SPRING 2010 HONORABLE MENTION

Lucy Richards

INSTRUCTOR’S FOREWORD

In her second paper of the spring quarter, Lucy tackled an abstract topic—the assignment was to consider the role of archaeology in the assignment of public meaning to places—by deftly synthesizing the material from much of the course into one key observation. Too many of the critiques of archaeology’s role in heritage conflicts, she argued, have focused on the product of archaeological research rather than its process. This deceptively simple assertion provided a platform for an argument that recognized the intractability of multi-causal modern conflicts like those over Jerusalem and Ayodha while simultaneously proposing a means of using archaeology to soften the stances of parties to those conflicts. Lucy suggests, in clear prose, an insightful approach to a daunting problem; the tone is hopeful without being naive.

Lucy’s paper recognizes the difficulties of archaeology in a postcolonial world without falling prey to a paralysis born of postmodern relativism. In its thoughtful and practical approach to the problem, it is cogent and sophisticated enough to serve as a model for academic archaeologists.

—Daniel Contreras
Archeology, through its portrayal of the past, can be said to be involved in “place-making”—establishing and legitimizing a particular vision of the past at a locale. “Place-making” can take many forms, however most would agree that it contains the moral imperative to soothe local conflicts rather than feed the flames. In her critique of the role of archeology in the conflict at Ayodhya, Julia Shaw laments “[archeology’s] various shortcomings have led to the view that ‘archeologists…had nothing specifically academic to contribute towards finding a solution to the problem’” (695). Implicit in her statement is the assumption that, in its act of place-making, archeology can and should shift its philosophy and methodology to advance peace rather than conflict. This belief forms the basis for most literature on archeology in both Jerusalem and Ayodhya, and this belief will also form the basis of my own argument. Most literature aimed at reimagining archeology’s role in Jerusalem and Ayodhya focuses specifically on the role of information obtained from archeological research—the methodology used to obtain it and its subsequent interpretation. Simultaneously, however, the same archeological literature suggests that the product of archeology has little power to soothe the disputes. I will demonstrate that this conception of the role of archeology as exclusively product-based hinders the ability for archeology to fulfill its implied mandate to pacify rather than antagonize conflict.

When invoking archeology in the context of Jerusalem and Ayodhya, both sides seem to reflect a common belief that archeology plays the role of an objective judge. At Ayodhya, Hindus claim that archeological evidence shows that there was a temple at the site when
the Muslims came to Ayodhya, while Muslims claim, with fingers pointing to archeological evidence as well, that there was no temple existing at the site when the Babri mosque was constructed (Myth, History, and Archeology 85). Both sides, however, share the implicit belief that archeology can show objectively who is right and who is wrong and, the assumption follows, that archeological information will can determine the solution to the conflict. Analogously, in the case of Jerusalem Nadia Abu El-Haj points out that Israeli archeologists, under the banner of archeology’s scientific neutrality, have constructed a chronology of the past that emphasizes Jewish heritage as the original heritage of Jerusalem (146). Israeli archeologists, like those at Ayodhya, use archeology’s objectivity to substantiate their claims to the past, and thereby to substantiate their claims to the Temple Mount and other important sites in the present. Archeological data is used by both sides to legitimize their own claims to territories in the present.

Because archeology is seen as an “objective judge,” criticisms of the role of archeology in these conflicts focus on the actual objectivity of the information being used as ammunition in the conflict. Abu El-Haj claims that archeological periods relating to Muslim heritage were “not very carefully excavated” (154), which produced material evidence, or “facts on the ground”, of Jewish heritage and discounted the material heritage of the Muslim past. Likewise, D. Mandal points out the flaws in archeology’s methodology: “The contention that a ‘pillared building’ was raised in the eleventh century A.D. is absolutely baseless… the stratigraphy was paid scant attention… the discussions reveal the selective manner in which some archeologists had cited the archeological finds to argue for the existence of a temple.” (8) Both of these authors focus their criticism on the methodology of archeology in Jerusalem and Ayodhya, implying that these authors believe that if archeology were truly objective (for example, if equal amounts of Muslim as Jewish heritage were excavated and the stratigraphic analyses of the sites was flawless) then these conflicts would be diminished.

