



During the last decade substantive changes have occurred in the way that archaeology is conducted in the 'Holy Land' as indeed throughout the Near East but one thing never seems to change: archaeology in Israel/Palestine always takes on a political dimension.

This book tells the story of the creation of Israeli Archaeology in the 1950s and early 1960s. Unlike other books on the archaeology of the 'holy-land', it isn't just a chronological parade of important excavations and nice finds, but a history of intrigues, budgets, failures and, above all, dreams. The book is based on documentary material, often from obscure periodicals in Hebrew, as well as thousands of original documents never published before. It is the first large scale publication using preliminary archival material about Israeli archaeology. It is also an independent study that reflects the author's personal views.

The documents reveal a surprising picture. Much has been written about archaeology in Palestine during the Ottoman and British Mandate periods but very little exists about Israeli archaeology after 1948. Archival documents have not been treated and biographies of Israeli archaeologists are rare and not critical.

Obituaries are short and, naturally, positive. The regular products of archaeological writing—excavation and survey reports and the like—are focussed on specific topics and thus not helpful for examining the larger picture. Criticisms are also rare, almost always limited to very narrow arenas: the political place within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the accusation about the "Biblical Archaeology" bias. We read much about the "myth of Masada", for example, but nothing about why, by whom and when was the decision made to start excavations at Masada, who gave the budget, and how Yadin became the excavator. Uniquely this book gets to the heart of such decisions and the political circumstances in which they were made.

In recounting the history of archaeology in Israel, the author argues that any community focused on the study of some distant human past must also acknowledge its own roots; its genesis. Without knowing the origins and history of Israeli archaeology, there can be no open-minded evaluation of it.

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Later, tourists started to ask questions about deserted villages. To solve this problem demolition continued, and more general operations were carried out in 1965–67 by the JNF and after 1967 by the army near Latroun and in the Golan Heights (thus Masalha 1999; Shai 2002).

The official position was that there was no demolition after the 1948 War, only demolition in legitimate military acts during the war. This was part of the myth of “the empty land”, a land that was or became desolate by itself. For example:

The war of independence brought ruin and destruction on hundreds of settlements, and when the state came into being there stood only the Jewish villages established in the last seventy years and a few which were not Jewish. The truth is that the state inherited a wasted and deserted land.

(Ben-Gurion 1952: 15)

FACELESS ABSENTEES

To most Israelis the absentees were a faceless group (similar, though to a lesser degree, to the way veterans saw newcomers: Segev 1984: 155). This was true also for the IDAM, despite the fact that many of its first employees came from the ethnically mixed (not really integrated) Mandatory Department of Antiquities. Some absentees were mentioned in reports just by name, for example in relation to abandoned collections.

One absentee occupied a more prominent place, although fleeting and cold, in the files of the IDAM. This was Na'im Makhouli, the former Inspector of Antiquities of Galilee. On 28 January 1949 Yeivin wrote to Major Elisha Soltz, the military governor of eastern Galilee at Nazareth. He had heard that some of Makhouli's family members were still in Nazareth, and as far as he knew they held files from Makhouli's office, and a few other articles of government property. Yeivin asked Soltz to investigate, and deliver this material, if found, to Amiran, the supervisor of the northern district (GL1340/9 no. 302). However, Ben-Dor read this letter and wrote to Yeivin on 31 January 1949 that he had “very important reasons” against seizing the property, which “I will offer to you verbally”. He asked Yeivin to tell Soltz to cancel the investigation (GL1340/9). Yeivin agreed and Ben-Dor sent Amiran an urgent telegram requesting her to postpone action (GL1340/9, 31.1.49). Amiran complied, and on 10 February 1949 reported: “Mr Makhouli is known as an absentee [*ne'edar*] and if he asks to come back to Nazareth his request will be carefully considered” (GL1340/9). This was still a period of uncertainty, when people were not yet sure whether refugees would return; later, only immediate family members were allowed to be reunited.

In 1950, S. Makhouli asked for his cousin Na'im to be allowed to return. Apparently Yeivin was asked to give his opinion about the request, but he declined to recommend agreeing to it. He informed the administrative manager at the Ministry of Finance that "as far as the IDAM is aware, Mr Makhouli left his home town of Nazareth and went out to Lebanon during the rule of the bandits of Qawukji [the leader of the Arab Liberation Army] in Nazareth and its vicinity; his fate [*dino*] is surely like that of all the Arab refugees, who left the country of their own free will, before the state of Israel was established" (GL44880/13 no. 2380). The IDAM, he wrote, was not very interested in returning him to his post. Yeivin hinted that "you would surely know what answer to give to S to his request about his cousin" (GL44880/13 no. 2380): that is, find some excuse. Why prevent the return of Makhouli? Apart from the reasons given above, a clue comes from the fact that the letter was sent to the Ministry of Finance. Presumably Makhouli, if allowed to return, would continue at his former post, following the rule of continuation in government bodies, but that position was now occupied by Amiran.

