From Archaeological Sites to Cultural Heritage in Jordan: Towards a Sustainable Approach

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Introduction

This article attempts to go beyond the conventional, ‘top-down’ approach to the identification, evaluation and intervention in archaeological sites in Jordan by suggesting a community-based, context-oriented and culture-led one. It draws on the accounts delivered by the local communities in Jordan through in-depth interviews conducted with them by the researcher, to suggest that archaeological sites cannot exist outside their contemporary contexts. Instead, these sites constitute part of local communities’ historic and contemporary contexts. The capacity of local communities to interweave archaeological sites with daily life legitimates them as cultural heritage. In this sense, cultural heritage is a process through which archaeological sites are transformed into something meaningful to local communities. In short, this article “[makes] use of a battery of indicators supplemented by qualitative information” (Sachs 1999: 29), to suggest an alternative approach to archaeological sites in Jordan.

This alternative approach draws on local communities’ experiences, knowledge, feelings and attitudes in order to understand the meaning-making process of archaeological sites. It challenges the presumption that archaeological sites exist outside local communities’ consciousness, and that local communities are part of the problem that archaeological sites face. Instead, it argues that archaeological sites acquire meanings through continuous interaction between local communities and these sites. These meanings are different from intrinsic values and assigned ones as they are derived from local communities’ contexts, culture and contemporary issues.

The Jordanian approach to the past: Archaeology vs. heritage

Separating the remote past from the recent one is a sensitive decision. In many cases, this decision implies defining part of the past as cultural heritage and dismissing the rest as something irrelevant to contemporary life, mainly referred to as archaeology. The decision to isolate the remote past from the recent one usually serves the governments and the élite. Such a decision highlights the recent past that is relevant to those in power, while “[leaving] the study of archaeology where it so often is – outside public consciousness – or [disenfranchising] the more distant past from any living reality or contemporary relevance” (Ucko 1994: 238). In Europe, the Classical past was identified as an essential part of modern Western cultural heritage (Mason 2002: 19). However, the absence of a classical past in North America encouraged people and government in the USA to look at the recent past, mainly events, sites and buildings that marked modern life after independence from Britain in 1776 AD, to construct its cultural heritage. The ancient past in the USA was identified as being irrelevant to the modern state and its modern residents who mostly came from Europe (Tainter & Lucas 1983: 707-708). While the recent past was sensitively approached as cultural heritage (McGimsey III & Davis 1984: 116), the ancient one was mainly considered as archaeology, and ‘rigidly’ interpreted on the basis of ‘pure’ scientific approach (Greene 2002: 258).

The nature of interest in the past in Jordan enhances the lack of intellectual engagement with it. The separation between what is considered as heritage and what is identified as archaeology in Jordan appears to be circumstantial. The Heritage Law was issued in 2003 to
cover an inadequacy in Antiquities Law that was designed to protect the material of the past dated before 1700 AD. The Antiquities Law identified the year 1700 AD as the year when archaeology ends. Consequently, the Heritage Law was designed to protect the material of the past dated after 1750 AD. It adds 50 years to the time span of archaeology. However, the existence of these two laws resulted in emphasising the recent past as cultural heritage, while the ancient past was dismissed as being relevant only to archaeologists and tourists. Having the Department of Antiquity in Jordan (DAJ) under the umbrella of the Ministry of Tourism, instead of the Ministry of Culture or the Ministry of Education, is further evidence of the exclusion of archaeology from contemporary life in Jordan.

Dividing the material of the past in Jordan into archaeology and cultural heritage might not be as arbitrary a decision as it appears. Identifying the recent past as cultural heritage is believed to serve the newly established state of Jordan. However, it ignores the roots that Jordan has in time and place, and only focuses on the modern state of Jordan, which is an outcome of the 20th century colonisation of the Arab World. Furthermore, it fosters narratives of élite and powerful families in Jordan (Daher 2007: 299-303). The lack of critical engagement with the Antiquities Law in Jordan resulted in very little pressure, if at all, on the Government to change the Law to include material of the past dated after 1700 AD. However, in the midst of the development of the tourism industry in Jordan, this ‘excluded’ past proved to be economically viable as many conservation projects represented it as being a valuable commodity for tourists (Addison 2004: 231-232; Maffi 2002: 208). The obvious action for the Government was to issue a new law in 2003; the Heritage Law, that protects the material of the past which the Antiquities Law excluded.

