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The Study of the Ancient and Recent Past in Israel: The View from Tel Ḥadid

Ido Koch

Jakob M. Alkow Department of Archaeology and Ancient Near Eastern Cultures, Tel Aviv University, Israel,
idokoch@tauex.tau.ac.il

In recent years there has been growing scholarly interest in the social context of archaeology in Israel. As amply demonstrated, ideologies, politics and religions have been entangled with the practice of archaeology in the southern Levant since Ottoman times, and they form the foundations of common current approaches. True, interpretive frameworks and methodological approaches gradually changed in response to studies of the history of scholarship during the 1980s and 1990s, as well as exposure to critical archaeological studies, and the perspective of archaeologists educated in recent decades differs from that of their predecessors, but many still adhere to paradigms and concepts that developed and crystallised almost a century ago by agenda-driven scholars. Accordingly, this contribution joins the call for a reflective discourse – which is needed now more than ever. It deals with the entanglement of the ancient, the recent and the present, as reflected in the ongoing work at Tel Ḥadid, a multilayer mound in central Israel, following Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis' (2022) call to “demystify” the ancient and imagination and consequently our scholarly approaches.

Studying the Ancient in a Contemporary Context

During the 2019 season of archaeological fieldwork at Tel Ḥadid,¹ a hand grenade was found just below the surface. Work was halted for several hours, and as the team waited for a police bomb squad to come and dismantle the threat, they could identify the grenade as an artefact dating back to the days of British rule over Palestine (1917–1948).

This was our team's introduction to the first full season at Tel Ḥadid, during which we invested our efforts in four main areas, three of which yielded significant remains dating to the Iron Age II (primarily 7th century BCE), the Hellenistic period (2nd–1st centuries BCE), and the Byzantine period (4th–7th centuries BCE). Our initial aim had been to investigate the Iron Age II, a context already explored at the site in the 1990s (Brand 1996, 1998; Beit-Arieh 2008; Koch and Brand Forthcoming). Specifically, we were intrigued by the remains of a community of deportees who were forcibly relocated and settled in the region by the Neo-Assyrian empire in the late 8th century BCE (Na'aman and Zadok 2000; Koch et al. 2020). These remains offered us a rare opportunity to explore this historically well-known yet archaeologically understudied episode in the history of the region (Koch 2022).

We began the exploration with questions on the transformative capacity of ‘uprootedness’ – the forced relocation of communities from their homelands or habitual surroundings. Such questions included:

- What would the uprooted take with them on their journey?
- How would they adapt to the local climate, flora and fauna of their new homes?
- What would the nature of their interactions with their new host society be?

1 The project is co-directed by the author and by James Parker (Baptist Theological Seminary of New Orleans).

As work progressed and with the discovery of new contexts, new questions came to light, yet the Iron II remains constitute the main attraction of the site in the eyes of the scholarly community and the general public. The proximity of the site to the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, its elevation, towering above the neighbouring communities, and its development as a leisure site by the Jewish National Fund all make it a popular site with the public. Tel Ḥadid and its surroundings host hundreds of thousands of visitors annually, especially in the summertime. Naturally, the sight of our black excavation tents and equipment, alongside the sound of tools (and our team's vocal enthusiasm) attract visitor attention. We decided, therefore, from the beginning, to adopt an inclusive approach by collaborating with local communities and visitors and regularly sharing our thoughts and plans with them. Many visitors would approach us and ask questions, most frequently about the Iron II or, more accurately, about the biblical period. As all our staff members can testify, one of the most common questions was: "Have you found proof of the Bible?"

