

Editorial

Anthropological Archaeology in the Middle East – Past Achievements, Present State and Future Prospects

Anthropology of the Middle East has implicitly and explicitly been a journal with a regional orientation. Most previous issues, however, have added a thematic dimension to this regional orientation, and the same applies to this special issue. The chosen theme is anthropological archaeology, given the fact that this school in archaeology has been responsible for tremendous progress in Middle Eastern archaeology and has advanced our knowledge of the ancient Middle East by leaps and bounds. Anthropological archaeology has been a major player in Middle Eastern archaeology for the past half-century, and no other school in Middle Eastern archaeology can claim to have been immune from its influence, whether in matters of theory or, more visibly, in methodology.

Archaeology of the Middle East (Near East, in archaeological parlance) always has been an enticing field for professional archaeologists and archaeology aficionados alike. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century and continuing into the early decades of the twentieth century, large-scale and high-profile excavations, predominantly inspired by biblical accounts or imperial competition among European powers, marked the ‘Golden Age’ of archaeology in the Middle East, when many excavated archaeological sites revealed awe-inspiring palaces of long-forgotten rulers and temples of heathen gods and, in the absence of any meaningful set of antiquities laws, poured invaluable artefacts and hoards of cuneiform tablets into major museums in Europe and the United States. Following World War II, as the new economic conditions in the West hindered such grandiose archaeological adventures, another, more subtle movement in archaeology was about to shift the focus from large-scale excavations aimed, among other things, at discovering lost cities and civilisations to much smaller exposures focused on more humble, but arguably more important, questions pertaining to the early stages of human development. The rise of New Archaeology in the United States and England was changing the theoretical and methodological configuration of archaeology and pushing for a closer intellectual and methodological affiliation with anthropology and other social and natural sciences.



Thanks to earlier explorations, the historical framework for the culture of a large part of the Middle East, including Mesopotamia, Iran and the Levant, had already been laid down. As a result, the new generation of archaeologists arriving in the Middle East in the post-war years was able to explore the more anthropologically oriented questions that were beginning to gain centre stage in archaeology. Such matters included the transition from food acquisition to food production; the domestication of plants and animals; the origins of sedentism; the development of villages, towns and cities; and early political formations leading to the rise of states and empires. Of course, earlier archaeologists, most notably V. Gordon Childe, had already speculated on the causes and processes of some of these developments, but their ideas lacked substantial factual support – a shortcoming that the new era in Middle Eastern archaeology was trying to rectify. After the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago's Iraq-Jarmo and the Iranian Prehistory Project under Robert Braidwood introduced interdisciplinary and anthropologically oriented field projects to the Middle East in the late 1940s and early 1950s, less than two decades later a multitude of teams from various countries were engaged in archaeological research with an anthropological focus throughout the region. While the above-mentioned pivotal economic, social and political questions continued to be a mainstay in research, as time progressed, other anthropological themes caught the attention of archaeologists working in the Middle East: in the 1970s, exchange and trade, its mechanisms and commodities were popular subjects; in the 1980s, social complexity and the means of craft specialisation were major areas of research; and in the 1990s, there was a growing interest in the study of social organisation, social relations and gender roles, as well as more attention to palaeo-environmental studies as an integral part of archaeological research. With the arrival of the twenty-first century, questions of ideology and symbolism have been gaining momentum, while research on other topics mentioned above continues to adjust and progress, both theoretically and methodologically.

This issue of *Anthropology in the Middle East* has been conceived by the co-editors as a forum to reflect upon the past, ponder on the present and contemplate the future of anthropological archaeology in the Middle East. We are fortunate that a number of senior figures in the field responded to our call. Without assigning any specific topic, we asked them to reflect upon their experience as Middle Eastern archaeologists working within an anthropological framework. Frank Hole, a pioneer in the field, presents an overview of what anthropological archaeology has accomplished in the Middle East in the past few decades. Marc Verhoeven explores the enduring topic of domestication within a holistic approach that incorporates various lines of evidence, from palaeo-environmental studies and bio-archaeological research, in an anthropological framework. Reinhard Bernbeck argues for a reconsideration of pivotal turning points in Middle Eastern history – most importantly, the process of urbanisation and state formation – from the vantage point of ordinary peo-

ple. David A. Warburton calls for an inclusion of information from the ancient Middle East in building models on the history of economics and political theory. Last but not least, in an article distinct from the other contributions, Henri-Paul Francfort offers a unique view from Central Asia – long considered to be peripheral to the Middle East proper – on how models based on information from the Middle East, especially those pertaining to the Bronze Age, can and/or cannot be applied to Central Asia and its distinct yet similar cultural trajectory vis-à-vis the Middle East.

While wide-ranging in their subject matter, the contributions underline a number of key issues. First and foremost is that anthropological archaeology has established a firm footing in the Middle East that, if not stronger, is at least on a par with other parts of the world where anthropological archaeology is the dominant approach. Additionally, far from being exhausted, themes such as domestication, sedentism, urbanism and early political formations still are and will continue to be important areas of research. There is also the urgent need for archaeologists working in other parts of the world to keep a close eye on Middle Eastern archaeology as a major area of research and theoretical and methodological development. On a more specific note, there is the significance of social dichotomy that continues to characterise Middle Eastern societies from the Mediterranean coast to Central Asia – that is, the sedentary versus nomadic peoples – and the interaction that has shaped the course of Middle Eastern culture, economy and politics.

We began this editorial by emphasising that we chose a thematic approach within *AME's* regional framework. While successful to a certain degree, we recognise that the articles in this volume represent only a small sampling of the wide range of archaeological research topics in the Middle East today. This special issue should therefore not be considered a one-shot attempt at the subject. We hope that, as a result of this first effort, other anthropologically oriented archaeologists working in the region will be motivated to contribute to future *AME* issues of a similar nature that will appear in the not-too-distant future.

The astute observer will notice that several geographically significant parts of the Middle East are conspicuously absent from this special issue. The fact that the Middle East is one of the most turbulent regions of the globe is reflected in this volume. Years of sanctions and the ensuing carnage and chaos have rendered Iraq – archaeologically one of the most important lands in the world – largely inaccessible to archaeologists. Self-imposed isolationism and rocky relationships with the rest of the world, especially the West, have hindered systematic archaeological research in Iran, a country that once spearheaded anthropological archaeology in the region. Afghanistan and more recently Pakistan, critical lands at the crossroads of the Middle East proper with Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, also suffer from various problems that render research difficult and hazardous, if not impossible. These examples demonstrate how political conditions can affect science and push principal regions of the Middle East into archaeological oblivion. To add

insult to injury, rampant looting of archaeological sites and materials throughout the Middle East, especially those with a less effective protective apparatus, has led to unimaginable devastation and plundering. This is a calamity from which we may never be able to recover. We can only hope that improved social, economic and political conditions, along with healthier international relations and more pragmatic policies on archaeological collaboration, will some day lead to a more productive era of archaeological research in the Middle East.

– *Kamyar Abdi, Marjan Mashkour and Soheila Shahshahani, co-editors*