

# An Archaeologist in al-Tira

Raja Shehadeh

Walking through the hills around Ramallah, where I live, I have often come upon archeological ruins and remnants: Byzantine tombs, Ottoman olive presses, pottery shards. They lie there, scattered among stone walls and olive trees, unmarked and unstudied. I often wondered, with no small degree of vexation, why, in a land like Palestine that has long been subject to historical challenge, so little attention is given by the Palestinian Authority to archeological excavations. The opposite is true in Israel. Could this be because the Palestinians tend to take from granted their belonging to the land?

And so on a sunny June morning two years ago, I was pleasantly surprised to find the archeologist Salah Hussein Al-Houdalieh and his students from al-Quds University under a green canopy loading off buckets of stones, scraping dirt and dusting a mosaic floor at Khirbat al-Tira. The site, which sits on top of a high hill a few miles from the Old City, is believed to date back to the Roman Empire, Houdalieh said. It includes fortifications, stone dwellings, a Byzantine church, water cisterns, and olive and grape presses.

Khirbat al-Tira's existence, as well as its significance, has long been known. It was first mentioned in the 1882–1888 Survey of Western Palestine by the London-based Palestine Exploration Fund. Greek Orthodox faithful – the largest Christian community in Palestine – who believe the site to be the first burial place of the first Christian martyr, Saint Stephen, hold open-air prayers here every August. Houdalieh told me that he hopes to find Saint Stephen's grave.

Houdalieh has been carrying out excavations in various sites every summer since 1992, when al-Quds University

opened the Institute of Archeology, and throughout that time has been hampered by inadequate funding. With this project, the Prince Claus Foundation in the Netherlands has contributed thirty thousand euros for a one-year project to excavate Khirbat al-Tira, educate the local community about the importance of archeology, and prepare the ruins for tourism. I was happy to hear about this support, but disturbed that funds had to come from Holland, rather than from our own institutions, particularly the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage.

To be sure, the department operates under heavy constraints, and not only budgetary. It can only operate in areas A (cities) and B (villages) – never in Area C, and of course a total ban presides in Jerusalem. With international partners, it has undertaken a very limited number of new excavations in those areas over the past two decades, most notably in Jericho. However, its main focus has been salvage operations, often prior to the issuance of a building license. Another focus has been the preservation and restoration of existing excavated sites and historic buildings. However, in the case of Khirbat al-Tira, building licenses were issued despite the archeological evidence amply displayed in the ruins. Of the original six acres at Khirbat al-Tira, only about 1.5 are exposed today; the rest have been covered up in recent years with apartment blocks, two schools, a gas station, and a wide road.

When such historical sites in the West Bank aren't being built over, they are often left unguarded and unmaintained. And, as Houdalieh described, that often means they are damaged or looted:

Over the past several decades, Palestine's archaeological heritage has faced serious challenges caused by the looting of antiquities. This ongoing phenomenon has resulted in the partial or total destruction of thousands of archaeological sites and features, and the extraction of hundreds of thousands of heritage objects.<sup>1</sup>

It should be mentioned here that that in some 60 percent of the West Bank, in what is dubbed as Area C, Palestinians can neither excavate nor protect sites from looting because these are under full Israeli control and are excavated by Israeli archeologists in contravention of international law. One example of such a site is in upper Sabastya, where the important archeological remains are left totally unguarded.

Why this relative neglect? To be sure, the Palestinians' lack of control over Area C plays a part, as do budget constraints and a potpourri of other priorities. But I also think that Palestinians, despite their long standing struggle to win political rights, may also be taking for granted that the land around them, and its buried heritage, is theirs.

Their attitude certainly is different from the approach of the Israeli government. In the course of its forty-five-year occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Israel has carried out thousands of excavations. Even since the 1993 Oslo accords, it has done so with impunity in the so-called Area C – including important tourist sites like Herodium and Qumran. Although Annex III of the 1995 Interim Agreement between Israel and the Palestinians provides that all powers and responsibilities to do with archeology should

gradually be transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction, this has still not happened.

Most of the artifacts displayed at the 2013 exhibit about King Herod the Great at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem were illegally removed from sites in the occupied West Bank. In the words of the Israeli archaeologist Raphael Greenburg who is one of the founders of Emek Shaveh, the alternative archaeology organization, “Archaeologists are in the business of creating collective memories.”<sup>2</sup> While Israel has mobilized resources to produce these memories – unfortunately often of an exclusivist cast – Palestinians have perhaps not felt the need to do the same. The energy and enthusiasm of Dr. Houdalieh and his students, however, are a reminder that much can be lost without more sustained initiatives to save what remains.

*Raja Shehadeh's latest book is Language of War, Language of Peace (Profile, 2015). A version of this article was published in the New York Times on 13 June 2013.*

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Salah H. A. Al-Houdalieh, “The Attitudes of Palestinian Religious Scholars and Institutions toward the Looting of Palestine’s Archaeological Heritage,” *Present Pasts* 4, no. 1 (2012): 22, accessed 18 July 2015, online at [www.presentpasts.info/articles/10.5334/pp.54/](http://www.presentpasts.info/articles/10.5334/pp.54/).
- 2 Reid Singer, “Archaeologists Fear Their Work in Jerusalem May be Tainted by Settler Politics,” *Blouin Art Info*, 29 November 2012, accessed 17 July 2015, online at [www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/843637/archaeologists-fear-their-work-in-jerusalem-may-be-tainted-by#](http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/843637/archaeologists-fear-their-work-in-jerusalem-may-be-tainted-by#).