Our staff members, most of whom are Tel Aviv University students, engage in such conversations daily and present their own perspectives. Here, however, is when things can get tricky, and where we must tread with care, since the entanglement of archaeology with politics, ideologies and religions is at the core of our field in Israel. Such views derive from the colonial origins of earlier scholarship and the nationalistic archaeology of the first decades of the State of Israel that have evolved to become the legacy of modern scholarship (see, among others, Silberman 1993, 2003; Shavit 1997; Kletter 2006; Feige and Shiloni 2008; Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022, esp. 24–28). Even nowadays, decades-old approaches dictate research questions, methods and interpretations. News media and politicians often cherry-pick the latter, which are harnessed as "proof" of their views and sacralised as part of a political agenda (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 103–105, 144).

To counter such insidious entanglements, we highlight the need to maintain the independence of the analysis of material remains from the tyranny of texts and their scholarly interpretations. The prioritisation of data over paradigms is essential if we are to release the Iron Age archaeology of the southern Levant from its *biblicised* past and protect it from the threat of manipulation in the name of nationalist agendas. Following Greenberg and Hamilakis (2022: 162–163), archaeologists must engage with the public and discuss the roots of the myths, the complexity of interpretation and the production of alternative narratives.

The work at Tel Ḥadid has exposed yet another entanglement between the past and the present. Each visitor to the site, armed with their own mindset, interests, beliefs and political views, passes through hundreds of olive trees, organised in plots framed by crumbling fences and prickly-pear cacti. Some would engage in conversations on the ancient past and its contemporary context under the shade of Tel Ḥadid's serene, aged olive orchards. Those who climb the mound to see the panoramic view of the Lydda Valley and the Tel Aviv metropolitan area are probably unaware that when they reach the summit, they are standing on top of a cemetery. Just behind them lie the ruins of houses, blending in with the vegetation, covered by thick underbrush under a canopy of trees planted in the past 50 years. These are the sparse remains of the Palestinian village of al-Ḥaditha that was destroyed on 12 July 1948.

These paltry remains of the village have shaped the direction our research was to take. The grenade of the 2019 season was a vivid illustration of the site's violent past during the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. It became clear to me that the study of uprooted communities in the ancient past could not continue without creating the space to consider the nature of *our* current role in the story of this place and its recent episode of uprootedness. Thus, a new collaboration was co-initiated with Prof. Yoav Alon (Department of Middle Eastern and African History, TAU) to study the village of al-Ḥaditha and its remains. Together we intend to investigate the village through a detailed archaeological analysis of material remains and a thorough historical inquiry.² As such, the project underscores the promise embodied in historical-archaeological investigations into Israel's recent past, illuminating unknown aspects of recent material culture and shedding light on under-studied communities that leave few conventional records of their experience.

2 The project is funded by the Israel Science Fund, Grant No. 1316/22.

Our Academic Location: At a Turn in the Archaeology of Israel's Recent Past?

As we began to plan the project, we faced a well-known challenge. In contrast to the established scholarly community of Israel's modern history in all Israeli universities, institutes and departments of archaeology have few members who study and teach the archaeology of the Ottoman and British Mandate periods. Thus, while historical archaeology is a vibrant discipline in Europe and North America (Orser, Jr. 2002; Majewski and Gaimster 2009), Israeli archaeology has contributed little to the field, even though material remains from recent centuries are found in abundance throughout the country.

The roots of this phenomenon date to the early archaeological explorations of Ottoman-period Palestine (1517–1917), which focused on Judeo-Christian remains alone. At first, this was due to the (generally negative) Western colonial perception of the “Orient” and its people. This was compounded by the British Mandate Antiquities Ordinance (1920), which decreed that only remains predating 1700 CE should be considered antiquities. This same perspective of past remains was later endorsed by Israeli lawmakers and archaeologists (Melman 2020; Baram 2009; Kletter 2006).

