

Palestine, Prehistory, and the “Origins of Agriculture”

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At the 2022 Middle East Studies Association meeting, Omar Tesdell and I outlined how our current projects with communities in the West Bank may offer some thoughts for the future reconfiguration of local/traditional ecological relationships in the reality of Palestine’s deeply altered social landscapes.¹ These local challenges to historical and ontological understandings of land, landscape, and biodiversity are central to discussions of real-world issues of food sovereignty and social well-being that are crucial to the maintenance of social ecologies within and between local communities throughout Palestine. But these social ecologies have a deep history – an archaeology – that reaches far beyond contemporary conceptualizations of land property, ownership, and claims. The archaeological study of changing human-plant relations in prehistory has come to be characterized largely as the search for the origins of agriculture and domestication. Here, I trace the “origins of agriculture” debate within the archaeology of Palestine, in particular within the development of what is called “prehistory,” that peculiar construction of European late modernity, during the first decades of the colonial British Mandate.

Historical and theological perspectives have dominated archaeological research in Palestine since its inception as a formal academic discipline in the early twentieth century.² But alongside historical and theological perspectives runs the study of “prehistory,” that is, the study of preliterate societies/communities, from the earliest known hominin presence in the Jordan Valley (around 1.5 million years ago) to those of the late Chalcolithic (approximately

5,500 years ago). Research and teaching on prehistory in Palestinian universities is scant compared to institutions across the Green Line, and active fieldwork projects on prehistoric sites are likewise rare in contrast to the plethora of Israeli excavations and surveys both in Israel *and* in West Bank Area C.³ Further, there exists a perception that prehistory is somehow separate from, and stands outside, the politicization of archaeology so prevalent in contemporary nation state and settler-colonial discourse in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere. This is not the case. As I outline here and elsewhere, the study of prehistory in Palestine is equally entwined with archaeology's settler-colonial history and present, and with the search for European origins.⁴

The kind of prehistory established in Europe by the 1920s was largely concerned with Europe's own origins and development. The archaeologist V. Gordon Childe was among the first to argue for a "Near Eastern/Fertile Crescent" origin for European society by arguing that a number of key features of European prehistory – transformations or revolutions in technology, material culture, economic and social organization, and ritual/religious practices – originated in the prehistoric "cultures" of the "Near East."⁵ The archaeological narratives Childe and his contemporaries established in the late 1920s and 1930s were characterized by discussions of cultural origins, the evolution and spread of ethnic groups, and key revolutions in the development of humanity (the agricultural revolution, the urban revolution) – a colonial search for the "origins of civilization." When European prehistorians arrived in Palestine in the 1920s, these were the kinds of nascent archaeological lines of inquiry they carried with them. The archaeological research questions and the interpretive and epistemological frameworks embedded in the infrastructures of European colonialism thus served as the interpretive scaffolding for the study of prehistory in Palestine. The temporal, chronological sequence that developed for Europe – from the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) to the Neolithic (New Stone Age) – was imported wholesale into Palestine by the "prehistorians" of the colonial British and French Mandates, and it is from within this context that the "origins of agriculture" debate in southwest Asia emerged.

In Palestine, we can trace the archaeological preoccupation with the origins of plant cultivation, agriculture, and domestication back to the work of Dorothy Garrod, René Neuville, and Frances Turville-Petre, scholars affiliated with the British and French schools of archaeology in Jerusalem in the mid-late 1920s and early 1930s.⁶ Amid the dominant "biblical" and historical perspectives of the time, these scholars carried out the first (relatively) systematic prehistoric excavations at a number of "mesolithic" sites in Palestine, reporting what Garrod summarized as "evidence for a primitive form of agriculture afforded by the large number of sickle-blades and hafts discovered."⁷

In our recent ethnographic interviews in the village of Shuqba, in Wadi al-Natuf northwest of Ramallah, we often hear that Wadi al-Natuf is the place "where people first broke the land."⁸ This comes from a ubiquitous local understanding of the historical significance of the archaeological material that Dorothy Garrod and her workforce of local villagers discovered in Shuqba Cave, immediately to the south of the village, in 1928.⁹ A scholar of European prehistory, Garrod inferred that the Shuqba material (mainly stone sickle blades and bone hafts) was similar to Mesolithic material in Europe

that indicated plant cultivation and incipient agriculture.¹⁰ Following her work at Shuqba, she and teams of local villagers excavated in Wadi al-Mughara (Mount Carmel) and found further similar material there, specifically at al-Wad (cave and terrace), leading her to argue that evidence for the earliest known steps toward cultivation and agriculture was in Palestine.¹¹ Neville, at the same time, found comparable material in the caves and rock shelters of Wadi Khareitun, south of Bethlehem, and Turville-Petre's excavation at Kebara, Mount Carmel, in 1931, provided further lithic and bone artefact evidence to support this interpretation.¹²

