The Ethos of the Academe — Standing the Test of Time

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Community Based Archaeology: A View from Tel Burna

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Abstract

Tel Burna is located along the northern bank of Wadi Gaverin and situated in the heart of the Judean Shephelah, one of Israel’s most intensively researched regions. Excavations at the site have, thus far, revealed remains of both the Late Bronze and the Iron Ages. A primary target of the Tel Burna Archaeological Project is our focus on social outreach by integrating community and educational projects. In addition to volunteers from all over the world, the dig is open to anyone who wishes to experience archaeology first-hand; to date exposing people aged 8 to 90 to archaeology.

Recent studies have shown that the application of methods which involve the use of our senses enhances the learning process. Archeology can be used as an outstanding educational tool, as it integrates the use of various senses in the physical work involved, touching the ground and the finds, using vision to see changes in sediments, etc. By providing an opportunity to participate in archaeological fieldwork, excavation can be seen as an informal classroom for the study of archaeology, history, and anthropology, enabling hands-on experience and actual demonstration of how ancient societies are recreated. Rather than just reading about past events, the discovery of artifacts forms a personal connection with those events, whetting one’s appetite and leading to further study. Furthermore, the excavation of an archaeological site can create a special bond between place and person, inviting further interest in the subject. In our experience every individual who contributes to developing the site, assisting in the conservation of different features, such as the Iron Age fortifications or the Late Bronze Age cultic building at Tel Burna, gains a connection that perseveres in subsequent visits to the site and a personal pride in one’s part in discovering finds that strengthen one’s rootingness in the history of the land.

Keywords: Archaeology, Research, Education, Outreach, Community Archaeology

Introduction

The land of Israel has a very rich pre-historic and historic record, with remains of the past surrounding us everywhere we go. Archaeology concerns itself with all physical traces of the human past, and therefore archaeology covers all types of material culture, including rains, tells, agriculture installations, ancient roads, etc. Many people often take for granted the landscapes they walk through and seldom recognize the depths of time in what they see. Furthermore, there is no real sense of what that history means. This rich heritage is one of Israel’s greatest economic resources. Tourists come to Israel to see the glorious past of this country, whether genuine or reconstructed. Yet, in order to build up this insight, it is necessary to begin involving the local
Community in its past and only later to enrich the outer circles. In this paper, we would like to present our work at Tel Burna, where we focus on how to convince the public, both local and foreign, to join us, and how to use archaeological excavations as an educational tool, particularly for outreach education.

Community Archaeology

Recently, Henson (2011, 222) highlighted the relevance of archaeology, stating that “to study the human past is to study ourselves; to realize what it is that makes us human, and that we all share an ultimately common humanity”. Since archaeology helps people discover their past (Henson, 2011, 219), one of the definitions of community archaeology is to create a situation in which people are involved in their own local past and heritage. Community archaeology has become very popular over the past decade (Merriman, 2004; Byrne, 2012). These projects seem to be gaining academic importance as well, and are considered by some people to be vital to the survival of archaeology as a whole (Marshall, 2002, 218). However, as it is varied and changes from region to region and from one community to another, as well as the goal and the research questions of the archaeologists, it is hard to define (Byrne, 2012, 26-27). It operates through educational programs (schools and outreach), public lectures, and presentations, alongside field work (including survey, excavations, and post-excavation work, such as pottery reading and washing (Byrne, 2012, 27)).

In Israel, community archaeology is gaining momentum, including several projects, such as excavations in Modi’im (Ilan & Gadot, 2010), Tel Bareqet (Paz, 2010), and Rogem Ganim, Jerusalem (Greenberg & Cinamon, 2006, 2011). One of our goals, is to encourage people to join us in the field, to draw together diverse threads of evidence in order to give relevance to the present, as everyday objects, places, and landscapes can reflect history.

Since archaeology is a destructive science, what we have excavated can never be returned to its original state. If we do not excavate and record properly, the information will be lost forever. Therefore some archaeologists prefer to work with trained employees, experienced volunteers, or people that come for over a week. These demands ensure that the worker is trained in the methods used and the archaeologists do not have to teach a different group of people the rules of excavation every day. This is particularly true when working with school children, who come for a short time and are not necessarily interested in this work at all. That said, these obstacles can be overcome, if one of the goals of the project is outreach (and see more on this below).

Tel Burna: The site and the excavations

Tel Burna is located along the northern bank of Wadi Guvrin and situated in the heart of the Judean Shephelah (Figure 1), one of Israel’s most intensively researched regions. A fertile area that supported agricultural production, the region became known as the breadbasket of the south. One of the great attractions of digging at Tel Burna is that it had never been excavated, despite its clear regional prominence. In 2009, we set out to conduct a long-term project at the site. Excavations at the site have, thus far, revealed remains of both the Late Bronze and the Iron Ages. The total size of the site is about 10 ha. (Uziel & Shai, 2010).