Although the remains of Arab villages from the Ottoman and British Mandate periods have been uncovered in many salvage excavations (e.g., Ustinova and Nahshoni 1994), only a few projects have focused on the rural sites from these periods. These include Glock's study of Ti'innik (Ziadeh 1995; Ziadeh-Seely 1999, 2000) and Hirschfeld's excavations of the village of Umm el-'Aleq (Hirschfeld 2000). Other studies have explored burial practices (Simpson 1995) and objects, predominantly smoking pipes and drinking vessels (Baram 1999; Simpson 2002). Nevertheless, and despite the well-established field of historical archaeology, no sub-discipline for the archaeology of the modern era in the southern Levant has emerged. In Baram's (2000: 139) words, “for a land which has been overturned in nearly every corner with the archaeologist's spade, the recent past is the least understood archaeologically.”

This situation has improved in recent years. First, the significant and extensive development of Israel over the past three decades generated salvage projects that focused on the modern era. Some of these projects involved historical-archaeological studies, primarily in Jerusalem and Jaffa (e.g., de Vincenz 2015; Arbel 2021), but also in other regions (e.g., Majdal Yaba: Tsuk et al. 2016; Kafr 'Ana: Arbel and Volynsky 2019; al-Muzayri'ah: Taxel and Amit 2019). Second, an outreach project in Lydda promotes the study of the city, specifically during the Ottoman and British periods (Da'adli 2017; Shavit 2022). Third, the material remains from these periods have been subjected to detailed analyses, the results of which illuminate local trends in economic activity and consumption during times of increased exposure to European material and technological innovations, followed by political domination (Walker 2009; Shapiro 2016; Vincenz 2018; Arbel 2019; Da'adli 2019; Shehadeh 2020). Finally, there has been an increased exploration of the political context of modern Israeli archaeology, including the role of Israeli archaeologists in demolishing pre-1948 Arab villages (Kletter and Sulimani 2016; see also Kletter 2006: 48–81).

University-based fieldwork (distinct from salvage excavations) complements this growing interest in the recent past. Such projects include Tell eṣ-Ṣāfi (Horwitz et al. 2018), Bureir (Saidel et al. 2020), and Tell el-Hesi (Saidel and Blakely 2019) in the southern coastal plain, as well as rural sites in the Western Negev (Saidel et al. 2019). To these one should add the study of the village of Qalunia, west of Jerusalem, which is based on a reanalysis of past salvage excavations (Wachtel et al. 2020; Kisilevitz et al. 2021). The most recent development is the project at Qadas, located in the Upper Galilee close to the Israeli–Lebanese border, co-directed by R. Greenberg and G. Sulimani, which endeavours to study the village and its destruction following the conquest in 1948 (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 176–178).

Lastly, such an interest is reflected in special issues of peer-reviewed journals, which hitherto did not deal specifically with these periods (Saidel and Erickson-Gini 2021). This recent momentum of archaeological interest in Israel's recent past provides a new context for our project and allows us to explore aspects of past and present societies as well as consider the role of archaeology within this discourse.

Al-Ḥaditha: A Historical–Archaeological Study of a Depopulated Arab Village

The archaeological study of the recent past involves sets of data that provide high-resolution details unknown in the study of more ancient periods. First is the wide range of written sources and photos from various archives and contemporary press reports as well as oral testimonies: some are already available online, and others are compiled from al-Ḥaditha communities in Ramallah and Amman. The archival work is carried out by Alon, assisted by two postdoctoral fellows, one of whom is a native Arabic speaker responsible for communicating with the al-Ḥaditha communities in the West Bank and Amman.

A fundamental component of our project is the collaboration of the al-Ḥaditha Association (Jam‘iyyat al-Ḥaditha) in al-Bireh, Ramallah. We are trying to enable the refugees from al-Ḥaditha and their descendants to play an active and integral role in the project rather than a passive one (cf. Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022: 159). For instance, within the framework of the interviews, we encourage active participation, asking questions such as: do you have any inquiries we can explore in our excavation of your village? We plan to maintain open communication with the al-Ḥaditha community throughout the project and hopefully into the future. Focusing on narrative transmission and preservation, we ask community members to document their stories of the village – which will then be translated into English and Hebrew in our publications.