This archaeological fieldwork – and interpretations of the material evidence – in 1920s and 1930s Palestine laid the foundations for all subsequent research into the prehistory of southwest Asia, establishing long-lasting key questions into what Garrod labeled the “Natufian culture” (approximately ten to fifteen thousand years ago). Over the twentieth century, the Natufian came to be regarded as a bridge – a transition between the nomadic hunter-gatherers of the Paleolithic and the settled farmers of the Neolithic – where scholars located the origins of plant cultivation practices that led, around 10,500 years ago, to domestication, agriculture, and, perhaps, the very beginnings of those profound environmental and ecological changes that some researchers today identify as the onset of the Anthropocene.

If, from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, European study of plant life aimed to “generate hypotheses about the nature of matter and, by extension, the order of the cosmos,” and from the eighteenth-century became “a project for ordering, visualizing, labeling, and classifying life,”¹³ then over the past century, the study of *ancient* plants – archaeobotany – can be characterized by a dominant concern with the notion of *domestication*. Domestication continues to loom large in archaeological narratives, in which locating an initial temporal point of departure – an origin or origins – for direct human involvement in the reproductive cycles of plant and animal species is regarded essential to “understanding the roots of complex societies.”¹⁴ In the biological sense, domestication is broadly conceptualized as management of the nonhuman by the human. It is regarded as something people did to make their world more secure and easier to manage; to make living in it better. Nimrod Marom and Guy Bar-Oz emphasize domestication as a process, rather than an event, which we need to detail archaeologically to understand “the role of humans as constant modifiers of their ecological niches.”¹⁵

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, the general archaeological consensus was that the earliest known plant domestication took place in the southern Levant (modern-day Palestine, Israel, Jordan) around 11,500 years ago (followed by the domestication of goats and sheep around ten thousand years ago, and cattle and pigs slightly later). It has now become clear, in light of recent archaeobiological and genetic research, that the earliest domestication of what are often referred to as the “founder crops” of einkorn and emmer wheats and pulses, along with nonhuman animals mentioned above, occurred not in the southern Levant but in the Upper Tigris and Euphrates valleys (in modern-day Syria and Turkey) around 11,500 years ago or slightly earlier.¹⁶ But we should bear in mind that these assumed points of origin are in fact the “end points” of domestication

processes. In southwest Asia, such processes lasted many, many thousands of years, and so such gradual long-term changes may have gone largely unnoticed by people in their daily lives and interactions with plants (and nonhuman animals).¹⁷ It is only through our contemporary retrospective lens that we observe this domesticated “point of arrival.” In this sense, the archaeological narrative or concept of domestication as a key component in human social evolution is part of the origins “trope of modernity,” one of human mastery over nature.¹⁸ In discussing this relationship as one of “our existing great divides,” Severin Fowles argues that archaeologists’ “major contribution [to the project of modernity] has been the evolutionary ontostory of how the modern liberal humanist subject has come to be and of how the world of nonhumans has been drawn increasingly into his (the gendering is necessary) sphere of control.”¹⁹

The archaeological “origins of agriculture” debate has another late modernity tale to tell – a story entwined with the settler-colonial control of Palestine and its agricultural landscapes and practices. Tracing this history from the mid-twentieth century onward, we can see how the interpretive framework embedded in the infrastructures of European colonialism in Palestine was carried forward in the settler-colonial archaeologies (prehistories) of Israel. The prehistoric narrative of human progress from cultivation to domestication and agriculture, developed by and for Europe, has been replaced in Israeli prehistoric research by a settler-colonial version of the same narrative. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty terms this “historicism,” a situation where local narratives about origins and their subsequent development replace those constructed by earlier colonial narratives.²⁰ This is a perspective consistent with the epistemology of the cultural-historical archaeology of the mid-twentieth century: a retrospective narrative preoccupied with locating origins, and with tracing continuities (as well as ruptures and transitions) from those assumed prehistoric origins to the present. European archaeological search for the origins of plant cultivation and agriculture was a colonial search for European origins in the “Near East,” the self-narration of Europe’s origins; this has become a narrative about the settling of the landscape through cultivation, agriculture, and domestication – a prehistoric version of “making the desert bloom.” Palestine is fixed in a prehistoric pastoral imaginary of the archaeologists’ own making, with the political realities of rural life (agricultural land confiscation, restriction of movement, the banning of gathering wild food plants, uprooting of trees, and so on) obscured to emphasize the domesticated, civilized, settler landscape. These contemporary landscape and territorial perspectives have their roots planted firmly in the prehistoric archaeology of the European colonial occupation of Palestine.

