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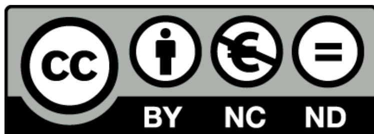
Zitiervorschlag
Allison Mickel. 2026. Archaeology and the Normality of Care. Forum Kritische Archäologie 15, Theme Issue: Orienting Archaeology towards Peace: 17–23.

URL https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de

DOI http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-51892

ISSN 2194-346X



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Archaeology and the Normality of Care

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In my introductory archaeology course this semester, we started with a discussion of the 25 Grand Challenges for Archaeology, identified by Keith Kintigh and colleagues in 2014. My students expressed surprise that war and conflict was, in their view, so underemphasized in comparison to other questions about leadership, hierarchy, and human-environmental interaction. To them, it seemed obvious that violence should be one of the most robust areas of inquiry for archaeology.

It's hard to blame them. At the same moment they were asking the question, their phones were flashing in their backpacks with news alerts about protestors being tear gassed and murdered in the United States and in Iran, immigrants and activists being detained and disappeared, updates on the kidnapping of Maduro, rumblings of a Greenland invasion and potential subsequent world war, and reminders of ongoing violence against Palestinians by the Israeli state. In this context, I have to imagine it is difficult to understand how our discipline could be concerned with anything in the human past besides the history of war and violence.

We have to contend not only with the present making violent conflict seem ubiquitous and inevitable, but also public and popular narratives about human history. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, the drive for humans to invade and conquer is unquestioned; the explanatory mechanism for why things are the way they are today comes down to geographic and environmental factors in the contest for world domination (Diamond 1998). Similarly, while Yuval Harari has emphasized that he does not think that humans are either uniformly naturally violent or peace-loving creatures, he does contend that "even in oppressive dictatorships, the average modern person is far less likely to die at the hands of another person than in premodern societies" (Harari 2015: 368). This is part of his argument that the rise of the state has led to the most peaceful era in human history, due to states' ability to "rein in communities" who would otherwise be disposed to attacking one another, using police and forceful punishment.

Violence and conflict, furthermore, are particularly visible in the archaeological record – whether in historical texts, reliefs, and monuments celebrating military victories, fortresses and other defensive structures, or in destruction layers evincing attacks and burning. In Biblical and historical archaeology, particular battles can represent key chronological markers. In the history of archaeology, research questions have often focused on identifying evidence for specific skirmishes and victories, shaped both by modern interests and priorities as well as by the nature of the archaeological record. We can observe directly that a building has collapsed, but need specialized techniques to determine how long it stood. Injuries and traumatic causes of death stand out in comparison when examining skeletal remains in comparison to subtler, slower endings of life. Violence demands notice; stability is quieter. At a macro-scale, then, violence seems particularly pervasive.

The impossibility of peace also permeates conversations around heritage management. Cultural heritage is constantly "under threat," or "at risk," whether because of intentional destruction, climate change and natural disaster, development, or neglect (CBS Interactive 2025; Kuta 2025; UNESCO 2026). Certainly, there is much excellent and essential work ongoing to document and preserve the archaeological resources being targeted in Gaza, Ukraine, and elsewhere, as well as to defend sites against rising sea levels and climate crisis (Hambrecht and Rockman 2017; Andreou et al. 2022; Hollesen 2022; Holtorf 2023; Kosciejew 2023; Fradley et al. 2024; Shydlovskyi 2024; Taha 2024). I do not want to imply that these efforts are anything but necessary. At the same time, some of the rescue narrative that archaeological and environmental conservation share stems from an underlying conviction in the (overextended and much-contradicted) concept of the 'tragedy of commons,' or the inevitability that humans will destroy a shared resource (Hardin 1968; but see Cox 1985 and Feeney et al. 1990 for critiques). From this standpoint, archaeological remains must always be safeguarded from humans whose presence can only degrade monuments, artifacts, and landscapes, and intervention (including displacement and dispossession of contemporary communities) can be justified.

These premises that humans have and will always destroy the places, things, and people around them are spurious at best. Archaeologists and anthropologists have for some time challenged the idea that war has always been a fact of human experience (Thorpe 2003; Sabloff 2008: 59–68; Haas and Piscitelli 2013). Writing in 2006, R. Brian Ferguson stated that, "War, as a social institution, *had a beginning*. If it had a beginning, then war is not an inevitable expression of either human nature or the nature of societal existence" (2006: 504). Beyond our field, work like Rutger Bregman's *Humankind* (2019) and Nicholas Christakis's *Blueprint* (2019) rewrite common narratives about conquest, theft, war, and violence to show how care, peace, and cooperation has played a larger role in the human story.