Therefore, the decision to isolate archaeological sites from contemporary life is highly charged with political implications. In Jordan, this decision ignores the fact that the vast majority of archaeological sites exist within busy urban contexts, and are surrounded by vivid daily life. The definition of archaeological sites on the basis of their being isolated entities that stand on their own prevented scholars from recognising the surrounding contexts of the archaeological sites. Very little interest, if at all, is paid to the context in which these sites exist. Archaeological sites in general are evaluated according to their inherent values, and sometimes, according to their assigned values that are derived from their association with ancient events and/or historic individuals. While monumental sites are approached on the basis of their importance in the tourism industry, non-monumental sites are mainly excavated, documented and in most cases, ‘fenced’ to be ‘protected’ from their surrounding contexts.

The sharp distinction between archaeological sites and heritage ones in Jordan is dangerous because it is hardly noticed by scholars and local communities. On the one hand, some scholars, mainly archaeologists, restrict their concern with archaeological sites to academic purposes. Other scholars, such as architects and art historians, are mainly interested in the technical issues of conservation, and the application of principles established in UNESCO charters and conventions (Abu-Khafajah 2000). Not once has any debate been raised, in Parliament or among academics, about the possibility or necessity of locating the Department of Antiquities as part of the Ministry of Culture, rather than the Ministry of Tourism. This indicates the lack of recognition of issues concerned with the material of the past on a governmental level.

On the other hand, as the respondents of the in-depth interviews, conducted by the author of this article, with members of the local community of Jordan demonstrate, people believe that the Government is interested only in archaeological sites that have the potential to attract tourists. The ordinary sites such as those that exist within local communities’ contexts are hardly of any importance for the Government. Moreover, the respondents assume that their accounts regarding the archaeological sites do not matter for the Government or the scholars. This is also evident in the respondents’ astonishment at the researcher’s interest in their experiences and knowledge of, and feelings and attitudes towards, archaeological sites. If it
were not for in-depth interviews, local communities’ rich and diverse accounts about archaeological sites within their contexts would go unnoticed. In-depth engagement with local communities is what the Government avoids by failing to acknowledge these sites as cultural heritage.

Despite the sharp distinction between the ancient past and the recent one on governmental and academic levels in Jordan, local communities approach the past as a whole. The ancient past is inextricably related to the present as long as it can be incorporated within people’s lives. For many respondents “history does repeat itself” (Awwad 1, 15th July 2004); “those who have no past have no future” (Rasheed, 22nd August 2004); and “the past is like a creature, say a tree or even a man, you cannot cut it into pieces and make the people believe it is alive” (Aroob, 16th July 2004). The lack of engagement with local communities prevents such points of view from being considered in the current approach to the past.

To conclude, the approach to archaeological sites in Jordan is a complicated process in which local communities and their points of view regarding the past are marginalised. The lack of critical engagement with conventional approaches or the Government laws concerned with the past prevents local scholars from dynamic interaction with local communities. In this ‘top-down’ approach, archaeological sites are either tourist destinations, or academic arena, or both. Local contexts, knowledge and experiences are viewed as being completely irrelevant to approaches to material of the past in Jordan.

“On the basis of their culture”: Reversing the ‘top-down’ approach to archaeological sites in Jordan

The above section demonstrates the importance of establishing in-depth and interactive engagement with local communities regarding archaeological sites within their contexts. This engagement is essential for exploring local communities’ cultural knowledge (Taylor & Bogdan 1984: 96). Interactive communication enhances people’s confidence. It activates their cultural power and leads them to act (Richardson 1990: 24-25). This power neutralises the ‘top-down’ approach and initiates a community-based, context-oriented and culture-led approach to archaeological sites.