![Figure 1: Location of Tel Burna and neighboring sites](image-url)

Tel Burna lies along the border between Judah and the Philistines in the Iron Age, as well as on the border between Bronze Age city-states, making it a prime target for studying ancient borders, one of the project’s main goals. We intend to examine the behavior along the border, not just from a political perspective, but also how daily life differed along the border. Did the people who lived on the boundary between these two competing entities interact more than those who lived within the respective regions – and how is this manifested in the archaeological record? How were they affected by the proximity on the one hand, and the political pressures of their rulers on the other? On a more regional level, were frontier towns used as interfaces between cultures, or as protective forts, placed there in order to defend the mainland?
Over four seasons of excavation, we excavated in three areas (Figure 2). The first area is located at the center of the summit of the tel, where a fortification system built over 2800 years ago created a flat, almost square area of 70 by 70 meters. The second area was located along the eastern slopes of the summit, forming a section of the upper tell. The third area was located in the terrace just below the summit, to the west of the fortifications. This area, labeled Area B, has yielded the earliest levels excavated to date.

![Figure 2: Topographic map of the tel, showing the location of the excavated areas](image)

In Area B, directly below the surface, we reached a series of Late Bronze Age (13th century BCE) surfaces related to a massive building (Figure 3). The finds include a row of pithoi, a necklace with beads and scarab, a cylinder seal, and more. In this period, imported pottery from Cyprus is very commonly found. While Cypriot imports are not unique to Tel Burna, certain objects discovered are unique, such as a vessel with three cups joined together – likely of cultic orientation. Furthermore, the building technique alongside the finds (e.g., pottery masks, figurines, chalices, bones) suggested that this area should be interpreted as an area of cult activity.

![Figure 3: Aerial view of Late Bronze Age II building in Area B](image)

In the center of the summit (Area A2) a large 8th century BCE building was found (Fig. 4). The finds include a typical Judean pottery assemblage, loom weights and stamped handles which are common in this period all over Judah. Above this layer, a 7th century BCE level was unearthed, including a series of silos laid over and sometimes reusing the 8th century architecture (Shai et al., in press).

![Figure 4: Aerial view of 8th century BCE building in Area A2](image)

The main feature of the Iron Age settlement at the site is the fortification system, built around the summit, excavated in the eastern section of the summit (Fig. 5). The outer fortification wall is approximately 2 meters thick, with six courses of large field stones and at least three rows of stones surviving. The inner line of fortification, running north-south, is 1.5m wide and built of large field stones. The two walls are connected by a perpendicular wall, indicating that this must have been a casemate wall. With approximately 2 meters between the walls, the entire fortification system was approximately 6 meters thick, 280 meters long, and while it stands to a height of about 2 meters, it was certainly much taller in antiquity. A firm terminus ante quem can
be given, as the wall is cut by one of the 7th century silos. The silo, lined with field stones, yielded pottery of a 7th century BCE date, meaning that the wall must pre-date this, and that at least the inner wall went out of use in this period (Shai et al., 2012).

Figure 5: Aerial view of the Casemate Wall in Area A1

Archaeology and Education

Education outside the classroom is very well known and has a broad definition. It can be seen as any learning experience that takes place outside the classroom environment, during the school day, after school, or during holidays (O’Donnell, Morris, & Wilson, 2006, i). While among other activities one can mention visiting heritage sites, the case that we would like to highlight here is slightly different, as school children do not only visit the site, they take part in exposing the past and the history of the inhabitants and of the site. Fieldwork leaves its impact on school children for many years (Barker, Slingsby & Tilling, 2001, 2) and indeed fieldwork is a memorable learning experience. This aspect is further enhanced in the case of participating in an archaeological dig, as it combines field work outside the classroom with history, geography and environmental studies (Malone, 2008, 15).

Schools and children are assumed to be the best candidates to serve as the backbone of community archaeology. This assumption is based on the fact that children have much more free time to spend on archaeology, especially if it is part of their school requirements. However, at least in Israel, schools have very limited resources. This forces interested projects to take on additional costs, beyond the budget needed for excavations, analysis and publication of the project. Some of these costs can be offset by working together with local or regional authorities, although both the local authorities and archaeological projects are usually not at liberty to take on extra expenses.

It is of much importance to explain beforehand in detail to the children what they should expect from the field work and the methodology and practice of the excavations, as in many cases their only knowledge of archaeological work is from the movies, where the field is portrayed in a very different light than actual tedious and slow archaeological work (Paz, 2012, 39-40). In addition, it is of vital importance to give the children and their teachers the background for the excavations, i.e. in which main periods was the site inhabited? Who were the inhabitants? What historical sources refer to the site? What is the importance of the site? And what are the research questions that interest the archaeologists working at the site? While some of these issues and should be resolved in the classroom, repeating them in the field when the environment is visible (landscape, water source, agricultural fields and installations, etc.) strengthens the importance of the project for non-experienced archaeologists. Based on our experience, however, doing this prior to their arrival wakes the senses and raises interesting questions regarding the excavations, the site, its history and heritage.

