

Archaeology and the Media

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How does the study of the past deal with the future? What are the needs and expectations of a global, cosmopolitan profession and how do they relate to those of the public? How are all these questions refracted by the media? This article discusses what is arguably the most problematic sub-branch of archaeology, Biblical Archaeology, which captures all the tensions of politics, religion, and commerce—in short, modernity.

For 150 years, Biblical Archaeology has had a unique position at the convergence of amateur and professional involvement and public interest. Unlike other branches of archaeology that in their day generated fervor for purely nationalist or other reasons, the question of religious faith that parallels, animates, and dogs Biblical Archaeology seems unique. However much professionals have sought to qualify or distance themselves, this relationship remains a central and inescapable reality. We can either resign ourselves to this fact, or we can somehow embrace it: what greater challenge could there be than to reach an accommodation between “science” and “religion?”

Fortunately, the transcendental remains outside the scope of this brief essay. But a corollary of the problem of archaeology, the public, and religion have been the ethical problems embodied by the phenomenal success of *Biblical Archaeology Review* (BAR). This magazine occupies a unique position; it straddles the academic and popular, mediating the high culture of scientific discovery with the middle culture of educated laypersons, and the superficial representations of the low or popular culture.

BAR, wholly dependent on the archaeological profession for its material, provides an important service mediating information to the public, but has also become an active participant in the intellectual and

political processes of American archaeology. There are many unique features to this relationship, which must be situated in terms of American religious and social history. But in the broadest sense, the question of BAR permits us to discuss the relationships and contradictions of archaeology and the media in a free and open society.

Biblical Archaeology and the Shining City

It is useful to recall that archaeology and the press have had a mutually beneficial relationship since at least the nineteenth century. That period's Internets—the newspaper, lithograph and telegraph—permitted information about discoveries to be disseminated globally in near real-time. Schliemann's discoveries at Troy in some respects set the tone: the heroic fieldworker working over the horizon revealing the sources and setting of the West's Great Tradition. The reception given to these words and images in mid-century were conditioned in the West by high, middle, and low cultures that were still “biblical” in outlook. Darwin and Marx (and Hegel, Kant, Nietzsche, Mill, and Morgan, to name only a few) had not yet overthrown Moses and Jesus to create new touchstones of history and faith. By 1900, however, the European outlook had altered, irrevocably, at least in terms of high and middle culture, which was followed in 1950 or 1960 by a removal of religion from low or popular culture. Or perhaps it occurred during the period 1933 to 1945.

The draining of religion from European society and its replacement by technocracy had different dynamics in America. Although by perhaps 1900, high or elite culture in America had largely cut itself off from religious inspiration, terms, and concepts, middle culture (even today) retained at least some awareness of, and tension with, religion. And American popular culture

is consciously schizophrenic, embracing Internet porn and televangelism with equal enthusiasm.

Such distinctions are fundamental to understanding the past and present state of BAR. Nothing like BAR has or could have ever existed in post-Christian Europe. The *Illustrated London News* had its time in the sun, but has long since given way as secular interest in archaeology has waned. BAR could only exist in America, where religion and faith remain; however, if the educated middle class enlarges in rapidly evangelizing Latin American or Africa, franchises in those areas might be profitable.

As a concomitant, American curiosity regarding all archaeological results also has a quasi-theological cast. Archaeology helps create a sense of place that plays off what Gunnar Myrdal, Seymour Martin Lipset, and others have called the American Creed, the continual rebirthing of immigrants into a culture characterized by what Samuel Huntington has called "the English language; Christianity; religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, the responsibility of rulers, and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a 'city on a hill.'"

