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Why those who shovel are silent: a history of local archaeological knowledge and labor

Allison Mickel, *Why those who shovel are silent: a history of local archaeological knowledge and labor*. Louisville, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2021. Pp. xiii, 203. ISBN 9781646421268 \$74.00.

Review by

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Fieldwork projects in the Near East — in the past as well as today — are often carried out under the auspices of Western institutions. The workers conducting most of the physical labor, however, frequently are locals, hired by the international archaeologists. And it is these workers, commonly underrepresented in any kind of communication about the fieldwork projects, that are the center of Allison Mickel's book.

The monograph is structured as an introduction followed by six chapters and a conclusion. The research undertaken for the book is based on 167 ethnographic interviews that Mickel conducted with local workers at Petra (Jordan) and Çatalhöyük (Turkey). The overall aim of the book was to explore the role of the community members in the light of the archaeological research process and if and how this role has changed in the last 50 years. At the same time it manages to showcase the amount

of undocumented knowledge of local site workers and connects it to the sites' labor management.

Chapter 1 provides the historical background on the sites and region. It lays out the Western desire to establish authority through institutions in the regions and what that has meant for archaeological fieldwork. This chapter also provides a theoretical framework for ethnographic archaeology, explains the concept of community archaeology, summarizes some former studies on hierarchies within archaeological projects, and gives an overview of the involvement of local workers in archaeological fieldwork projects in the Middle East.

Chapter 2 contrasts the oral histories of the workers on the excavations at Petra and Çatalhöyük with archival information, analysing the relevant knowledge that the workers retained but was never officially recorded vs. the information that was selected by the archaeologists for the written records. Employing network analyses, Mickel dissects the information she gained from the interviews and the site notebooks and what networks of knowledge are revealed when comparing the data from both sources. At Petra, there was a clear discrepancy: the workers recalled some information that was never recorded. The find categories mentioned in the excavation notebooks do not match the find categories mentioned by the workers. Furthermore, the best methods, tools, and the workers' general expertise are not mentioned in the notes, whereas they become evident in the interviews. At Çatalhöyük, in contrast, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of the workers' knowledge of the excavated material and its connection to the local community. The knowledge about the archaeological site and the excavation seems to be more equally distributed between the archaeologists and the site workers. Mickel ascribes this to the different relationships between site workers and archaeologists at these sites. At Petra, people took the fieldwork jobs due to a lack of alternatives, and their relationship with the archaeologist was poor. At Çatalhöyük, the workers chose to work at the site and were

part of most of the excavation processes, leading to a very different relationship with the archaeologists.

Chapter 3 illustrates how the differences in access to interpretation influence the workers' self-image and engagement in the production of knowledge. It is evident that the workers feel as though they know little about the past that they helped excavate, while the interpretations and knowledge they offer in the interviews demonstrate the opposite. Through ethnographic analogies based on the life experience of the local communities, the workers come up with their own interpretations of the archaeological record. However, network analysis shows that there is “minimal overlap, minimal complementarity, and, indeed, few connections between the knowledge presented by the archaeologists and site worker communities regarding archeological interpretation and analyses” (p. 69).

Differences between the sites reflect variations in the organization of the fieldwork projects. At Çatalhöyük, the workers' interpretations are close to their own memories and experiences, whereas at Petra, their interpretations are closer to the published records. This is due to the decades of archaeological work conducted at Petra and the engagement of the locals in the debates surrounding the site as part of their employment. The local workers still do not feel that they have any specialized archaeological knowledge. Mickel ascribes this to the exclusion of the workers from the process of interpretation, as they were not included in any of the processes following the excavation and sometimes not even of the removal of finds. The last part of the chapter evaluates the strategies of community-oriented archaeology in Çatalhöyük against the background of network analyses that have shown the differences between information from oral histories and archives. While the site workers acquire expertise about the finds that links to the excavation records, a distinct gap appears in the interpretative and analytical stage of the excavation. One example is that of the Temple of the Winged Lions (Petra); while it is interpreted as a sanctuary by archaeologists, some interviewees think that it was rather the house of a person

with high statues, based on parallels with the houses of their own settlement. There is thus still a gap and also a barrier between archaeologists and local workers.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of lucrative non-knowledge, which Mickel uses to explain the results from the previous two chapters. In the first part of this chapter, the relation between labor management and (an expressed) lack of knowledge is explained in more detail, touching upon the following points regarding one or both sites: the workers' jobs on site were detached from the rest of the excavation and thus the production of knowledge; the short periods of employment (based on the exploitative labor conditions and the lack of organized power to negotiate for better treatment or compensation); and the feeling of mutual distrust manifested in the archaeologist excavating important artifacts without the local workers. All of this leads to division and tension between the workers and the archaeologists and hinders the workers from participating in the process of interpretation.