In what follows, I offer three examples of how an archaeological perspective affirms this sense that care for others and for the past is, ultimately, the norm. These examples, while disparate in time, have in common the ability to challenge dominant myths about the need for violent intervention to maintain cultural heritage, geopolitical borders, and human livelihood. I argue that revealing violence as an active, intentional choice rather than an inevitability is a significant potential contribution of our field. Imagining extraction and harm as unavoidable is defeating; revealing the effort it takes to maintain violence instead expands real-world possibilities and motivations for restoring and sustaining the normality of care.

"We Protect the Athar[1], We Protect it So Much"

Petra, Jordan was named as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1985. The sequence of events ensuing from this decision are well-documented and widely discussed (Shoup 1985; Bille 2019; Meskell and Luke 2021; Hussein and Mason 2024): the Bedul Bedouins living in the caves and tombs of the archaeological site were named as anachronistic to the site as well as a threat to the archaeological remains, and relocated to government-built housing on a nearby escarpment, creating the village now called Umm Sayhoun. The move was negotiated in exchange for particular rights to sell souvenirs and animal rights within the archaeological park.

While many members of the Bedouin community today are emphatic that they were active agents in brokering this deal rather than passive or unwitting victims, since that time the state and Petra's management agencies have eroded the original deal. The housing built by the government was, from the beginning, insufficient and many Bedul families have worked to move back to their familial caves (Hanna 2016; Callaghan 2021; Burke 2025).

Visiting one of the women residing in the caves one year, she was proud to show off the modifications to the cave that she had made to make it livable. A conservator, I'm sure, would cringe at the sight of her waste management, lighting, and whitewashing. But as she showed me these elements, she described these features as protection. Petra, she said, "is so important for us. Our great, great grandfathers own it and we protect it so much from everything. We protect it more than everybody. We protect it, we love it so much, and we protect it."

1 Archaeological remains, or ruins.

Framed differently, the Bedouins' occupation of the site was not the cause of its destruction but rather evidence of its continued liveliness and relevance through ongoing care. Salem Sweilem el-Bedul, in an interview, also spoke of this protection, saying that foreign researchers and the Jordanian government should "care about the people living here, because [the Bedul] have protected the city. Which is why [you] find it so beautiful today." He and others emphasized that the Bedul kept invaders at bay until Johann Ludwig Burckhardt arrived in the 19th century. Having lived in the caves and tombs, many Bedul can recount direct experience with the major threats to the site today – primarily, water, wind, and salt – and offer their own strategies for contending with these forces. They also named tourists using the caves as garbage receptacles and toilets as sources of damage (in contrast to their own methods for collecting and disposing of waste in the caves). And some community members suggest that by living on top of the ruins, rather than exposing them, the Bedouins protected the layers below. "Our grandfathers came," said Salman Khalaf, "They came and they didn't dig the floors. They didn't expose the Roman or the Nabataean or the Byzantine. They didn't do that."

I have no doubt that the Bedouin habitation of Petra's tombs and caves had physical impacts on the archaeological remains there. But UNESCO's decision to remove them from the site entirely was predicated on the belief that their presence was automatically, inherently a destructive one, and that the best decision for the long-term stability of the remains would be to remove them some distance away. If we take the Bedouins' narrative of their history seriously, however, their relationship with the remains has traditionally been centered on care, protection, and symbiosis. The Bedouins relied on the caves for housing and the caves benefited from the Bedouins' management of elemental forces and the landscape as a whole. It is easy to miss this, however, when the plumbing, light switches, and paints are so visible. If Petra's constancy feels like a fragile and fortuitous inheritance, it becomes easy to justify the displacement of a community and continued dispossessions in the years to come. Recognizing the long-term normality of a community's care for the stone, though, suggests that another path for the preservation was (is?) possible.

Water at the Border

Sela, a company founded in Petra in order to train local community members in skills for cultural heritage management, has been engaging in community mapping efforts in Petra and in Hesban, a city in the Amman governorate in northwestern Jordan. This work has entailed semi-structured interviews with community members about their memories, traditions, and relationships with the archaeological sites they live near. For several years, I have brought students to participate and assist in these community mapping efforts.

One theme that they have remarked on consistently is elder community mappers' memories of interactions with Palestinians. Hesban is only about 24 km (about 14 miles) as the crow flies from the contemporary eastern border of the West Bank, and from the summit of Tell Hesban, one can look down into the valley where this border lies. It feels extremely close, but of course today it is much further than 14 miles away. There are only three border crossings between Jordan and Israel/Palestine today, and the nearest one to Hesban (King Hussein/Allenby Bridge) is an hour drive from the town, plus a many-hour (and more than $80) process to enter.

As a result, the residents of Hesban do not make this crossing frequently, if ever. But this stands in contrast to the stories they share from before the border was established and militarized. When asked about their memories of growing up in the area, elder residents frequently share about trips to the streams in the valley and their friendships with Palestinians at the water's edge. They shared memories of crafts and crops exchanged in the valley – and how abruptly this seemed to end, in their experience.