The following arguments explore how such an approach can be established. It identifies the necessity of establishing a new perception of archaeological sites among scholars, as the first step towards this approach. This perception is based on the assumption that meanings for archaeological sites emerge out of interaction between people and these sites. In order for such a perception to be justified, scholars have to appreciate the qualitative approach to material of the past. Consequently, their perception would broaden, and their role would shift. These shifts in perception and role are discussed in the following sections.

Establishing a new perception of archaeological sites

In order for a community-based, context-oriented and culture-led approach to archaeological sites in Jordan to be established, scholars need to undergo dramatic changes in the way they perceive archaeological sites. The aim of these changes would be to generate a substantial shift in the internal constancy of the ‘top-down’ approach to the past in Jordan. Moving beyond the technical and economic purposes of conservation into more humanistic and social ones depends on recognising archaeological sites as places rather than sites. Places and people are inextricably linked (Proshansky et al. 1983: 60-62). Recognising the ‘placeness’ of archaeological sites implies recognising the contemporary contexts and people of these sites. Changes that are necessary to establish such a new perception are closely linked.

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1 The real names of the respondents were replaced by fictitious ones to protect the respondents’ identity
Rethinking the approach to archaeological sites

For archaeological sites to be recognised as places, scholars should shift from the conventional identification and evaluation of archaeological sites, which are based on what archaeological sites are, and what they were. Instead, scholars should appreciate, besides the intrinsic and assigned values of archaeological sites, the contemporary contexts and people of these sites. The aim is to shift the approach to the past from being directly related to archaeological sites, towards being about the context in which archaeological sites exist, the people who encounter these sites on a daily basis, and the process in which archaeological sites acquire meanings among local communities. This process involves people’s stories and memories that are associated with the sites in question.

Stories develop through mental and emotional interaction between people and the time and the place of the past. Without this interaction, the physical remains of the past are reduced, as Su’ad, a 40-year-old female, explained, to “stones … something that is only meaningful for the foreigners [referring to the Excavation team working in the site]”. This interaction is consolidated by the memories these places evoke. For example, the fact that Tell Hesban oversees Jerusalem is a crucial factor in many people’s perception of the Tell as almost every respondent mentions that Palestine can be seen from the Tell. The following statement has been repeated in different forms: “If you look at the West from the top of the Tell when the sky is really clear … you can easily see Jerusalem and maybe the Dome of the Rock glaring in front of your eyes” (Naseem, 30th August 2004). Many residents of Hesban who fled their homes in Palestine in 1948 and 1967, find in the Tell a place to ‘communicate’ with their lost land. For example, Abdullah mentions that “the Tell used to be my grandfather’s favourite place. We used to make jokes about his repeated visits to it … my mother told us that he used to go there to look at Palestine and remember his good life there … The Tell reminds him of his youth in Palestine”. The Tell, in many accounts, is presented as a place for reminiscence. Memories evoked by being in the Tell reference it to a wider geographic and cultural context.

Local contexts enable scholars to establish critical engagement with the past and the conventional approaches to it. In addition, local communities’ reflections on archaeological sites within their context implies critical engagement, not only with the past, but also with the local and foreign agencies involved with material of the past. This engagement is highly influenced by the historic and contemporary contexts of local communities. In-depth communication allows scholars to gain an insight into the critical engagement that local communities develop with the past. It also encourages scholars themselves to initiate a critical approach to the past and conventional practices concerned with it.

This critical engagement is at the heart of the meaning-making process of archaeological sites. Thus, in-depth communication with local communities not only encourages scholars to initiate a critical approach, but also to provide an insight into the meaning-making process of the past. Furthermore, the knowledge that local communities provide through in-depth communication neutralises the ‘objective’, ‘scientific’ and ‘top-down’ approaches to archaeological sites and facilitates initiating a sustainable approach.

Exploring the meaning-making process compels scholars to examine the social, political and economic contexts of archaeological sites. This examination provides an understanding of the meanings local communities claim for archaeological sites. It accumulates knowledge through in-depth and interactive engagement with local communities, and ultimately results in understanding the process through which archaeological sites are transformed from mere material of the past into cultural heritage; something that expresses people’s contexts and way of life.

