

## **The First Villagers: Changes and Challenges in the Preservation and Presentation of the Neolithic Record of Jordan**

The theme of this book is ‘changes and challenges’. These two words convey much information; this volume is devoted to new and exciting archaeological discoveries using the latest research techniques. But another topic that clearly falls under ‘changes and challenges’ relates to how the past is preserved and protected, and how it benefits the public, including local communities (e.g. Little 2002); this is what this essay addresses. I will focus on a ‘deep time’ site – one that does not necessarily have the impressive physical ‘signature’ that the remains of later antiquity possess.

Much of the early history of archaeology in the Near East was a one-way process in which western archaeologists took much from host countries but returned little. This has changed. Countries in the Near East now have sophisticated antiquities services that are very conscious of their heritage, while at the same time realizing that their resources are limited. Most countries welcome foreign projects; Jordan is, of course, a prime example of this. While joint endeavors are now common, much of the intellectual output of these projects is still one way. This problem is even more pronounced when it comes to public presentation and community outreach which, with a few notable exceptions, is limited. This is particularly true for prehistoric sites. In this paper, I present the evolution of an archaeological park at Neolithic Ghwair I in southern Jordan.

The past 20 years or so have amply demonstrated that Jordan contains one of the richest records of the world’s first villagers, people belonging to the Neolithic period. The Neolithic started over 11,000 years ago and, by domesticating critical plants and animals and establishing permanent villages, set the stage for the development of complex societies and, ultimately, the modern world (Simmons 2007). It is no surprise that a huge amount of research has

focused on this important stage in human development. However, there is something missing.

A primary goal of archaeology should be educational. To both archaeologists and the general public, archaeological sites are some of the most interesting places in the world. We need to do better at presenting those sites to a wide audience. After all, it is ultimately the public that supports archaeology. Thus, archaeologists must address the necessity of making archaeology something more than an academic discipline with a limited audience. This is no easy task, especially in a country such as Jordan, which has a rich archaeological record likely stretching back to over one million years ago. One problem, however, is that most of these early sites, lacking substantial remains, are not very photogenic to the average person. Such sites, the residue of hunters and gatherers, typically consist of chipped stone scatters which do not convey much excitement to many people, although I contend that they can be made more appealing to a broader audience, with proper ‘marketing’.

A major part of making archaeology accessible is in the preservation and presentation of representative sites from all periods. A question, though, is how to select which sites to showcase and, once selected, how to present them. In relation to the latter, one approach that has enjoyed considerable success is the concept of a public archaeological park. However, determining target sites is a difficult choice, especially in countries with limited budgets for heritage preservation. Many sites of classical antiquity receive the bulk of preservation funding. There is no mystery as to why this is so: these remains are spectacular and there is no denying the attraction of sites such as Petra or Jarash, as well as the tourist revenue they generate. This also occurs elsewhere in the world, such as at Tikal in

Guatemala, where considerable expense has gone into a very user-friendly archaeological park. Many such sites also have ethnic, political or religious significance, which may contribute to their elevated status. Nevertheless, I would argue that political usage of archaeology (e.g. Atakuman 2010; Galaty and Watkinson 2004; Meskell 1998) is a complex issue that is usually inappropriate and that it is best to not make archaeology a pawn of politics or nationalism.

What I want to discuss in this essay is a specific example of an archaeological park at a type of site that rarely gets much public attention. This is due to its antiquity and, perhaps, to the fact that no modern ethnic groups lay claim to these ruins. This case-study is the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (PPNB) village of Ghwair I, located in the remote - but spectacular - Wādī Faynān area (Simmons and Najjar 2006). However, first we should examine some broader issues.

Rarely have prehistoric sites in the Near East been accorded much attention, beyond perhaps a few sign posts. There are, of course, exceptions to this. For example, at the Tabun Caves in Israel, sites from truly 'deep' antiquity (i.e. the Paleolithic) have been developed for public audiences (e.g. BibleWalks.com 2011). In most cases, however, prehistoric sites are simply not considered informative enough to devote already stretched resources towards their public presentation. However, with the proper 'packaging' they can be made interesting to the general public. For example, in the United States, many sites that lack impressive architectural features are very successful at attracting visitors with minimal, but effective, 'advertising'. At Grimes Point in Nevada, a simple trail and signage system, forming a sort of archaeological park, is very effective at a site that contains no architecture, but only rock art (United States Department of the Interior 1979). Despite its isolated location, many people visit this site.

There are many issues related to developing sites for public visitation. Several basic questions must initially be asked, beginning with the physical layout of the site. For example: what features are to be interpreted, are visitors allowed into the sites or just allowed to look at them from trails or viewing platforms, will there be facilities for disabled visitors, how do the sites fit into the landscape, are there physical barriers to visiting them, are there any special hazards and are any site areas too frag-

ile to allow access for visitors?