At the same time, we are aware that we should not ignore those who have lived next to Tel Ḥadid in recent decades. Inspired by the framework of community archaeology (Tully 2007; Marshall 2009; Moshenska and Dhanjal 2012), we have engaged with the regional council and called for its collaboration. In this context, we have talked to local residents and asked them for input on the site’s place in their landscape. Special attention is accorded to the senior members of these communities, who first settled at the foothills of Tel Ḥadid in the early 1950s and remember the site with its ruins before the planting of the park by the Jewish National Fund in the 1970s. In addition, we have joined classes in the neighbouring elementary school and guided them to/around the site as we listened to their stories about Tel Ḥadid – stories that will also be included in our publication.

Based on the historical sources, we have built our second data set, which integrates the GIS application of historical photos and a survey of the village and its environs. This allows us to incorporate all the information amassed into a detailed digital map of the village, reconstructing its immediate agricultural surroundings and tracing land usage in the vicinity. To this end, we work on converting historical aerial photos of al-Ḥaditha and its environs into orthophotos (top-down photos stretched to scale and placed on a coordinate system), facilitating the comparison of sources from different periods. The collected data will be cross-referenced with the high-resolution survey data and archival documents (pertaining to land ownership) to create a holistic view of the village and its environs.

The third (and archaeologically more “conventional”) data set would be the excavation of al-Ḥaditha’s built-up area, which will commence in the summer of 2024. The excavation team will work following the insights provided by the historical research during three seasons of excavation of the village (2024–2026), and ongoing analysis of the material remains will be framed in comparison with the historical evidence. This excavation will involve the detailed documentation and removal of ruins to study destruction processes, followed by the excavation of underlying habitation levels. We initially planned to conduct the digging of two sections along the slope and one wide area in the village’s core. However, as we continue the interviews with the al-Ḥaditha community, our final excavation plans will be amended in line with their questions and approval.

We aim to publish a comprehensive presentation of the project and its components as an open-access edited volume in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. The main contributors to this volume will be the project’s PIs and staff members, along with former residents of al-Ḥaditha and their descendants.

Our consultation on the final storage location of the unearthed objects is another facet of this project. According to the Israeli Antiquities Law, the excavation director is responsible for handing over all excavated finds to the state authorities. However, since the recent date of the finds excludes them from the law, it is the excavators’ responsibility to decide how to process them. We plan to work with the community and conduct consultations to determine

how the recovered objects are to be treated regarding their display in museums or exhibitions, their preservation and storage, and their eventual return to the descendants of their former owners.³

The project's final phase (to take place in the summer of 2026) will consist of a reflective discourse on the collaborative effort to uncover the story of al-Ḥaditha. We will convene for a summary workshop to present the results of the project and our conclusions on theory, methods and practice. Alongside the need to discuss disciplinary boundaries that should be at the very least revisited and perhaps revised, there is the fact that both Alon and myself are Jewish Israelis and thus must be aware of the need for a self-reflective component in the project, as it directly relates to Israeli and Palestinian history within the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict.

As I am writing this contribution after concluding the first year of the project and after some years of studying uprootedness in the ancient past, I wonder how my personal experience has shaped my research. Ever since I was a child, I have heard the stories of my grandparents – holocaust survivors who lost their families, were uprooted from their homes, migrated to Palestine in 1947 and built a new life while joining the war. What elements of these stories and the details I have collected during the years became part of my research? And how much of my grandfather's stories on his participation in the 1948 War are lying in the back of my mind as I read the testimonies of the people of al-Ḥaditha?

Indeed, this is only the beginning, and I look forward to the ultimate results of this project. I already feel, however, that although our task is not easy, we are not alone. We have colleagues to consult with, the willingness and generosity of the al-Ḥaditha community, recent awards of generous funding for our research, and the support of a passionate and kind-hearted student community eager to join the project. It is my hope that more projects like this will be developed in the future.

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