Community Archaeology at Tel Burna

The Tel Burna Archaeological Project can be defined as a research-led project, which actively seeks to involve communities from outside the profession (Byrne, 2012, 27).

While the Tel Burna Archaeological Project posed several research questions and academic aims (see above), we also had in mind the insight that archaeology is part of cultural heritage and that it is part of our duty to share the experience of field work as well as the results with the public. Since the first steps taken in the field, it was clear to us that the project would be open to the public. In that, we decided that unlike most of the research and academic excavations in Israel, this project welcomes volunteers of all ages. Thus, one can see in the field a high school student working together in the same area with a seasoned graduate student from another country. Moreover, as a focal decision, we decided not to limit the minimum time for volunteer work.

Contrary to most community archaeological projects (e.g., Byrne, 2012; Paz, 2010), the Tel Burna Archaeological Project does not depend only on the community, rather it involves several groups, such as local residents, volunteers from Israel and abroad, schoolchildren and students.
This can on the one hand be an advantage, as the workers are diverse, yet on the other hand it forces us to take charge and welcome dissimilar groups of various ages (as young as 5 years old all the way up to 93 years old) and with different interests. Hence, it is of much importance to employ different methods and attitudes focusing on the wide range of participants in order to make archaeology relevant to them and ensure the success of the project (Simpson & Williams, 2008).

During one week of the 2012 excavation season, a program was established with the Safit regional public school, where a different class of 8th grade students would join us in the field every 3 hours. The students came with their teachers and received a short explanation about the site, the periods, its location and importance in ancient times, and a brief explanation of how to dig, accompanied with safety instructions. After that, they spread out in the excavated areas, creating an environment where in each area we had about 10 children working side by side with the volunteers. Although some were disinterested, most of the children were really excited and got involved in the work as well as chatting with the volunteers. The staff connected with the school children, giving them some more background about the site, its history, and plans and goals of the project, while they worked. For example, the students were interested in the Guvrin River south of the site and the natural environment surrounding the site, discussing the reasons behind establishing a settlement in this specific location. When we discovered a Judean pillar figurine (well dated to the biblical period), the children raised questions about monotheism in this period and how is it that we find an idol in a Judean site.

One should emphasize that while the site reached its peak in the Iron Age II, i.e. the biblical era (Uziel & Shai, 2010), and that we clearly see the use of outreach education and bible studies outside the classroom as a huge opportunity, other archaeological periods are of no less importance and represent another facet of the history of any archaeological site (see Ilan & Gadot, 2010). One of the tasks of archaeologists is to make sure that people care about and take care of their own heritage (Henson, 2011, 223).

The Iron Age fortification system at Tel Burna is a model that fits this framework very well. From the early stages of the project, we concentrated on exposing the fortifications, excavating them and dating them based on archaeological methods (i.e., Uziel & Shai, 2010; Shai et al., 2012). However, the conservation of this system is no less important. Therefore, the excavated area of the fortifications is limited to the NE corner, in order to avoid too much exposure, which would create problems with conservation and upkeep, possibly leading to the collapse of this monumental feature. Further excavations of the fortifications will be made dependent on the conservation and tourism development of this feature, together with the head of the architectural school at Ariel University, Prof. Benny Levy.

It has been suggested that community archaeology can be seen as a tool for enhancing awareness of heritage and connecting people to their homeland (Henson, 2012, 122). As Israelis, we take this one step further. In our view, the encounter between Israelis and foreigners with different backgrounds and knowledge about Israel and Judaism from all over the world is a fascinating opportunity to bring together people who would not necessarily connect, and to influence public opinion about Israel abroad. The excavation exposes Israel not through news and headlines of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but rather as people who returned to their homeland and study its culture and heritage – regardless of religion or race – as we investigate the Canaanites, Judeans, Philistines, and others who left their imprint on Tel Burna.

In summary, the opportunity to participate in archaeological fieldwork can be seen as an informal classroom for the study of archaeology, history and anthropology, enabling hands-on experience and actual demonstrations of how ancient societies are recreated. Rather than just reading about past events, the discovery of artifacts forms a personal connection with these events, whetting one’s appetite and leading to further study. Furthermore, the excavation of an archaeological site can create a special bond between place and person, inviting further interest in the subject. Our experience is that each individual who contributes to developing the site, assisting in conservation of different features, such as the Iron Age fortifications or the Late Bronze Age cultic building at Tel Burna, gains a connection that is furthered in subsequent visits to the site and a personal pride in the contribution to discovering finds that strengthen roots in the history of the land.

References