Coming from an American context, my students respond strongly to these stories. The predominant narrative of a 'border,' in their experience, is of something contested, requiring defense, surveillance, policing, and deterrence. They also arrive with minimal exposure to any discussion of what life was like in Palestine or the Levant before the creation of the state of Israel. If anything, their understanding is that this region was relatively barren and empty. With this background, the idea of a diffuse border between contemporary Jordan and the West Bank fostering community interaction and exchange is striking.

My goal here is not to disentangle the historical arguments for the creation of the contemporary borders in the Levant, nor to offer up an alternative map. All I aim to show is that our experience taking an archaeological perspective to community mapping – taking memory, placemaking, and oral history seriously – revealed the normality of intergroup peace in a region that is framed as the site of intractable violence.[2]

The End of Empire

Related to the myth that violence is endemic and intractable in the human experience is the idea that hierarchy, and state governance, is similarly inevitable – a narrative that Aris Politopoulos and colleagues (2024), along with others, have roundly challenged. This vestige of a unilineal understanding of human history, however, remains pervasive, and I think is related to widespread interest in the 'collapse' of civilization. I frequently find myself being asked about the collapse of civilization by students and members of the public looking at the world around them, wondering if we are on the brink, and what might come next. Is the empire falling, and if so, how will we survive?

This is one of my favorite conversations to have. In contrast to the vision that many people posing the question have in mind of people turning on each other, competing for scraps, and struggling to survive, the archaeological record demonstrates much more complexity, attesting to the human capacity for flexibility, localization, and mutual care. In my teaching, many students arrive familiar with the idea of Bronze Age collapse. It is powerful, then, to show them the evidence in the early Iron Age for what Ann Killebrew calls "regional markets for new types of goods" – the identifiably Phoenician, Cypriot, and Egyptian pottery found at Levantine sites from this period (2014: 600), or to show how early Iron Age sites often exhibit highly diverse animal economies (Lev-Tov et al. 2011). Talking about the Intermediate Periods of Egypt allows for a discussion of strategic, local consumption of pork in periods when the state played less of a role in directing agro-pastoral activities in Egypt (Redding 2015).

Collapse studies today is an identifiable, multidisciplinary field of study and deserves a more complex and nuanced engagement (see Tainter 2006; Faulseit 2016; Middleton 2017, 2025; Sharratt 2024). In the context where I work, at least, archaeology offers the opportunity to push back against proclamations by emperors and kings that they saved their constituents from desperation, starvation, and unrest. Instead, the archaeological record tells a different story: one of small-scale, mundane, and local systems of exchange and caretaking. The data sources for this story are quiet and unassuming: objects like bones, sherds, seeds, and pollen. They attest, however, to the normality and everydayness of people in the past living and surviving through ordinary interactions that altogether formed networks of care in the absence of the state.

Archaeology and the Normality of Care

Archaeology is a powerful tool for overturning established narratives about the past, for uncovering contradictions in claims that work to maintain power and inequality in the present. Often, in this effort, the role of archaeology has been to make clear the extent of violence when it has been denied – for instance, with regard to enslavement, state-denied genocides and disappearances, migration, or incarceration. This work has comprised, in my view, some of the most important ever conducted.

Archaeology's analytical approaches and methods, however, also offer the potential to challenge the perception of violence as ubiquitous and unavoidable by instead highlighting the prevalence, durability, and normality of peace. The archaeological record tells stories of communities coming together to fill in gaps of governance, and the oral histories of the communities we work with often belie the idea that intervention is necessary to displace those communities and police their movement. Archaeology as a field is positioned to reconceive of these periods of the past not as times simply when there was *no* state, or *no* war, or *no* organization – but rather when other things, like exchange, relationships, and placemaking were growing and building.

2 Indeed, "peace in the Middle East" is the punchline *par excellence* for something impossible. Twists on an old joke hinge on peace in the Middle East being more possible than finding a perfect man, or creating a rock that God himself cannot lift.

Rather than conflicting with archaeologies of violence, an archaeology that centers on evidence of care is complementary. By normalizing care, we contribute to debunking the idea that peaceful interaction is an impossible ideal, always imagined but never attained by humans who will unavoidably erupt into conflict. The evidence suggests that care, instead, is much more magnetic and sustainable than we might expect. Viewed in this way, we can start to see forcible interventions that are coercive and inflammatory, aimed to suppress or displace groups of people from their homes and neighbors, as intentional, agentive choices by particularly situated actors – rather than unpreventable, if regrettable, occurrences nearly predetermined by human nature. We can – and should –contribute to questioning narratives that insinuate the necessity of violent state actions in the present, by pointing to just how normal it has been in the past for people to build their communities on a foundation of care.

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