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April 18, 2008

## Partitioning the Past

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Last update - 07:41 18/04/2008

## Partitioning the past

By Neil Asher Silberman

All too often in archaeology - especially in the archaeology of Israel - things are not what they seem. Finds can be fakes. Discoveries can be misinterpreted. And the public significance of historical evidence often depends on the particular community being addressed. Despite mountains of data and painstakingly detailed excavation reports, archaeology is far from an exact science, and few of its conclusions are indisputable — much less binding, legal proof of modern territorial and religious claims.

No one can doubt the pride, the passions and the possessiveness that archaeological conflicts can spark in this land. Archaeological icons such as Masada, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the biblical sites of Tel Dan, Hazor, Lachish and Megiddo - among many others — embody the archaeological roots of Israel's national consciousness.

Yet struggles over the physical space and historical significance of the Temple Mount, the City of David, the Western Wall tunnels, Tel Rumeida in Hebron, the Tomb of Joseph in Nablus, and archaeological sites throughout Judea and Samaria have repeatedly served as flashpoints in the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And in recent years, Palestinian involvement in archaeology has also been steadily growing, with universities, private preservation organizations and the Department of Antiquities of the Palestinian Authority asserting Palestinian claims to excavate and interpret ancient remains.

An obvious goal in the peace process would thus be to formulate a mutually beneficial framework of cooperation by which the two sides could resolve existing conflicts over ancient sites and artifacts, and establish a durable, shared structure for protecting the land's unique and fragile archaeological legacy. Unfortunately, the "Israeli-Palestinian Cultural Heritage Agreement" announced last week in Jerusalem has not quite lived up to the great challenge it set for itself.

The brainchild of two U.S.-based archaeologists, Ran Boytner of UCLA and Lynn Swartz Dodd of the University of Southern California, this initiative brought together three Israeli and three Palestinian archaeologists to formulate a set of recommendations about the equitable division of disputed objects and sites, as part of a comprehensive political final-status agreement. The idealism and dedication of this binational group should not be dismissed lightly. But their final text disappointingly concentrates on the physical control of sites and the repatriation of relics, without seriously confronting the core issues: bridging the enormous differences in attitudes toward archaeology between Israelis and Palestinians, and addressing the utter lack of a sense of shared archaeological heritage.

Regrettably, the agreement's principles cling stubbornly to old-fashioned concepts of territory, sovereignty and exclusive possession of cultural property that dramatically reduce the possibility of ever seeing archaeology as anything more than a zero-sum game. In its vision of archaeology under a two-state solution, each state would have the exclusive responsibility of owning, managing and disposing of the sites within its domain. Finds excavated in the West Bank since June 4, 1967, would be handed over, without exception, to the Palestinian antiquities authorities as would all finds looted from the West Bank in the course of illegal excavations for the Israeli and international antiquities trade. Jerusalem is proposed as a unique island of archaeological condominium, but the proposed "Cultural Heritage Zone," carefully enclosing the various ancient sites ringing the walls of the Old City, would mostly likely be an entirely voluntary area of cooperation subject to the same partition of sovereignty as the rest of the land.

Cutting the baby in two? Will both would-be parents agree with this archaeological variation of the famous Solomonic judgment simply because it seems fair? The battle for possession of archaeological sites is a struggle for modern recognition — to have one's choice of historical commemoration publicly accepted, or at least not be angrily denied. And in a land as contended and contentious as this one, a simple plan for partition can never be entirely successful, without a basic recognition that two distinct archaeological visions — and styles of collective memory — will probably always coexist.

Indeed the very concept of "heritage" is almost necessarily exclusionary, delimiting "our" heritage from "theirs." Israelis tend to see stones, pots and ancient coins as materialized illustrations of a meaningful national narrative that runs from the beginnings of Jewish history to the rise of the State of Israel. For Palestinians, the narrative is one of dispossession, in which archaeological artifacts and sites are not seen as symbols but as alienated possessions, as real and movable property, whose ultimate significance lies in their physical return.

Neat archaeological partition will not work, and compromise arrangements will not further the cause of peace, so long as we refuse to recognize that it is not passionate archaeology that causes the present conflict, but, rather, that it is the other way around.

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