

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In which we each present a brief intellectual autobiography and the path that led us to this dialog.

YH: I propose we start with a brief word about our respective standpoints, then move on to explore the origins of the two national projects and the links to archaeology. From there we will proceed to the other themes we have selected for a sustained discussion: The notions of the crypto-colony and crypto-colonization, the idea of purification and its expression in the fields of material heritage and archaeology, the logic of race and its entanglement with the emergence of archaeogenetics, and finally, our struggles for decolonization. Rather than opting for a generic comparison, we have decided to focus instead on specific phenomena, at play in both national contexts. Do you want to start?

RG: I came to archaeology, as a boy, in an entirely physical way, joining an excavation in the Old City of Jerusalem in the autumn of 1970. As a child of Jewish-American immigrants, I suppose digging was a way of connecting with my new surroundings. When I eventually returned to archaeology as a graduate student (after completing a degree in literature), I discovered that there were many recent immigrants studying alongside me. This is something I've noticed ever since: Many of the students that I studied with, and many of the students currently in my classes, were not born in Israel. Clearly, archaeology offers an outsider a way of bonding with a new place: There is something about the physicality, the camaraderie,

being out in the sun and dirt, that answers a need – perhaps for rebirth. At the same time, there's something equivocal about this connection; it is mediated and evades direct interaction with contemporary people. That's probably my starting point, apart from the things that I guess most archaeologists share – being attracted to old stuff and a little bit romantic about the past.

Archaeology in Israel in the late 1970s and early 1980s was more of a craft and a vocation than an independent intellectual discipline; you might call it “applied history.” Our studies were focused on the accumulation of expertise and on method, and we were measured by our endurance and our initiative, blending the German tradition of acquisition and systemization of data with the British tradition of enterprise. We took pride in our impassive scientific gaze, and although I was politically active as a student, sensitive to the political contexts in which excavations took place, I was certain that archaeology transcended all that. As I have mentioned to you on several occasions, introspection was never the strong suit of Israeli archaeology; we were simply enjoined to “dig the right way.” Even if I was aware of political dissonance at an excavation, I did not see where it intersected with practice. This came about later, after I was already doing my own research and running my own excavations, especially when I started working for the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA).

IAA excavations are conducted in the public domain, far away from the sequestered academic framework: They're out in the world, in communities, in people's yards – and it is there that you face the most fundamental questions: Who owns the past? What is the archaeologist's claim to it and what is the source of their authority? Working in salvage archaeology, that is, on excavations made necessary by infrastructure and construction projects, forced me to question and confront the structures of authority and coercion within which I worked, and the values embedded in interpretation. Issues of conscience that might have been obscured by the façade of academic respectability while I was a student, presented themselves in a very stark way. And as I became more independent as a scholar, I realized that my convictions had to be backed up by action, within my organization and outside of it. If, as a student, I clung to the belief that science should be kept free of politics, archaeological praxis

taught me that science was structured by the social and political context – whether it was the structural violence of military occupation, the agendas of those who funded our work, or the identity and status of the archaeologists themselves.¹ This was my route to thinking about the impact and the deployment of archaeology in society, beyond academic questions, and, as a critical position, it has often led me to uncomfortable confrontations with colleagues and governmental bodies, both during my time in the IAA and in my academic career in a public university.

More recently, after becoming involved in the Rogem Ganim community project in my own, West Jerusalem, neighborhood, after initiating the creation of the “alternate archaeology” group (now called Emek Shaveh) in Silwan, and after participating in the discussions on decolonizing archaeology across the discipline and around the globe, I found myself increasingly intrigued by the deep roots of archaeology in colonialism and racism, and by the demand to rebuild archaeology on entirely new foundations.² This is one of the things that brought me to Brown, to our joint project of examining the context of archaeology in the two regions that can be viewed as “ground zero” for the development of the discipline in the context of Western modernity and nationalism. Spending 2019–2020 in the US, the year of covid, the murder of George Floyd, and the political entrenchment of white nationalism, provided an extraordinary background to our discussion, bringing home its importance and encouraging me to educate myself on the nature of systemic racism and inequality.

What about you?

YH: My way into archaeology was similar to yours, in some respects. I was born and raised in Crete, surrounded by Bronze Age (“Minoan”) ruins, so archaeology was very much present in my life. My father, who passed away as we were completing this book, also used to be an amateur archaeophile, and although neither he nor my mother had any formal education beyond primary school, he was an avid reader and admired learning. The very few books that we had at home were often about archaeology, especially local archaeology. I remember, for example, the copy of Paul Faure’s *Everyday Life in Minoan Crete*. But I was reading much literature at the time, both

Greek and world literature, and I wanted to study it at the University, but did not get the grades for it. So, I ended up in archaeology, which had lower entry requirements compared to literature, by accident. Yet, I decided to give it a serious go, especially in the later years of my undergraduate degree. At first, I found it difficult to see its relevance: Archaeology was then, in early-mid 1980s and in that context, mostly classical archaeology; the rest was prehistory or Byzantine art, and, therefore, of much less significance to the national imagination and Greek academic culture. We were told that the founder of archaeology was Winckelmann, the iconic 18th-century, German Hellenist and art historian who, ironically, never set foot in Greece but who established a framework for appreciating and studying ancient Greek art. This was a framework based on biological/organic principles of birth, maturity and decline, on geographical and environmental determinism and on cultural hierarchies, a scheme still venerated by many scholars. There was no debate on the complex nature of his work nor on its problematic facets.³ The permanent positions in archaeology (this was at the University of Crete) had been occupied mostly by classical archaeologists, trained in the German tradition. At that time, like you I was already politicized, and I could not really see any direct relevance to what was happening in the world or to what interested me as a political being. I was also disheartened by the lack of any explicit theoretical reflection or critique on the epistemology and politics of archaeology.⁴