Broadening the approach to archaeological sites
Broadening the approach to archaeological sites implies fundamental changes in scholars perceptions of these sites. Moving beyond technical issues into more inclusive and dynamic ones is at the heart of these changes. These changes are evident in understanding archaeological sites as places rather than sites, and shifting the focus from archaeological sites only, to their contexts and local communities. Furthermore, political and social issues that are evident in local communities’ accounts about archaeological sites can contribute to these changes. These changes are explained as follows:

Historic and contemporary issues concerned with politics, social and economic life are at the heart of local communities’ accounts about archaeological sites in Jordan. Close investigation is hardly needed to recognise the constant presence of issues such as development, colonialism, foreign hegemony, and the ‘top-down’ approach in these accounts. These issues are raised by the respondents themselves without being triggered by questions in this study’s interviews. For scholars to see these issues as being relevant to the meaning-making process through which archaeological sites are transformed into cultural heritage, they should broaden their understanding of cultural heritage. The meaning of culture in cultural heritage should shift from the static meaning of culture to the anthropological one. That is, instead of viewing culture as being concerned with only tangible aspects, scholars should see culture as presenting people’s way of life. The anthropological sense of culture facilitates exploring the human dimension of the past. The anthropological approach to culture encourages exploring cultural knowledge, which is evident in local communities’ accounts about archaeological sites. Thus, it enhances the rethinking of the approach to archaeological sites discussed in the previous section.

Exploring cultural knowledge prepares scholars for engagement in debates about identity, power and authority, rather than the technical issues of conservation, and the ‘rigid’ approaches of management. Engagement with local communities in these issues empowers them. It activates the cultural energy or the ‘inner’ force that resides within communities. Activating this ‘inner’ force is necessary for post-colonial contexts to reverse the ‘top-down’ approaches and initiate sustainable ones.

Critical engagement with the conventional approaches to the past can be stimulated through recognising the colonial nature of archaeology. Archaeology, as it is practised in post-colonial contexts, is an extension of that which was established during colonialism (Byrne 1991: 270). Despite independence, post-colonial contexts are still engaged in an unequal encounter with the West. Rethinking the conventional approaches to archaeological sites on the basis of this critical engagement encourages questioning the conventional approaches to the past. It stimulates scholars to examine their own contexts for local approaches that express people’s culture and way of life. Consequently, this leads to in-depth and interactive engagement with local communities.

Widening the approach to the past is a mutual responsibility of both local communities and scholars. It liberates archaeological sites from arguments that are confined to technical issues and ‘scientific’ approaches into more inclusive and dynamic ones. In this liberation process, contemporary political and social issues become relevant to archaeological sites. This relevance is evident in local communities’ accounts about these sites. These accounts, in their turn, are a reflection of contemporary as well as historic issues and debates. Thus, broadening the approach to the past anchors it to people’s contexts, culture and contemporary issues.

In order for local communities to feel confident in sharing their personal perceptions with scholars, local scholars themselves should recognise the need for an approach that acknowledges local communities’ perceptions of and attitudes towards archaeological sites. The following section examines how the need for a local approach can be brought to the attention of scholars in Jordan.
Recognising the need for a local approach

Western theories and practices concerned with material of the past has been shaped by context (Abu-Khafajah 2007:52). Acknowledging the role of context in generating perceptions and approaches to the past is the first step in recognising the need for a local approach. Rejecting the Western-oriented and universal approach to archaeological sites is a result of realising the difference between Western cultures and local ones by local communities in non-western countries (Wei & Aass 1989).

In post-colonial contexts, where governments strive to identify themselves with the West, very little effort is made to explore or emphasise local contexts. In such contexts, where the West is highly courted by, and seen to lead, political and academic groups, arguments that highlight the importance of local contexts are best introduced by the West itself. The Western studies that criticise Western approaches to the past in other contexts can be very influential in encouraging post-colonial governmental and academic institutions to investigate local perceptions of the past. Furthermore, studies that indicate the importance of local contexts in initiating sustainable development in deprived countries can succeed in drawing local scholars’ attention to the power that resides within local contexts. Foreign agencies operating in Jordan, such as the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR) and the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL) play a vital role in the conduction of the conventional approach to archaeological sites in Jordan. If these research centres chose to incorporate local contexts as part of their approach, they could help to introduce local scholars as well as the Government to more dynamic and inclusive approaches to archaeological sites.