In the American context, the immense popular interest in archaeology might generally reflect the diverse roots of Americans themselves. But American interest also seems a function of globalized bourgeois culture that now shops for experiences and identities, while remaining partially rooted in a sense of American exceptionalism. The American approach to archaeology generally, and to Biblical Archaeology specifically, might be called a latter-day Victorian progressivism, Whiggish in the sense that archaeology helps situate us, individually and communally, although as with the American Creed generally, this may be cast along a spectrum of religious to secular belief. Archaeology is, one might argue, a postmodern form of gnosis. Europe is more difficult to understand, particularly post 9/11. I have argued elsewhere that European interest in archaeology mirrors European society, superficially communal but in fact deeply individualistic, a kind of pagan dilettantism rather than a shared, sometimes religious, quest. More empirical research on these questions is obviously required.

It might be argued that the American approach to archaeology in general and to Biblical Archaeology in particular is a mere facet of American nationalism. If

so, then American nationalism has the peculiar ability to appropriate and naturalize finds situated a continent away, or, more locally, those that predate European Colonialism in North America. This would seem to run counter to the usual argument from archaeologists and scholars of nationalism alike, that archaeology's contribution has been to create specific pasts, with spatial boundaries and historical linkages to the present, for "nations" (defined ethno-linguistically) seeking "homelands." What is also worth noting is that archaeology has the capability to generate or inform both individual and collective identities, and thus has ridden the post-modern shift to individualism. The cost, however, has been at the erosion of the discipline's social authority as other challengers have arisen.

To sum up, BAR's success may be attributed in large part to its ability to address Americans familiar with biblical religion with compellingly told and beautifully illustrated data, that shorten the distance between past and present. Its readers find this useful for understanding themselves, their faiths—real, attenuated, or lapsed—and their individual and communal identities. In short, archaeology satisfies metaphysical yearnings. But how are archaeologists to reconcile this with their professional obligations, when their publicity needs and impulses collide with corresponding media needs for products in the global market? What are the roles for professional ethics and disciplinary self-regulation? The case of the *Biblical Archaeology Review* shows how these needs may diverge dramatically.

The Ages of BAR

The *Biblical Archaeology Review* has passed through several phases of increasing engagement, named here after the main source of controversy, suggesting growing confidence in BAR's exercise of authority and attempts to become a full and equal player in intellectual debates. These are the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) Phase, the Ostraca Phase, and the James and Jehoash (J+J) Phase. Other divisions could certainly be drawn that more closely approximate phases of disciplinary self-definition, for example, a Biblical Archaeology versus Syro-Palestinian Archaeology phase (where the Bible-centric version of the past was contrasted with a geographically labeled and wholly "secular" vision), and so on. But the scheme offered here seems native to BAR itself, rather than originating from the profession.

The DSS Phase (ca. 1986-1994) was characterized by BAR issuing a challenge on the basis that the ar-

chaeological profession had restricted knowledge, or acquiesced to the restriction of knowledge. In article after article, BAR drove home the point that the DSS corpus had not been fully published, and accused various professionals, including the Israel Department of Antiquities (now Israel Antiquities Authority) of complicity in an intellectual scandal verging on a cover-up.

The dominant themes pertaining to this phase were aimed at “breaking the scholarly monopoly.” There was a distinctly ad hominem character to the reporting, as well as sensationalistic undertones regarding potentially earthshaking revelations. Still, the self-serving nature of the effort, for example in the establishment of a “Biblical Archaeology Society Institute for Dead Sea Scrolls Study,” did not appear completely overbearing. In retrospect, however, these themes were portents of what might be called a larger trajectory, or grander ambition.

In the Ostraca Phase (ca. 1996-1999) BAR itself disseminated restricted knowledge. This had already occurred with the publication of an unprovenanced ivory pomegranate, alleged to be from Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem. But it intensified throughout the mid- to late-1990s with a stream of sensational finds that seemed too good to be true. Among these were a *bullae* seemingly belonging to King Ahaz of Judah, seals with names of Biblical personages, and ostraca with long Iron Age inscriptions. In most of the cases, the objects were published by leading scholars and their appearance in BAR complemented formal publication in professional journals. Virtually all of the objects originated from the private collection of London jeweler Shlomo Moussaieff, and had apparently been sold by a Jaffa antiquities dealer, Robert Deutsch, who was also a graduate student in ancient Near Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The publication of unprovenanced objects from private collections simultaneously accomplished several things. It situated BAR as a source of primary data, presented by scholars without any of the usual controls on the authenticity of materials and quality of analysis, such as peer review, presentation at scholarly conferences (whose sponsoring organizations are usually bound to reject such objects), and dialogues in scholarly journals. When such objects were finally published in scholarly journals, they had already assumed a life of their own thanks to BAR and were given