It was only in the last two years of my undergraduate studies that I started seeing some connection because it happened that I attended some broader and more theoretical courses, mostly to do with what we call prehistory, which were exploring other facets of human experience beyond conventional and formalistic art history, such as economy and society. These were courses offered mostly by younger, female professors often on precarious contracts, and I was incredibly lucky to have had the chance to learn and get inspired by them. That's why I decided to give it a go, and then got seriously into it. The practical, physical aspect of it, however, was there from the beginning, and it always fascinated and attracted me, and I was taking part in archaeological surveys and excavations from the first year.

So, the interest in the political dimensions of archaeology was there, but academically it was not, at the beginning, a very important part of my research.⁵ It gradually became so, and it helped that the degrees in Greece were broad, allowing you and, in fact, requiring you to take courses outside archaeology and outside ancient studies, including courses on modern and contemporary history. And I was always fascinated by anthropology, although I had no formal training in it. The unconventional courses I referred to, taught by people such as Katerina Kopaka or Antikleia Moudrea-Agrafioti at the University of Crete and several people at the University of Sheffield (during my postgraduate studies), nurtured this fascination. My work on the politics of archaeology started as a kind of sideline, a secondary interest or a kind of an activity you do in your free time, alongside your mainstream study and research. But it progressively became more and more important, and I realized early on that it cannot really continue being an add-on, it needed to become central. So, I eventually did the work on nationalism and more recently on other, related matters, on colonialism and colonization. The warm reception of *The Nation and its Ruins*, which was published in 2007, encouraged me to continue.⁶ Ethnographic work was also important for me from early on, and while at the beginning it was mostly in the tradition of ethnoarchaeology, I eventually developed it into what we now call archaeological ethnography, defined as a shared space of multiple encounters, an explicitly political enterprise.⁷ My graduate studies and work abroad helped me in some ways to take some distance from the habitual routines of nationhood, develop critical, personal and intellectual reflexivity, and articulate more clearly the conditions of colonality for archaeology and for society more broadly. It eventually led me into redefining the archaeological as a transdisciplinary field in which the epistemic and the philosophical, the aesthetic and the sensorial, and the social and the political are all prominent.

Even the work that had to do with seemingly “non-political” topics, such as the archaeology of the Bronze Age for example, had to confront the critical history and the entrenched traditions of scholarship, in other words the epistemology and the political

economy of archaeological practice. To give just one example, how could I have studied the Bronze Age of Crete (the “Minoan” period, the focus of my doctoral dissertation) without interrogating and historicizing terms and schemes such as palaces, kings and queens or the assumed naval supremacy of the “Minoans” in the writings of people such as Arthur Evans? Or without examining their link with British imperial and colonial history, monarchical politics, and European modernity?⁸ So again I was led, through another route, back to the politics of archaeology. I came to realize early on that whatever you do in archaeology is political, whether you accept it or not.

As for my interest in Israel and Palestine and the politics of archaeology there, it stemmed from a comparative impulse, trying to situate the Greek case in a broader context: So I came across books such as the ones by Neil Silberman and Nadia Abu El-Haj, and later your own articles and those by Palestinian colleagues.⁹ But it was also a contemporary political impulse in terms of what was happening in that region, and a theoretical impulse because I saw that some of the thoughts and ideas, for example on the links between national ideologies and religion, were already developing within the discussion of Israeli archaeology. I realized that such thoughts had wider applicability, beyond the case of Israel and Palestine. That is why I started following these discussions and continue to do so, and that’s why I embarked with great enthusiasm into our teaching and writing collaboration.

RG: Well, there are some curious similarities in our paths (like our shared beginnings in literature), but also differences in context, in training, and in our intellectual predilections; it will be interesting to see how they play out. Let’s move on to the first part of our discussion, on the origins and trajectories of our respective national archaeologies.

Notes

1 Greenberg 2015.

2 See, e.g., Bruchac 2014; Lydon and Rizvi 2010; Mignolo 2011.

3 Winckelmann’s work is much more interesting and complex than it is usually assumed, and its mechanistic use within traditional archaeology does not do justice to it. See, amongst others, Harloe 2013; Potts 2000.

- 4 See for a short critique, Hamilakis 2000.
- 5 A key early article was the one published in collaboration with Eleana Yalouri: Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996.
- 6 Hamilakis 2007; the Greek translation appeared in 2012, the Turkish in 2020, and the Macedonian in 2021.
- 7 Hamilakis 2011a. Initial writings on archaeological ethnography were developed in collaboration with Aris Anagnostopoulos: Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009.
- 8 See Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006 and Papadopoulos 2005, Varouchakis 2017, amongst other writings.
- 9 Abu El-Haj 2001; Silberman 1990; Yahya 2005, amongst others.