Foreign agencies in Jordan can set the example for a ‘bottom-up’ approach to the past. For example, Andrews University’s Director of the Excavation in Hesban; an archaeogical in Jordan, highly emphasise the importance of his and his team’s engagement with the local community in Hesban. This has been well recognised among the members of the local community itself, and the Municipality of Hesban (Abu-Khafajah 2007). For such an approach to set an example for governmental agencies and local scholars in Jordan, it is important for the foreign agency involved in Hesban to disseminate its experience with the local community among local scholars, and the governmental institutions concerned with the past, through academic lectures, as well as articles and books.

Activating engagement with local communities

In post-colonial contexts, where ‘top-down’ approaches dominate the way matters are perceived, local communities’ experiences, knowledge, feelings and attitudes are rarely valued on governmental and academic levels. The following discussions highlight the moments at which local communities’ accounts can be recognised as valid material with which to identify and evaluate archaeological sites.

When cultural heritage is viewed as a process

The basic argument here is that archaeological sites go through a meaning-making process. This process is carried out by local communities who encounter these sites on a daily basis. It is based on local communities’ engagement with these sites as part of their place. These meanings are derived from people’s historic and contemporary contexts, and allow these sites either to be considered by local communities as cultural heritage, or to be dismissed as ruins. In this sense, identifying an archaeological site as cultural heritage is a specific process, as the meanings that the site reflects are specific. They are far from being universal or general as they are derived from specific geographic, political, social and historic contexts, and specific communities. These contexts provide the past with a ‘qualitative energy’ that is suggested in local communities’ accounts. As Bond & Gilliam (1994: 1) state, ‘qualitative energy’
balances the overwhelming ‘objectivity’ and science in the conventional, ‘top-down’ approach.

When the human dimension of the past is appreciated

The shift from the ‘objective’ and scientific approaches to the past towards a dynamic one is contingent on recognising the human dimension of the past. The human dimension of the past is mainly concerned with two aspects. The first is the intangible dimension of life in the past, such as modes of thinking and religion, and the influence these aspects have on the tangible ones, for example the influence of religion on the style of building. The second aspect, which is the concern of this article, is the influence of archaeological sites on the contemporary local communities that live within the geographic context of these sites. This influence is approachable through local communities’ experiences and knowledge of, and feelings and attitudes towards, these sites, which are subject to people’s contexts. Thus, exploring archaeological sites with the human dimension in mind compels scholars to engage with the local communities of these sites.

When the role of the scholars in approaching the past is reinvented

A community-based approach to the past requires making local communities, their experiences and knowledge of, and feelings and attitudes towards, archaeological sites, rather than the sites themselves, and/or the professionals’ identification and evaluation of them, the main subject of enquiry. This requires reinventing the role of the scholars involved. Instead of identifying and evaluating archaeological sites according to a pre-prepared set of values that they might or might not satisfy, scholars turn to local communities’ experience, knowledge, feelings and attitudes. Local communities’ accounts about archaeological sites become the ‘material’ that scholars have to deal with in order to provide an identification and evaluation of archaeological sites that are community-based and context-oriented.

The role of scholars in this process is based on their belief that a qualitative approach is adequate for conducting their research. As Neuman (1994: 62) suggests, qualitative research is an “analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds”. Thus, it can provide an insight into the meaning-making process of archaeological sites. The role of scholars in establishing a community-based, context-oriented and culture-led approach to archaeological sites is to: a) interact with local communities and ‘collect’ their accounts regarding archaeological sites; b) analyse these accounts in the light of local communities’ contexts; c) validate the accounts and give them credibility among governmental and academic institutions as part of a sustainable approach to the past; and d) employ the accounts within the levels of intervention conducted in the sites. The following account explains each of these roles.

