

Anthropology Book Forum

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ALLISON MICKEL. 2021. *Why Those Who Shovel Are Silent: A History of Local Archaeological Knowledge and Labor*. Louisville: University Press of Colorado, xiii + 203 pp. ISBN 978-1-64642-114-5.

Key Words: Çatalhöyük, community engagement, ethnography of archaeology, lucrative non-knowledge, Petra.

Allison Mickel's book is an enlightening ethnographic-based critique of the dehumanizing, colonialist, and classist dynamics traditionally harbored in archaeological praxis. The author collects the stories, memoirs, interactions, and (very expressive) silences of the local communities involved in the early excavation of two flagship archaeological sites in the Middle East: Petra and Çatalhöyük. The Temple of the Winged Lions is a large Nabatean complex located in Petra (Jordan) that was excavated by Phillip Hammond between 1973 and 2005. On the other hand, Çatalhöyük (in Anatolia, Turkey) is a large Neolithic and Chalcolithic proto-city excavated interruptedly since 1959, first by James Mellaart and then by Ian Hodder.

Despite the apparent dissimilarities between both sites, Petra and Çatalhöyük share some commonalities that make them suitable for analysis and comparison: both are large-scale sites extensively excavated for several decades by a mixed team of foreign and local members and have progressively embraced public engagement strategies. Since 2009, The Temple of the Winged Lions Cultural Resource Management (TWLCRM) project works on preserving the site with the collaboration of local Bedouin supervisors and personnel (p.6). Likewise, Hodder's Çatalhöyük Research Project (ÇRP) is known worldwide for pioneering the use of progressive and integrative archaeological and curatorial methodologies that include, for example, recording laborers' interpretation of the site (p.6-7).

In this monograph, Mickel's goal is to assess the evolution of archaeological fieldwork over the past fifty years and to evaluate the role that seasonal local laborers play in

archaeological research settings. Her study combines different quantitative, qualitative, and visual approaches. The author performed social network analysis to compare the site laborers' experiences, obtained from recording a hundred and sixty-seven interviews with locals that used to work at the Temple of the Winged Lions and Çatalhöyük, along with archival documentation produced by archaeologists. Furthermore, she conducted a small-scale experiment that involves inclusive photography to show the workers' stance on archaeological work.

Mickel presents the results of her research in six chapters. Chapter 1 contains a historical overview of the archaeological work performed in the Middle East since the mid-nineteenth century, when European scientific expeditions were linked to military imperialism, economical colonialism, and moral paternalism. She places special emphasis on the creation of the first standards for fieldwork that were formed at the time, which inserted global politics and hierarchies of power into the labor-management strategies and resulted in exploitative work conditions, low wages, long hours, and a clear segregation between intellectual and manual work. In fact, the origins of archaeology in the Middle East explain why the interviewed site workers claim to lack knowledge and expertise about the archaeological process. This is the thematical cornerstone of the book and the connecting thread between Chapters 2 to 4.

In contrast to laborers' allegations, Mickel's social network analysis shows that local workers do develop scientific expertise in archaeological methods and processes and have a deep understanding of artifacts (Chapter 2). Their perspectives sometimes overlap and sometimes complement the body of information recorded by professional archaeologists, which proves the loss of significant information when laborers' insights are disregarded. Unfortunately, the voices of local workers are silenced by prejudices and misrepresentations that prevent the symbiotic transfer of ideas between laborers and archaeologists.

Furthermore, the management system that was used to run Petra and Çatalhöyük for decades (and is still used at other archaeological projects in the Middle East and elsewhere), led to the disconnection of local workers from the analysis and interpretation processes and the resulting outcomes (Chapter 3). For instance, in Petra, laborers were not allowed to excavate artifacts and they were banned from laboratories due to their supervisors' fear of valuable assets getting looted or any expensive equipment being stolen. Therefore, they were given no place to develop their own theories and contribute

to the interpretation of the past. Hence, Mickel's assertion that local laborers represent the Marxist epitome of workers in a capitalist system (p.35): they were instrumentalized, alienated from the product of their work, and received no real academic prestige or monetary profit for it. Their job was reduced to remove as much earth as possible, as fast as possible, in exchange for a substantially small wage.

Mickel argues that laborers have found a way to take advantage of these unequal power relationships—local workers decide to purposely conceal their expertise in archaeological matters because it is more beneficial to portray ignorance than to share their knowledge. This phenomenon is what she coins as “lucrative non-knowledge” (Chapter 4). Members of local communities admit to systematically downplaying or denying their scientific knowledge to be more likely to be hired for the work season. They also affirm being willing to self-identify as ethnographic-worthy subjects in order to receive better compensation. Passivity and ignorance are features well-rewarded in archaeological labor economics. Unfortunately, this situation is not exclusive to the Middle East. In Chapter 5, Mickel explores the phenomenon of lucrative non-knowledge in Syria, Egypt, India, South Africa, and various countries in Central and South America. With some exceptions, laborers from regions with a colonial past are not paid for their expertise but are remunerated for performing docility, submission, or exaggerated traditional identities.

In Chapter 6, Mickel claims that changing the archaeological labor management system implies a radical transformation at the foundational level of archaeological projects. Despite the emergence of post-processualism in the 1990s, which introduced a new appreciation for reflexivity, equity, and representation, and brought forward public engagement and community archaeology, fieldwork guidelines remain firmly established. The author suggests that a viable approach to catalyze change is to involve laborers in various forms of documentation. Archaeologists should incorporate the perspectives and insights of laborers not only to trigger a shift in the economic dynamics of archaeological labor that currently sustain lucrative non-knowledge but for the betterment of science itself. The author points out that “a science in which some of the most experienced researchers are so disincentivized from showing their expertise that they refuse to speak is bad science” (p.161).

In my opinion, *Why Those Who Shovel Are Silent* contains two main lessons for us to ponder: the need to move from cooperative to collaborative archaeological work and to

train archaeologists (especially project directors) in leadership skills that surpass the mere management of sites.

In cooperative work dynamics, the parties involved operate separately to achieve a common outcome. This is the labor management system adopted in the excavation of Petra: laborers and archaeologists performed different tasks independently to produce archaeological knowledge. Instead, Mickel advocates for collaboration, which requires the establishment of a new set of work values onsite (including equity, epistemological impartiality, and technological and processual democratization) in order to make laborers and archaeologists work together as equals. In this way, locals become an inextricable part of the research process, both as laborers and as rightful cultural descendants, consultants, and as knowledge-producers. This vision can only be achieved if a leader (as opposed to a boss, manager, or supervisor) takes charge, focusing on the process and the relationships established in the field, rather than concentrating on the results; inspiring and motivating crew members, rather than controlling them; looking after the team, instead of overseeing it. Hodder's vision of community engagement in Çatalhöyük is an exceptional example of how leadership can transform archaeological work.

In conclusion, introducing collaboration and leadership in the archaeological field as standards of praxis can both improve work conditions for all participants and make the generation of knowledge more rewarding than its denial.

Irene Martí Gil obtained her bachelor's degree in Archaeology from Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Barcelona, Spain), having pursued an academic exchange at Université Paris-Sorbonne IV (Paris, France), and graduated from Escuela de Liderazgo Universitario-Universidad Francisco de Vitoria (Madrid, Spain). She earned a master's degree in Cultural Heritage from University College London (London, United Kingdom) in 2017. Currently, Irene is a Ph.D. candidate in the department of Geography and Anthropology at Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge, USA). Her field of research is focused on archaeological looting and antiquities trafficking from an interdisciplinary (legal, archaeological, ethnographic, and linguistic) perspective.



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