Julia Shaw’s criticism, on the other hand, focuses not on the information produced, but the way that material evidence is communicated to and understood by the public (697). She proposes that archeological interpretations should emphasize the multivocality and fluidity of Ayodhya’s past, arguing that, “the solution lies less in the reiteration of science… and more in its realignment with a new historical imagination that can recover for Ayodhya the variety and multiplicity of its pasts.” (699) She claims that if the public received a more multivocal view of the past from archeology, then they would develop a more multivocal view of the present. For Shaw, the problem lies not in the information but the communication of archeology.
In light of these critiques, the question follows that if archeology could achieve perfect information and perfect communication then would the conflicts dissipate? D. Mandal states that “Not only laypersons but historians too have occasionally done a ‘highjack’ appropriating from archeology conclusions it never pretended to provide,” (2) implying that even if archeology were able produce perfect information, that would not prevent it from being misused and misinterpreted. Even Shaw seems to recognize that even well-communicated information would be a feeble restraint against the engine of conflict, remarking “the presence of material remains demonstrating the facts of the past holds little sway against the power of the religious imagination.” (p699) These statements indicate that however neutral the methodology and however pure the communication, archeology will still hold little influence over a society’s present feelings about themselves and about the “other.”

Superficially, Nadia Abu El-Haj, seems to contradict this conclusion. She states, “Science and the popular imagination were deeply enmeshed,” and that “archaeological sites and the stories they told galvanized public sentiment” (1). However, throughout the rest of the book she focuses almost entirely on how present-day conceptions of Israeli culture are reflected in the material culture that they produce, and not the other way around. By “galvanizing the public,” in terms of her argument, she seems to mean that Israeli archeology reinforced present day cultural conceptions rather than altered them. Much like pushing a train on a track to move faster is much easier than changing its direction, strengthening cultural conceptions is much more simply done than altering them. Thus, we can conclude that by “enmeshed” she means that cultural sentiments influence archeology to strengthen cultural affiliations that already exist, rather than fundamentally altering public sentiments. Though initially one might say she disagrees with Shaw, her choice to of evidence for how public sentiments influence archeology recognizes that archeology can easily reinforce public conceptions, but not so easily alter them.

Why, then, are these authors criticizing the product of archeology when they seem to recognize that the product of archeology will have little impact on present-day cultural affiliations and the conflicts between them? There seems to be a disparity between the motives behind these criticisms, namely to diminish the local conflicts, and what the authors believe their criticisms can actually yield. This discrepancy, it seems, stems from the assumption I discussed above-- that archeology derives its power to influence conflict through its scientific objectivity. Under this assumption, archeology’s role in calming conflict is limited to playing the neutral judge. However, these authors seem to recognize that no matter how neutral archeology becomes it will not be able to have a significant influence on the way present-
day conflicts develop, other than possibly deepening cultural schisms further.

If archeologists, therefore, want to play a more calming role in the conflict, then they must imagine their role outside the cliché of the “neutral judge.” As my argument suggests, the conflicts at Ayodhya and Jerusalem are the products of present day cultural identities and beliefs that sway archeological data and not the other way around. If today archeology could point to one side of the conflict and say unquestionably that they are wrong, then would archeologists expect them to throw up their hands and give up? Even if archeology could endlessly point out that the two sides of the conflicts share a common past, according to Shaw’s argument for multivocality, would we expect people who are deeply angry at each other to care? In these instances, at least, it seems clear that the past is the past, and no matter how many times or how insistently we reiterate it, it will not become the present.

This does not mean that archeology must forfeit its scientific nature, only that it must reimagine its role beyond the scope of the information it can produce. For instance, if archeology’s ability to calm the conflict through its product is limited, perhaps it should consider calming the conflict through its process. In none of these works did any of the authors explicitly mention the demographics of the people doing archeological work. Though Abu El-Haj repeatedly mentions “Israeli archeology”, she does not make the exclusion of Palestinians from archeological work the basis of her argument. Clearly, however, in both conflicts both sides have a vested interest in the past. Perhaps archeology could become a model for teams of people from different sides of the conflict working together to create archeological data, drawing attention away from the information that is produced and towards the inclusive and collaborative process of creating it. Instead of trying to create a multivocal past, perhaps archeology would be more compelling if it created a multivocal present. However, regardless of how archeology re-imagines itself in Jerusalem and Ayodhya, it is clear that its present role of neutral judge is limiting and impotent.

**Works Cited**


Shaw, Julia. “Ayodhya’s Sacred Landscape: Ritual Memory, Politics, and Archeological ‘Fact’”. *Archeology and Identity in South Asia*. 