The first role of scholars is to interact with local communities and to ‘collect’ their accounts regarding archaeological sites. For scholars to be discovery-oriented and inductive in approach, they have to be ready to learn from the contexts they examine and the people they approach (Patton 1990: 203-205). Converting to a qualitative approach to archaeological sites is made possible if scholars believe that meanings develop out of people’s interaction with archaeological sites rather than the sites themselves. Thus, scholars’ interest becomes diverted into local communities, their experiences and knowledge of, and feelings and attitudes towards archaeological sites, and the influence that historic and contemporary contexts have on the meaning-making process of these sites. At this point, scholars should realise the importance of a qualitative approach in the identification and evaluation process of archaeological sites. Thus, they approach local communities, not as part of the problem, but as essential part of the process in which approach the past and its material.
The second role of scholars in the community-based, context-oriented approach to archaeological sites is to analyse local communities’ accounts in the light of their contexts. At this stage, issues such as marginalised stories, counter-memories, identities, development and colonialism start to emerge in the accounts. These issues are directly derived from local communities’ contexts; they shape part of the meaning-making process of archaeological sites. The recognition of these issues allow scholars to investigate their relevance to the meaning-making process of archaeological sites, and to be engaged in debates about archaeological sites that shift from the confines of intrinsic values and technical issues concerned with conservation and tourism towards a dynamic, inclusive, ‘bottom-up’ approach.

The third role of scholars is to validate local communities’ accounts, and to give them credibility as part of a sustainable approach to the past. This can be done through validating qualitative methodology and its subjective accounts as an adequate conceptual and practical approach to investigate meanings of archaeological sites. Validating subjective accounts can be also achieved by examining the importance of contexts in shaping and reshaping the meanings of archaeological sites, and capitalising on literature and case studies that appreciate local people, contexts and approaches.

The final role of scholars is to employ these accounts within the levels of intervention conducted in the sites. Using local accounts in the levels of intervention is contingent on the empowerment of local communities. Communicating with people regarding their past empowers them. This empowerment prepares local communities for collective actions regarding their past. People’s empowerment introduces a new political context to archaeology. This context is generated from local communities being part of the process in which archaeological sites are identified and evaluated: it is derived from the shift in the nature of interaction between scholars and local communities from a ‘top-down’ approach that aims at increasing their awareness of the importance of the past, to a ‘bottom-up’, interactive approach that acknowledges them as the ‘enablers’ of the meaning-making process of archaeological sites.

This power takes many shapes. On the one hand, it can be suggested in critical engagement with the agencies working in the site, or critical thinking about, and intellectual engagement with the role of archaeology in the contemporary community. On the other hand, local communities’ empowerment can lead to local communities organising themselves into groups that address the archaeological sites within their geographic context. For example in the case study of Hesban, the active communication with the local community that was originally established through Andrews University work in Hesban, resulted in the local community establishing a Friends of Archaeology of Hesban. In other archaeological sites, such as Khreibt al-Suq and the Citadel, local communities’ empowerment is evident only in their critical accounts; this is because they have not been approached (as the local community of Hesban was) regarding the archaeological sites within their contexts. The scholars’ role should be to help local communities take their critical thinking into a practical level by encouraging collective actions that aim at improving archaeological sites as part of local communities’ place.