the benefit of the doubt thanks to relentless advocacy. Finally, they were presented as sensational finds, which not coincidentally played to the core concern of BAR’s readers, the biblical world, who, in effect, became their constituencies and advocates. In short, BAR endorsed suspect objects, advocated and created a public following for them, their owners and sellers, and promoted explicitly the concept of a black market that was presumed to serve higher ends. The interests of science and capitalism firmly collided.

In the J+J phase (ca. 2002-), BAR has challenged the expertise of professionals and their bona fides. The most sensational objects yet, the alleged ossuary of James, brother of Jesus and inscription allegedly written by King Jehoash of Judah, were first oversold to the world by BAR, and then discussed in scholarly journals.

The authenticity of these objects was quickly challenged by professionals on the basis of the objects lack of provenance, shady dealings by their owners, and then scientific data demonstrating them and their predecessors to be fakes. In response, BAR launched an unprecedented counterattack, shopping for experts, decrying the victimization of the artifacts’ owners, and casting itself as a victim of scholars bent on vendetta. Having helped create the tsunami of stolen objects and then forgeries, BAR now explains that this sea cannot be held back.

BAR’s relentlessly capitalist behavior is uniquely American. There are no constraints and the rewards for participation in this regime of values pertain to all, archaeologists included. In this sense, BAR has managed successfully to ride the tiger, at least until recently. The strategy of soliciting professionals to reveal their results and participate in disputes has been a form of willing cooptation that is, to repeat, as old as Layard and Schliemann.

Observer Dependent Effects

On the basis of this rough framework, the DSS Phase and its essentially journalistic efforts challenged the profession on what might be called democratic grounds. The “prying out of information,” or more accurately, journalistic pressure for faster publication by means of embarrassing revelations regarding poor stewardship, fulfilled a useful watchdog role. If the rhetoric was sometimes extreme, the cause was ultimately legitimate.

But the latter two phases described here saw journalists defying archaeology’s disciplinary norms and values, first in the grey area of publishing and in endorsing unprovenanced artifacts, looting and the black

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market, and then by competing with the profession by rejecting the profession's authority. To be sure, the looting, forgery, and the black market existed before BAR and will exist long after, but BAR's contribution has been significant.

The question is not one of competing "narratives," although this is certainly a feature. There is a question of authority, but what does that really mean? Authority is the appropriate relationship between experts and non-experts, but also a question of the relationship between capitalists and, for lack of a better term, non-capitalists, in the sense that for producers, archaeological knowledge is not wholly a function of, or captive to, capitalist regimes of value.

Archaeology is an odd form of science at best, but it strives toward objectivity and professionals willingly participate in mechanisms of disciplinary self-regulation. Peer review and the certification explicit in the granting of advanced degrees, are means to assure scholarship is not contaminated. Indeed, the contamination of the data stream on Iron Age Israel by fakes touted by BAR has been especially damaging, and professionals must bear their share of the blame.

A balance of power between BAR and the profession has always been difficult to maintain. In some respects, BAR's influence has been resolutely negative. BAR's emphasis on controversy and a limited range of issues—the biblical world of Israel and Jordan, roughly from the second millennium BCE through the first millennium CE—has put other periods, places, topics and scholars at a disadvantage, at least in terms of public perception. BAR has also reinforced the impression among other archaeological professionals that Biblical Archaeology has only a narrow range of concerns, namely biblical persons, places, and problems. In this retrogression, professionals have been surprisingly complicit.

The services BAR provides, publicity for finds and projects, notoriety for individuals, and minor economic benefits, have been willingly embraced. In truth, archaeologists have always been happy to sell their souls, for money, fame, and especially access to countries, sites, and collections, but in this limited arena of two tiny countries, three thousand years of archaeology, and perhaps 200 professionals, the distortion effects have become profound.