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Endnotes

- 1 “Palestinian Local Land-based Knowledge and Research: History and Futures,” Middle East Studies Association of North America annual meeting (online), 2 December 2021. This represents a brief version of part of our original collaborative presentation.
- 2 This is addressed in the two recent archaeology-focused issues of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* (JQ 90 and 91).
- 3 Hamed Salem and I discussed this phenomenon in a presentation titled “Preoccupations: Whatever Happened to ‘Prehistory’ in Palestine,” delivered on 31 October 2022 at Birzeit University as part of the “Reassessing the British Mandate” conference organized by the Institute for Palestine Studies.
- 4 See, for example, Brian Boyd, “‘Twisting the Kaleidoscope’: Dorothy Garrod and the ‘Natufian Culture,’” in *Dorothy Garrod and the Progress of the Palaeolithic: Studies in the Prehistoric Archaeology of the Near East and Europe*, ed. William Davies and Ruth Charles (Oxford: Oxbow, 1999), 209–23.
- 5 V. Gordon Childe, *New Light on the Most Ancient East* (London: Kegan Paul, 1934).
- 6 See René Neuville, “Le préhistorique de Palestine,” *Revue Biblique* 43, no. 2 (April 1934): 237–59; and René Neuville, *Le paléolithique et mésolithique du désert de Judée* (Paris: Masson, 1951).
- 7 D. A. E. Garrod, “Excavations in the Caves of the Wady-el-Mughara, 1929–1930,” *Bulletin of the American School of Prehistoric Research* 7 (1931): 5–11, quote at 10. This observation actually predated Childe’s proposition of a Levantine origin for plant cultivation, although Peake and Fleure had suggested a southwest Asian origin a few years earlier.
- 8 Oral history interviews at Shuqba, 2013.
- 9 D. A. E. Garrod, “Excavation of a Palaeolithic Cave in Western Judaea,” *Quarterly Statement of the Palestine Exploration Fund* 60, no. 4 (1928): 182–85.
- 10 D. A. E. Garrod, “The Natufian Culture: The Life and Economy of a Mesolithic People in the Near East,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 43 (1957): 211–27.
- 11 Garrod, “Natufian Culture.”
- 12 Neuville, “Le préhistorique de Palestine”; Frances Turville-Petre, “Excavations in the Mugharet El-Kebarah,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 62 (1932): 271–76.
- 13 Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari, *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 3 (“generate hypotheses”) and 2 (“project for ordering”).
- 14 Greger Larsen, Dolores R. Piperno, Robin G. Allaby, and Dorian Q. Fuller, “Current Perspectives and the Future of Domestication Studies,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 17 (2014): 6139–46, quote at 6139.
- 15 Nimrod Marom and Guy Bar-Oz, “The Prey Pathway: A Regional History of Cattle (*Bos taurus*) and Pig (*Sus scrofa*) Domestication in the Northern Jordan Valley,” *PLoS One* 8, no. 2 (February 2013): e55958, online at doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0055958 (accessed 20 August 2023). Changes in the human-nonhuman relationship, Marom and Bar-Oz write, are signaled primarily by “demographic, biogeographic, and morphological changes that occurred in the transformation of a wild species to a domesticated one.”
- 16 Melinda A. Zeder, “The Origins of Agriculture in the Near East,” *Current Anthropology* 52, Supplement 4 (October 2011): S221–35. According to Larsen, Piperno, Allaby, and Fuller, these processes “encompassed a wide range or relationships, from commensalism/mutualism to low-level management, and direct control over reproduction.” Larsen, Piperno, Allaby, and Fuller, “Current Perspectives,” 6140.
- 17 Lisa A. Maher, Tobias Richter, and Jay T. Stock, “The Pre-Natufian Epipaleolithic: Long-term Behavioral Trends in the Levant,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 21, no. 2 (March 2012): 69–81.
- 18 Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal, “Reclaiming Archaeology,” in *Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity*, ed. Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–29.
- 19 Benjamin Alberti, Severin Fowles, Martin Holbraad, Yvonne Marshall, and Christopher Witmore, “‘Worlds Otherwise’: Archaeology, Anthropology, and Ontological Difference,” *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 6 (December 2011): 906 (“great divides”) and 899 (“major contribution”).
- 20 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).