Active engagement with local communities about archaeological sites within their contexts enhances the sense of ownership of these sites. When these sites are introduced as being part of a universal approach to the past and its material, little concern is paid for the levels of intervention conducted in them. However, the accounts that local communities deliver about the archaeological sites within their context represent them as specific places rather than general sites. This ‘specificity’ is derived from people’s accounts that reflect specific contexts, people, and issues; it counteracts universality and acts against generality.
The ‘specificity’ should be reflected in the levels of intervention conducted in these sites. For example, inspired by one of the respondents’ accounts about the Roman temple in the Citadel, one can suggest scholars should search archaeological evidence for local characteristics that distinguish archaeological sites in certain contexts from others, and that are derived from their specific geographic, social and political contexts. Furthermore, scholars should examine how levels of intervention influence local communities’ sense of place. For example, three respondents in the Citadel consider that the restriction of restoration work to the Upper Citadel indicated the powerful (the gods and the kings), and marginalised the ‘real’ people. For example, the respondents were able to identify the Department of Antiquities (DAJ) as the agency that is in charge of the archaeological sites in Khreibt al-Suq. Mostly, the DAJ is identified as being a powerless agency that is governed by the Government’s policies and strategies. According to Abu-Hilal “we see who works in here, they are as powerless as we are, they can’t change things, those who have power don’t get their hands dirty and visits the dusty places of the *athar*. Similarly, Omar observed that the archaeological work in Khreibt al-Suq is a ‘top-down’ process, in which the professionals working in the sites implement a pre-prepared agenda that is mainly concerned with technical issues. In Omar words: “those who work in here are simple and ready to talk to people, but we know that they, as archaeologists, have a plan, prepared by those who are above them, they cannot change it”. Consideration of such accounts could influence scholars and agents in charge of conservation work to capitalise on local accounts and interweave them with the levels of intervention. This practice implies validating the subjective together with the objective in approaches to archaeological sites.

Besides conservation and restoration, interpretation signs can be designed to include local communities’ experiences and knowledge of, and feelings and attitudes towards, archaeological sites. Interpretations of these sites are currently restricted to providing signs that offer general archaeological and architectural information. Legitimising cultural knowledge and its role in the meaning-making process of archaeological sites can provide ‘specificity’ to this information. Local communities’ memories and stories can add a human dimension to interpretation. It can bring material of the past into the present by showing how local communities think about it, and how, if at all, they transpose it into something that can be considered as their cultural heritage.

The arguments developed above are not intended to exclude archaeologists and scholars concerned with the levels of intervention in the material of the past from the suggested approach to the archaeological sites in Jordan. Local scholars are fundamental for the initiation of this alternative approach: their embrace of local contexts, cultures, knowledge and experience is fundamental for the validation of ‘bottom-up’ approaches on a governmental level; their critical engagement with universal charters, conventions, and Western policies is crucial for empowering the local communities; their belief in the adequacy of the anthropological approach is essential for the exploration of the meaning-making process of archaeological sites. The ‘bottom-up’ approach this article identifies does not aim to put local communities in exclusive charge of the identification, evaluation and intervention of the archaeological sites. The call for a community-based and a culture-oriented approach in this article indicates that scholars should refer to local contexts, knowledge and experience, rather than the universal charter and conventions and the conventional Western approaches, to identify, evaluate and intervene with the archaeological sites.

**Summary**

This article draws on the accounts delivered by local communities in Jordan, to suggest the importance of contexts in the meaning-making process of archaeological sites. The capacity of local communities to interweave material of the past with their daily lives legitimates it as
cultural heritage. In this sense, cultural heritage is a process through which archaeological sites are transformed into something meaningful and specific that reflects specific local communities and their contexts.

This article builds up an alternative approach to archaeological sites that replaces the ‘top-down’, conventional one. The alternative approach moves beyond the conventional process of identification and evaluation of archaeological sites. It suggests that the meanings of archaeological sites are directly derived from local communities’ experiences with these sites. These experiences can be approached through interactive engagement with local communities regarding archaeological sites within their contexts. Thus, the alternative approach challenges the presumption that dominates governmental and academic institutions in Jordan, and that considers local communities as a problem which needs to be tackled through spreading awareness of the importance of the past and its material. Instead, it brings local communities to the foreground in the process of identification and evaluation and intervention in archaeological sites as specific places rather than ‘cultural properties’ that belong to all human kind. The ‘specificity’ of these places is derived from their meanings, which in turn reflect specific local communities, historic and contemporary contexts, as well as cultures.

This article explores how a qualitative approach to archaeological sites can be validated for local scholars operating in post-colonial contexts. The suggested approach is challenged by the dominance of ‘top-down’ approaches in these contexts. Therefore, the article examines how local scholars can benefit from recently developed approaches to the past that acknowledge local knowledge and contexts. It investigates how scholars can replace the ‘objective-oriented’, ‘scientific-led’ approach to archaeological sites, with a more dynamic and inclusive approach that is community-based, context-oriented and culture-led.

Bibliography