In other cases Yeivin showed sensitivity to the Arab minority in Israel (GL44880/13 no. 1903, 16.12.49). He wrote to Walter Eytan, the Director-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who later published accounts of events relating to Israel's foreign policy (Eytan 1958), recounting a conversation he had with Professor Grégoire (probably Henri Grégoire, scholar of Byzantine culture at Brussels University) and his secretary (GL44880/13 no. 4493, 17.1.51). Yeivin had defended the official position on refugees: that they had left for no reason, since those that stayed were not harmed; that they were not pressured or deported, but left before the Israeli conquest; and that some were allowed to return (although Yeivin added to their number a group that had stayed in Israel's territory). Yeivin's letter was termed private and confidential. He was under no obligation to report such a conversation, but he explained that the foreign scholar was a friend of Israel and an important person, so perhaps the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wanted to continue the discussion with him. There is something of a desire to impress, to prove efficiency, here; but Yeivin seemed to be disturbed that he had not convinced his guests.

In August 1951 the IDAM discovered various files from Makhouli's archives in the Prime Minister's Office (forerunner of the State of Israel Archive). How the files reached there was not explained (GL44875/9 no. 6368). Surprisingly, Makhouli wrote at least four long letters to Ben-Dor in late 1951, pleading for help from his former colleagues:

My dear Dr Ben-Dor

A very long time has passed since we heard from each other or knew each other's whereabouts. Thanks to Mr [Gedric Norman] Johns [Assistant to the Director of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine, 1945–48] who only

recently told me of your present post as Assistant Director of Antiquities and your exact address, which, I notice, does not appear much changed except for rubbing out "Palestine" and replacing it with ISRAEL. Hearty congratulations for everything!

I spent more than three years in an adjacent territory to the north of you. All that time, my condition was miserable and lamentable, [I was] racking my brains in order to devise some way to relieve my small children and my wife, who is always very anxious and longing to see and be near her very elderly parents ... but in vain.

Mr Johns was in Maresh as the last appointed Controller of Antiquities for Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in N. Africa. Having heard of my dreadful financial condition he at once started working hard with the Govt. of Cyrenaica to appoint me to the post of Surveyor of Antiquities ... I accepted the offer as a temporary remedy and joined him about 2½ months ago.

Can you now, my dear doctor, imagine what kind of life I have to live here? Let me tell you that I was stationed at a village known locally as "Shahat"; its ancient name is Cyrene. For about a thousand years in the Greco-Roman period [it] was the capital of the whole country, yet it is now a very poor and small village. About half of its 2,000 souls [population] currently take refuge in the rock-cut burial chambers ... In this poor place at present, rich in the past, I have nobody to talk to, so I spend my time in work, study and food preparation ...

So you find that under the present circumstances I am compelled to be separated from all members of my family and live an isolated existence. Is it not sad for a peaceful man like me, who attained the age of 54 years, to suffer deeply with his innocent children and wife and be sacrificed for the fault of others on the altar of ignorance and fanaticism? Do not you feel it? Are you not in sympathy with me?

My colleagues in Israel, who are at the same time my best friends, are numerous. They are, with you as the first: Prof. L. Mayer, Prof. Sukenik, P. L. O. Guy, Dr Meisler, Mr Avi-Yonah, Mr Ory, Dr Steglits [*sic.*] and Mrs Simon. If you all join together and try with good faith to save me from my present troubles and sad condition I believe you will succeed.

I was very glad to know from Mr Johns that the young Sukenik (now called Yadin) is the Commander in Chief of the Israeli army. If invited, I believe, to join you and others in helping me, he would not hesitate ...

I am sorry to have been worrying you so much, and ask your forgiveness for that.

In any case I should be glad to hear from you ...

Yours sincerely [signed] Na'im Makhouli

(GL44880/19, handwritten, 18.9.51)

Ben-Dor replied that it was a pleasant surprise to hear that Makhouli was “in good health and working”. He mentioned that they had hard times in Jerusalem during the siege “with water rationing and bombs exploding on houses and in the streets. A few of my best friends were killed.” He gave some archaeological news and mentioned that Hamilton was a professor at Cambridge and Iliffe excavated in Cyprus. He promised to pass on Makhouli’s request to the higher authorities, who make the decisions (GL44880/9 no. 6758, 3.10.51). Makhouli wrote again on 23 October 1951. He expressed interest in some excavations and asked if the Roman theatre at Beisan (Beth Shean) was being excavated. He asked Ben-Dor to mediate with the higher authorities, with which he was already in contact. He added:

The trouble is that they like to include me in the general question of a solution for refugees, while I pray to have my case considered separately ...

May I ask you to do me another favour? If you happen to pass Nazareth, would you kindly call on my very elderly father- and mother-in-law (Mr and Mrs Costandi Kanage) who live in the house with a red-tiled roof, by the road to Tiberias, and next to the house where I used to live, and enquire into their condition and let me have their news ...?

(GL44880/19, 23.10.51)

Ben-Dor answered briefly: Beisan was not being excavated and he didn’t know how the petition for return stood. He asked for a copy of the petition and promised to use it to investigate. He promised to visit Makhouli’s parents if he happened to be near Nazareth. In the meanwhile, he passed this request on to “one of the inspectors in the northern area” (in fact there was only one: Amiran) (GL44880/19 no. 7023).