By using modern methods to design pathways or trails through sites and providing interpretive messages along the way, we can increase visitor sensitivity to the sites and their potential impact. Good interpretation should also significantly enhance visitors' appreciation not just of the site, but the ancient culture it represents. These and other issues need to be settled in planning between park designers, site managers and archaeologists. Bringing together the right mix of these professionals will produce a quality experience for visitors and enhance the archaeological site for generations to come.

Another important question is: who is the target audience? This is a sensitive topic in an area such as the beautiful but fragile desert landscape of Wādī Faynān. The combination of high public interest and vulnerability to damage places managers in a difficult position: how does one both preserve and protect this heritage, while at the same time making it accessible to the public? Are these, in fact, conflicting goals? Many professional archaeologists would perhaps be happy to make sites off-limits to the general public. However, this is both arrogant and unrealistic. For reasons of sustainability, it seems inevitable that areas such as Wādī Faynān will open up for tourism.

One must therefore consider audiences for an archaeological park. Are they cruise ship tourists who will spend an hour at a site and take a lot of photos? Are they foreign nationals who are coming to the site expecting detailed information and explanation of the entire archaeological context? What about Jordanian citizens, from both urban areas and more adjacent rural regions? We must realize that only a fraction of visitors will be professional archaeologists; most will be there for some other reason and development must take this into consideration. Jordanians and others will come because these sites may be important to their heritage; others will come because they are interested in the area or time period. They are looking for something interesting to do and see.

Given the ecological sensitivity of Wādī Faynān, some of these scenarios are not particularly attractive. If the region is to be developed for the public, then perhaps the concept of limited eco-tourists looking for a 'natural experience' is preferable to large bus-loads of day-tripping tourists and massive group tours. Certainly eco-tourism is a major

driving factor in attempts to conserve natural resources, while at the same time educating the public with minimal impact on these resources (e.g. Hall 2005; Mowforth and Munt 2003; Shunnaq *et al.* 2008; Wood 2002).

There are presently attempts to set world-wide standards for eco-tourism, as exemplified in a World Eco-tourism Summit held in 2002. Two principles discussed there were cultural respect and benefitting local communities. In order to be ethically responsible, archaeological parks cannot be developed only to benefit tourists; the local population also needs to be considered.

In any event, after a target audience is identified and the physical capabilities of a site and its setting have been assessed, one has to think about design with a particular audience in mind, as already mentioned. For example, lots of children may require rails and fences. Elderly, handicapped or wheelchair-bound individuals will require a hardened surface. However, if the target audience is composed of eco-tourists, some of these issues might be minimized, although they still need to be considered.

Another significant issue to consider at the outset is, of course, cost. Costs are incurred in two ways: (1) the initial up-front cost of construction and (2) the long-term daily maintenance expenses that can, over the long term, exceed the cost of initial construction many times over. Good design can minimize maintenance costs, but not eliminate them all together. We shall return to this issue shortly, demonstrating the difficulty inherent in funding an archaeological park of the type described here.

So, how does all this relate to a specific example? The remainder of this paper presents the case-study of Neolithic Ghwair I, where we have completed a major campaign of excavations. While there are still many research questions that require further investigation, we also are acutely aware that Ghwair I is both a fragile resource and has a tremendous educational and touristic potential.

Wādī Faynān is an isolated area, which probably at least partially accounts for its well-preserved archaeological heritage. The region has a huge range of diverse ancient cultural traditions. As more and more researchers work in the region, we are developing a fuller understanding of how humans adapted to this arid eco-system through time. What also needs to be considered is: how do we preserve and conserve this archaeological treasure? I wish

to summarize one cost-efficient and low-impact system developed for Ghwair I, which consists primarily of a system of well-defined trails. Now, in an ideal world, an archaeological park at Ghwair I would be a small part of the creation of a larger archaeological district for the entire Wādī Faynān system, a concept that is currently being developed. However, at this point, it remains an ambitious concept.

What we did at Ghwair I was accomplished with modest financial support from a United States government, Fulbright Program Ambassador's grant. We did not modify existing features at Ghwair I to any great degree. We added to existing trails, provided signage (although this is, unfortunately, already in a bad state of repair after only a few years) and developed a brochure explaining the site's significance and increasing visitor sensitivity to the site and their potential impact on it. Could we have done more? Of course. For example, I mentioned earlier proposals to develop an International Eco-tourism Standard. These consist of three distinct sub-sectors: accommodation, tours and attractions. All of these can feed into the local economy, but how could they be incorporated within the future development of Wādī Faynān? Some specific issues can be identified:

- A critical question is whether tourists are permitted to go on self-guided tours, or whether they must be accompanied by guides, presumably local *bedouin*? If the latter were the case, this would provide local employment opportunities. My impression is that it is much better to have guided tours, perhaps along the model of Canyon de Chelly in the American south-west. This provides both local employment and restricts access; to a degree, this is already being done at the Dana Nature Reserve, located adjacent to Ghwair I;
- The training of local guides and other infrastructure personnel;
- Will there be a need for overnight accommodation? What about restaurants, gift shops and toilets? These infrastructure issues are critical to achieving a balance between maintaining pristine natural conditions and providing minimal amenities. Already, a nearby former geological survey camp has been converted to relatively elegant tourist accommodation;
- What is the relationship with the Dana Nature Reserve? I am not certain if any arrangements have thus far been made, but there are clear advantages

to partnering with the Reserve, which remains the primary conduit for eco-tourism. Benefits to local communities are clear at the Reserve, where *bedouin* handicrafts are sold and employment opportunities provided in a variety of forms, including restaurants and tour-guiding;

- What can one do about vandalism? Signage at a nearby Neolithic site has resulted in local vandalism. This is clearly an educational issue that needs sensitive handling;
- Perhaps most importantly – and tied into all of the above topics – is the relationship of the park with the local community. Can this be a profitable partnership (Simmons and Najjar 2010)?
- I would like to conclude with a major pragmatic consideration. We can probably agree that the concept of an archaeological park is a good idea. But, one must ask: who pays for it? This, perhaps unsurprisingly, is where we have had the most difficulty and where United States analogies have been of far more limited use. In the United States, most parks are paid for and maintained by either the federal or the state government. In Jordan, such resources are much more limited. This has become an even more critical issue since the unfortunate political events of recent years, which have drastically reduced the amount of tourism to Jordan. Without outside tourism, it is unlikely that already stretched government agencies will be willing to increase funding for tourist attractions.
- In any event, some funding possibilities to consider include the following:
- Submit proposals to international agencies such as the World Bank or the European Union;
- Require projects to incorporate the costs within their admittedly already stressed budgets;
- Solicit private funding;
- Use some type of government-supported workforce;
- Consider the possibility of matching funding, whether in cash or in-kind.

The reality is that funding remains a very real problem. Thus far, our experience of attempting to obtain funding through ‘traditional’ agencies has been less than successful, despite the Ambassador’s grant. As an indication of some of the problems facing preservation funding, let me provide some quotes from a proposal for Ghwair I that we submitted to a major US government agency some years ago. This proposal called for a combination

of research and funding for an archaeological park. It was not funded; the following are some of the reviewers’ comments that relate specifically to the park:

1. The “...chief problem is with objective #2 (i.e. the park); ...boosting local economy is not an NEH goal. Would funds sunk into such a project be repaid by visitors? (There is a) problem of long-term maintenance, which varies from country to country in the Near East”;
2. “...Until excavation is actually completed it seems premature to be developing plans for potential visitors”;
3. “...Plans for developing the archaeological park...should not be the responsibility of archaeologists...”;
4. “An archaeological park is a commendable undertaking but I am not convinced that this is a good use of funds. In my opinion, this money would be better spent excavating, and publishing the results, rather than constructing a park...”;
5. To our minds, perhaps the most egregious is the following comment:
6. “The goal of providing local employment is commendable but should not be the responsibility of archaeologists. The goal of site preservation by means of an archaeological park is highly dubious... If the excavators are serious about site preservation they should carefully backfill the site and not give out its precise location to anyone. Such tactics are standard in American archaeology...”.

Comments such as these are disheartening, especially coming from archaeologists. There is more than a little colonialist attitude expressed in such comments. Certainly, many seem to feel that it is not the responsibility - either practically or ethically - of archaeologists to provide for educational promotion beyond the relatively limited scope of academic research. We clearly disagree with such attitudes, finding them both paternalistic and arrogant.

Finally, it is necessary to situate the Neolithic within a 21st century context. Current Neolithic research will continue to focus on several important topics (Simmons 2007: 266-275), including:

1. Economic data;
2. Social structure, especially related to ‘invisible’ personalities in prehistory, e.g. women and children;
3. Burial practices; the Neolithic is rich in mortu-

ary data and we can learn a lot about ritual, social status and health from studying burials;

4. Defining the Neolithic world, which we now know was far more widespread than previously thought, stretching even to Cyprus in its earliest incarnations;
5. Ideology, ritual and symbolism;
6. Chronology;
7. Degrees of sedentism (Simmons 2007: 266-275).

These are all research issues, but just as important are the preservation, presentation and community-involvement topics that I have addressed in this paper. Neolithic sites have not received much attention in a Neolithic context (perhaps with the exception of Çatal Höyük in Turkey [e.g. Apaydin 2010; Tecirli 2010]). Most preservation funding tends to be directed at large, impressive sites belonging to periods later than the Neolithic. Even spectacular sites, such as Jericho, are not as well protected as they should be. Certainly, more mundane – but more typical – Neolithic settlements have received limited attention.