Media always produce observer-dependent results. Creating an emotional response in readers, whether

empathy or antipathy, or a sense of intellectual superiority, by providing "facts," necessarily feeds back to the original subject. Sometimes subtle, sometimes grotesque, these effects are inescapable, and have been the source of much lamentation by professionals, who claim to resist some pressures (especially nationalism), while others embrace "progressive" causes. But who sets the agenda and retains authority to interpret the past? What happens when, in pursuit of publicity, professionals are co-opted by media?

Follow the Money

Tolerant to a fault, the question of the market has always vexed archaeology's relations with BAR. The immense PR received through the popular pieces and most of all glossy pictures of happy volunteers from middle America making discoveries, that is to say, participating, has prompted professionals to overlook the ads for coins and other artifacts in the back pages of the magazine. But those ads have slowly overtaken BAR as a whole. The preponderance of archaeological discoveries is prosaic and they accumulate at their own pace. This is "normal science" in archaeology. But collectors have the nicest things, and the temptation for BAR to show them off, in place of scholarly wares, was irresistible.

Implicitly, and then explicitly, BAR began to rub the profession's nose in these "finds." Throughout the 1990s a series of "finds" were displayed in the pages of BAR. This hubris accelerated as the artifacts became more and more grandiose, and when BAR was their exclusive source. Showing off seals and ostraca that by definition had been stolen from archaeological sites put the profession in an increasingly untenable position. The rationale on BAR's part is difficult to fathom, since stolen antiquities trumped those that had been lawfully and hard-gained by responsible professionals. Rubbing noses escalated into a slap in the face, alienating those who were willing to live with the contradiction of using and being used by BAR, and increasing the ethical discomfort.

This situation, increasingly coupled with BAR's stance as an active participant and its new journals, namely *Bible Review* and *Archaeological Odyssey*, created a haphazard imperial strategy that took over a swath of the American imaginary. And, by accusing scholars of jealousy and envy in their analyses and condemnations of frauds, BAR has finally bitten off the hand that feeds it.

Without the discipline of procedures to verify or falsify results (expert shopping notwithstanding), by perceiving its responsibility as being only to its "clients" (namely its subscribers and, more critically, the collectors and dealers for whom it has and continues to shill) rather than abstract ideals of scientific truths, and by adopting an adversarial relationship with the profession, BAR has finally trapped itself in contradictions of its own making.

But is this a contradiction between capitalism, which knows no rules, and science, which is all about rules? Or it is a contradiction between the media, which have no method, only style, and an academic discipline, which is both method and theory? What ethics guide archaeologists in their relations with the media? In an open society the answer is not easily discerned.

Archaeology and Freedom

The media are free to report, criticize, and cajole. They may even manipulate, distort, and abuse their position—even pose as expert—since there are few legal constraints. Ethical constraints in journalism, if they exist at all, are honored more in the breach than in reality.

For science, however, a whole series of self-regulatory mechanisms should come into play. Peer review is one example. Publicity is not bad, nor is "complicity" with capitalism, provided that the agenda is still set by scientists. Archaeology, like all other sciences, despite unique attributes, cannot exist in a vacuum. And if it expects a claim on society's resources and respect, it must engage in a dialogue that will almost inevitably be conducted through or with the media. Media relations are already an important dimension of scientific ethics where positive images and results are necessary to attract continued investment and where scientists have direct economic interests. The same is true for archaeology.

But in discussions of archaeological ethics, relationships with the media are not prominent. The Society for American Archaeology, for example, merely indicates that archaeologists have an obligation to report on their finds, to engage in "public education and outreach" in order to (1) enlist public support for the stewardship of the archaeological record; (2) explain and promote the use of archaeological methods and techniques in understanding human behavior and culture; and (3) communicate archaeological interpretations of the past and at the same time not to "commercialize" objects and

thereby contribute to the destruction of archaeological sites. Thus, the ethical demands placed on archaeologists are to encourage appreciation, but not too much, to reach out to the public, but not generate too much enthusiasm, and implicitly, to work with or through the media. Presumably, these guidelines assume that archaeologists will maintain their authority and be challenged by neither individuals nor media. In open societies this power is difficult to maintain.