Makhouli wrote again from Benghazi on 3 November 1951 (wrongly dated 3 October 1951). He was doing “some clearance work” at Berenice. He asked again about various excavations and particularly the Roman theatre at Beisan: “I wish I could join your department in Israel and put myself at your disposal for doing the clearance work there.” He reminded Ben-Dor that he badly needed help, asking Ben-Dor to see the official from the Visa Sector of the Immigration Department responsible for his case (GL44880/19). Yeivin read this letter (he initialled it), so presumably Ben-Dor consulted him. The last letter by Makhouli was written on 23 December 1951:

I enclose herewith a copy of the latest reply I have received from the Immigration Department, Visa Sector, signed Jacob Giller ... They want to let my case hang until there is a general solution to the problem of refugees. But I wish they could do me a favour and consider it separately, partly on humanitarian grounds and partly because of the circumstances that

compelled me to leave my house. The longer I have to stay outside, the more miserable our life becomes, especially for my wife, who left her parents who are advanced in age and have no other children to look after them.

The second copy I enclose herewith is addressed to the Custodian for Absentees' Property in Israel and explains clearly the circumstances that made my wife and I leave our home. I hope, after consulting the Immigration Department about my case, you will be able to take the matter up with the high authorities, endeavouring to do your best to help me secure permission to return home legally with my wife and my daughter. I wish it would be possible for you to visit Nazareth soon and call, on your way, on my wife's parents ... My father-in-law had a higher education in Russia, so you will be able to talk to him in Russian.

I worry constantly about the future of my children and the life of misery that I am going to live with my wife if my case is not solved very soon. So any help you can offer me in solving the problem will be highly appreciated ...
(GL44880/19)

The letter to the Custodian for Absentees' Property, dated 18 December 1951, carried the title: "Issue of a Non-Absentee Certificate". Makhouli explained that he and his wife were compelled to leave Nazareth on 11 May 1948 for Lebanon. He asked for a visa on the grounds that:

- A Fear that the local Arab Committee organized early in 1948 at Nazareth would cause me harm. In the beginning of May 1948, one of the committee members, Amin Salem, requested me to pay an immediate instalment of 5 Palestine pounds for the use of the committee. As I refused his request, he became violent and threatened me that if I would not pay he would force me to pay or otherwise I would have to leave Nazareth ... [detailing two eye witnesses who are still living in Nazareth and can be asked to give testimonials].
- B My three children aged 17, 15 and 12 years were attending American schools in Lebanon during the scholastic year 1947/48, and in addition the fear that my wife and I might come to harm through the action of the Arab Local Committee, I was naturally anxious to be near my children, as they were too small to look after themselves should I not be in a position to communicate with them, and I did not want them to interrupt their studies. Should you desire it I can obtain at any time from the American school authorities certificates corroborating my statement.

In general, I must honestly declare that at no time have I interfered in political life or activities, and have always only lived for my work in the Antiquities Department and my family, as well-known persons like Prof. L.

Mayer, Dr I. Ben-Dor, Prof. Sukenik and Dr Meisler [Mazar] can confirm at any time ... (GL44880/19)

Makhouli attached a copy of the answer from Jacob Giller, then Director of the Visa Department of the Ministry of the Interior:

Sir,

We acknowledge receipt of your letter no. ____ regarding your request for permanent residence or a traveller's visa to Israel and regret to inform you that your request cannot be granted. As stated in our previous correspondence, your request may be considered when a solution has been found to the question of the return of refugees in general.

(GL44880/19, 28.9.51)

On 22 November 1952 Ben-Dor wrote Makhouli the last letter found in the file. He thanked him for sending a guide book on Tripolitania and added that he had applied to the Immigration Department, but:

Unfortunately, nothing can be done at present, since the whole question is "sub judice" and awaits its final solution. It is a shame that you are unable to return to your house and we are unable to have access, even for one hour, to the material in the Rockefeller Museum. I have not yet been to Nazareth, but on my first visit there I will certainly call on your parents and transmit them your salaams.

(GL44880/19)

Ben-Dor tried to equate Makhouli's situation to his lack of access to Rockefeller "for an hour". Whether Makhouli was truthful about his reasons for leaving is not the issue; nor should we criticize Ben-Dor, who was a considerate human being. Israelis do not have many opportunities to read such letters, which give the first-hand testimony of an "absentee". Of course, Makhouli, who found work in his former profession and could communicate in English with the IDAM, was not a typical "absentee"; the fate of most "absentees" is hidden by a wall of silence.

Most refugees were no doubt innocent individuals, but as a group they were part of a struggle between two emerging peoples. The situation would probably have been similar for Israelis if the Palestinians had been the victors in the war. From Makhouli's letters I draw a human, rather than a political conclusion. Let these letters be a warning to all of us who think we are secure in our life and our work. There is no security; we are all potential "absentees".