In the second part of the chapter, the focus shifts to the deliberate decision of locally hired workers not to share their knowledge. Some of the interviewees refused to talk about their experiences on the projects. From the offset of the conversation, they asserted control over the topics they would talk about, thus actively withholding their knowledge about the excavation – without denying they have it. Often this knowledge is based on analogies with local traditions and is used in ethnoarchaeological research projects in which the local community members participated. However, from the archaeologists' point of view, when workers are needed for physical labor, it is more important for them to be good workers than to have archaeological knowledge.

Therefore, Mickel concludes, site workers decided to not share their knowledge, or even actively pretended that they did not have any archaeological knowledge, in order to be hired or avoid being fired. In other words, while the skills of archaeological labor are desirable, scientific knowledge seems not to be. At the end of the chapter, Mickel urges that expressing their perspective must become a lucrative option for the

local workers.

Chapter 5 showcases other regions where local labor has been used on archaeological excavations: the Middle East, North Africa, India, South Africa, and Latin America. The practices of hiring local workers in Turkey and Jordan is thus placed in a global context.. These comparisons provide good complementary examples of labor models and its implications for the expertise of locally hired workers. Mickel also mentions projects relying on volunteers or students and how these groups differ from the laborers when it comes to compensation for their contribution and the tasks with which they are entrusted.

In chapter 6, Mickel promotes something she calls “inclusive recording” and develops ideas on how to document the expertise and voices of locally hired workers. First, she refers to the potential and pitfalls of recording sheets. Standardized sheets allow a range of people to fill them in; however, many of the local workers do not speak the language of the excavation team or are not literate. In addition, standardized sheets with multiple choice answers do not leave room for unusual interpretations. Second, Mickel mentions drawings as a way of documenting and offering room for interpretation. An example from a project in Amazonia, where local workers were asked to participate in the drawing of soil profiles, demonstrates the potential of including local workers in the documentation process. Third, Mickel suggests regularly conducting interviews with site workers in their native language and documenting these as audio or video recordings. This would “transform the site workers’ role into an intellectual and scientific one (...), [and] encourage a more open-ended sort of storytelling that weaves together the excavation procedure, findings, and developing interpretations” (p. 136). Fourth, although it should be approached with caution, Mickel suggests that projects use social media channels for public engagement. The largest part of the chapter is dedicated to photography. Mickel gave cameras to local workers to document their experiences. The outcome was multilayered, illustrating that some individuals focused on the workers and took a lot

of portrait and group pictures, while others documented the surroundings of the excavation site, thereby providing a view of the landscape. The photographs thus offer an alternative perspective that leads to a more comprehensive picture of the process and includes the local workers in the construction of knowledge.

In the conclusion, Mickel advocates for a better inclusion of the workers in the scientific process: “The expertise of other locally hired site workers that diverges from the expertise of the foreign archaeological team is crucial in this generative character of the knowledge production” (p. 158). Through flexible and creative media, the workers are given a voice and power. She argues that this would counteract the lucrative business of non-knowledge that was often the norm before and, at the same time, be a valuable (if not indispensable) addition to the scientific process and interpretation.

The excerpts from the interviews that are included in the chapters are well chosen and illustrate the main arguments made. Through the interaction with the site workers, the book offers a unique insight into their expertise, knowledge, experiences, and the personal stories that connect them and their communities with the sites. Mickel manages to approach the workers without value judgements, presenting what they said as facts and not as ‘good or bad’. She is also aware of her own biases and considers her own thought process during the interviews. She reflects on changes in the interview process (e.g., when and why she started to ask a new question) and on her interpretation of the site workers’ answers.

In the introduction, it would have been beneficial to go a bit further back in time and provide more background on the historical and political situations leading up to the time when the excavations took place, as the problem of labor management is rooted in the history of Near Eastern archaeology. Chapter 3 would have benefited from more information about (or have more references to) the interpretations of the archaeologists regarding the excavated sites, in order to compare the workers’ interpretations with

scholarly opinion. Furthermore, it would have been helpful to provide more background information on the respective interviewees, even if just in form of a table at the very end (e.g., age, gender, duration of employment, exact role), to get a better contextualize of the information she bases her interpretations on.

Nonetheless, Mickel’s book is successful in giving a voice to the local workers of the two projects. Some of her findings are not surprising, but that does not diminish the efforts that were put into the recording and systematic analysis of the silent voices offered by this book. Archaeologists who conduct fieldwork that includes local laborers, as well scholars using old excavation reports for their research, can benefit from this book, either in the way they organize and include the workers or in questioning what knowledge is missing from the reports due to the lack of the recording of all voices.

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