The problem of media ethics is exacerbated by the social dimensions described earlier. Archaeology's role as interpreter or shaman for American society has some limited similarities with other disciplines that have attempted to popularize results. Theoretical physicists, for example, discussing cosmology, have been forced to contend with the religious implications of their work, and have even resorted to using religious language to sell books. Scientists invoking the "face of god" and "theories of everything" sell books and speak to religious sensibilities. Controversies over "intelligent design" and evolution are, conversely, forced upon science by society. But the situation where a single media outlet, BAR, has significantly shaped both the science and the public perception is unusual.

Cooperating with exploitative media, even if they contribute ultimately to the destruction of the archaeological record, is very different from the moral problem of cooperating with, say, a genocidal regime. Cooperating with BAR may be a moral lapse and a disciplinary violation, but in the inevitable hierarchies that constitute real life and real decisions, it is not a matter of life or death. In this way, I believe the moral choices involved fall into the category of personal conscience rather than disciplinary-wide ethics. Others will no doubt disagree.

But as the archaeological discipline debates the morality and necessity of studying looted antiquities, regardless of their current ownership, the legitimacy of groups claiming to be "descendent communities" and how to include these in the process of archaeology, and as museums are being pressed to repatriate objects in their collections, among other problems, the situation is far from clear. Archaeologists now assume contradictory poses as defenders of humanity's heritage and of national patrimony, and many have resolutely shifted to a stance that places the expiation of colonial guilt as the supreme virtue and only goal. All the while media, such as cable television, continue

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to challenge archaeology's authority. Programs such as "Digging for the Truth" project the traditional image of archaeology as a romantic quest by scientific means for secret knowledge that situates or constitutes identity in the present. And beyond this the Internet, with its vast, shifting, and authority-less landscape, threatens to remove professionals from the equation altogether. Faced with this competition, the profession increasingly must navigate between isolation and marginalization, or participation and probable co-optation. To judge from the professional literature, however, the result is increasingly solipsism and paralysis. Professionals in open societies, where information is freely available and moral choices respected, are particularly susceptible.

Moral decisions are easy to pronounce after the fact but are harder to discern in real time. But asserting that archaeology should not cooperate with any forces it finds problematic, in effect, that archaeology possesses independent moral authority, and that it answers only to itself, is pure bohemianism. If we refuse to cooperate with "occupying powers" or with exploitative media, or with nationalists, or with consumer capitalism, we should not be surprised to find ourselves alone and out of business. The alternative, it should be stressed, is not repudiating the "colonial gaze" and becoming advocates for the latest political visions, new appropriations of the past in the name of indigenes or emancipation, or endlessly recursivity, a cycle of fretting about the difficulties of the present. Critical but not paralytic judgment and, perhaps above all, a reengagement with the material

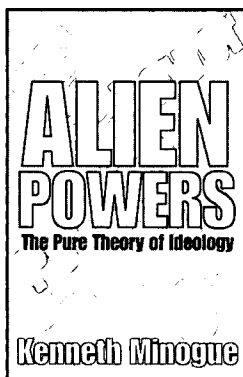
imperatives of archaeology, to dig, survey, and report, are necessary. Part of the answer also lies in the mutual disenchantment of archaeology and society, which will result in lessened hubris from one side regarding its potential contribution, and fewer expectations from the other. How this might come about is hard to imagine.

Archaeology occupies a unique place in global and American society, but its responsibilities are anything but clear. Unfortunately, if there is a lesson to be learned from the experience of the Biblical Archaeological Review it is that a discipline's relationship with the media can be heady and even profitable, but that slopes are slippery and our footing is unsure.

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Alien Powers

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Kenneth Minogue

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