When many well-known sites were excavated, preservation and conservation were not major issues. Today, with limited research funds, these topics still tend to be short-changed. One only needs visit a few sites to see how much decades of neglect have affected these precious remains.

I do not have a ready answer to this dilemma. One obvious solution is simply not to excavate until sufficient funding for preservation can be obtained. Given the tightening of research budgets, this is unlikely to occur soon. Although not conducting any new excavations and focusing instead on previously excavated material is an attractive option, I do not think that it is a viable one. For example, if sites such as Ghwair I – or innumerable others – had not been excavated, we would know far less of the diversity of the Neolithic; if ‘Ayn Ghazāl had not been excavated, the mega-site phenomenon might never have been documented. Certainly, this will be a major challenge for future generations of scholars.

There have however been some positive attempts at both preservation and presentation. While tourism in the Near East has suffered in recent years, it is nonetheless one potential avenue for increasing preservation funding. While many tourists may prefer to see the spectacular remains of Antiquity, with the right ‘advertising’ less spectacular remains

can be made just as interesting.

It is, however, incumbent upon us to share our findings with the public. We have tried to do this – at least at a minimal level – at Ghwair I. Wādī Faynān is well-suited for sustainable eco-tourism development that will protect cultural resources and benefit indigenous peoples. Another example is al-Baydā, where Dennis’ (2003) reconstruction of Neolithic structures is coupled with signage and simple trails around the site. This was all accomplished at relatively low cost and could be seen as a model for future studies.

If the Neolithic had never occurred, this paper would never have been written. Without the security and surplus provided by food production, contemporary society would simply never have evolved. So many aspects of life that we now take for granted had their origins in the Neolithic. Surely this heritage demands protection.

In conclusion, archaeological remains belong to all humanity. While careful and proper excavation and publication remain primary goals for archaeologists, preservation and public education – as well as community involvement – should be considered equally important. As Peter Young, editor of *Archaeology* magazine, has noted, the education of archaeologists as storytellers should be an important part of our training. This will require a radical reorientation of the discipline in the 21st century.

## Bibliography

- Apaydin, V. 2010. Community Education Research. Pp. 177 in *Çatalhöyük 2010 Archive Report*. Compiled by Shahina Farid ([http://www.catalhoyuk.com/downloads/Archive\\_Report\\_2010.pdf](http://www.catalhoyuk.com/downloads/Archive_Report_2010.pdf)).
- Atakuman, Ç. 2010. Value of Heritage in Turkey: History and Politics of Turkey’s World Heritage Nominations. *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology* 23: 107-131.
- BibleWalks. 2011. [www.biblewalks.com](http://www.biblewalks.com)
- Dennis, S. 2003. The Experimental Reconstruction of a Pre-Pottery Neolithic B Structure at Beidha - A Visual Introduction. *Levant* 35: 39-48.
- Galaty, M. and Watkinson, C. (editors). 2004. *Archaeology Under Dictatorship*. Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers: New York.
- Hall, C.M. and Boyd, S. (editors). 2005. *Nature-based Tourism in Peripheral Areas: Development or Disaster?* Channel View Publications: Buffalo, NY.
- Little, B. (editor). 2002. *Public Benefits of Archaeology*. University Press of Florida: Gainesville, FL.

- Meskel, L. (editor). 1998. *Archaeology under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East*. London : Routledge.
- Mowforth, M. and Munt, I. 2003. *Tourism and Sustainability: Development and New Tourism in the Third World*. London : Routledge.
- Shunnaq, M., Schwab, W. and Reid, M. 2008. Community Development Using a Sustainable Tourism Strategy: a Case Study of the Jordan River Valley Touristway. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 10: 1-14.
- Simmons, A. 2007. *The Neolithic Revolution in the Near East: Transforming the Human Landscape*. University of Arizona Press: Tucson (reprinted in paperback 2011).
- Simmons, A. and Najjar, M. 2006. Ghwair I: A Small but Complex Neolithic Community in Southern Jordan. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 31: 77-95.
- 2010. *Joint Custody: An Archaeological Park at Neolithic Ghwair I, Jordan*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Schools of Oriental Research: Atlanta.
- Tecirli, B. 2010. Archaeological Park Research. *Çatalhöyük 2010 Archive Report*. Compiled by S. Farid ([http://www.catalhoyuk.com/downloads/Archive\\_Report\\_2010.pdf](http://www.catalhoyuk.com/downloads/Archive_Report_2010.pdf)).
- United States Department of the Interior. 1978. *Petroglyph trail: Grimes Point Archaeological Area*. Washington DC. Bureau of Land Management:
- Wood, M. 2002. *Ecotourism: Principles, Practices and Policies for Sustainability*. Paris: United Nations Environment Programme.