And while she sees the NMB as a potentially

valuable symbol of national identity and unity, she questions its Phoenico-centrism, implying in the quoted interview that "the past of Lebanon is not treated equally and carefully." What exactly does she suggest?

A few of Tahan's points deserve rebuttal—the most important one being her contention that individual artifacts or exhibits arranged chronologically lack a "story." As I tried to stress earlier, chronological or stylistic progression in themselves tell a very potent story



ASOR New Publications



Shechem IV

The Persian-Hellenistic Pottery of Shechem/Tell Balāṭāḥ

by Nancy L. Lapp

This is the final publication of the Persian and Hellenistic pottery from the American Joint Expedition to Shechem, 1956–1968. In an introductory chapter, the stratification and important loci for this study are described. The next two chapters present the pottery by type with reference to strata and loci, complete with drawings, descriptions, and comparative material from other sites. A final chapter summarizes the important typological features and appendixes list loci with descriptions and finds from them.

American Schools of Oriental Research Archaeological Reports, Volume 11, Series Editor Joseph A. Greene, ASOR 2009, 351 pages, 67 b/w figures & 48 b/w photos, ISBN 978-0-89757-079-4, \$74.95.

Available from The David Brown Book Company – www.oxbowbooks.com

indeed. Second, I would take issue with the statement that, in contrast to museological discourse, “archaeological communication is scientifically technical and precise.” That may be true when it comes to describing pottery scatters in a single locus or measuring the ashlar in an ancient building, but anything more general than that takes interpretive creativity. It is storytelling pure and simple, with all the ideological baggage (if not the literary artistry) of other narratives that begin with “once upon a time...”

The three perspectives presented by Badre, Hakimian, and Tahan all show an active engagement and awareness of Lebanon’s political present, help us to recognize what complex challenges the country’s museums have faced—and continue to con-

front. I would stress here that the messages about the past that the highlighted museums convey are not the result of any single philosophy or ideological representation but are the products of a kind of narrative stratigraphy. Onto the nineteenth-century biblical vision, the colonial and imperial were superimposed in the early twentieth century, followed by a nationalist emphasis after the end of the French Mandate, with a recent turn to “post-colonial” rhetoric. We can therefore see clearly from the three foregoing articles that within the constraints of the narratives created and expanded by colonizers and colonists, imperialists and imperial subjects, globalizers and postmodern critics, the museums of Lebanon are *still* evolving and remain a valuable source of contemporary reflection, learning, and creativity.

ABOUT THE FORUM AUTHORS

Suzu Hakimian was the curator of the Beirut National Museum (1991–2009) who supervised the museum’s rehabilitation. She is a member of the National Committee of the International Council of Museums and other commissions. Since January 2010, she has been the curator of a new museum to be created in Beirut that will exhibit a collection of minerals from Mr. Salim Eddé.



Lina Gebrail Tahan (Ph.D., University of Cambridge) is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Tourism and Cultural Change at Leeds Metropolitan University and an affiliated scholar in the Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge. She is an active member of the International Council of Museums, working primarily for promoting museums in the Arab world.



Leila Badre is director of the AUB Archaeological Museum and was responsible for the complete renovation of the museum. She also helped create a museum at the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of St. George in Beirut, has excavated sites in various regions, and was founder of the Friends of the AUB Archaeological Museum and the Lebanese National Committee for the International Council of Museums.



Neil Silberman is Coordinator of Projects and Policy Initiatives for the University of Massachusetts Amherst Center for Heritage and Society. He is co-author of *The Bible Unearthed* (2001) and *David and Solomon* (2006) and editor-in-chief of the second edition of the *Oxford Companion to Archaeology*. He is also a member of the editorial boards of *International Journal of Cultural Property* and *Near Eastern Archaeology*.

