Archaeology's Publication Problem

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The Role of Theory in Preparing Archaeological Reports

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When the word "theory" is mentioned in biblical archaeology circles, what first comes to mind are the various "theories" regarding the rise of early Israel as a people and, eventually, a nation. In this context, the word is often used interchangeably with words like "proposal," "hypothesis" and "model."[1] Most of us are familiar with these different attempts at explanation: the conquest model, the peaceful-infiltration hypothesis, the social-revolution theory (also known as the peasant-revolt hypothesis), and, most recently, what might be called the "nomadic-transition theory."[2]

Apart from this context, concern with theory is a rarity among biblical archaeologists. Not surprisingly, the word "theory" does not appear in the indexes at the end of six prominent biblical archaeology textbooks.[3]

In light of this situation, it would appear that the topic of this paper—the role of appropriate theory in planning for and preparing archaeological reports—is one that many might judge to be utterly irrelevant to problems in archaeological publication. But that view is mistaken.

The Role of Theory in the Sciences

Before discussing the role of theory in preparing archaeolog-

ical publications, I would like to state my view on the so-called processualist/post-processualist debate. As those who have followed this debate in anthropological-archaeological circles already know, one of its central issues is the extent to which the Enlightenment ideal of cumulative understanding through positivistic science is an ideal worth striving for. Among post-processualists, it is not only *not* worth striving for, it is an arrogance that has divided the world of archaeology into elites and nonelites—elites who set the agenda when it comes to deciding what should be published, and nonelites who don't meet the criteria established by this self-appointed inner circle of elites.

In focusing attention on the political dimension of knowledge production in archaeology, I am sympathetic with the post-processualist position. I believe that there are many good reasons for doing archaeology, apart from the goal of advancing understanding in the narrow sense of positivistic science.

In the case of the project with which I am personally associated—the Madaba Plains Project—we have sought to accommodate a wide range of research agendas, some of which fall within the traditional concerns of biblical archaeology and humanities scholarship, some of which are social scientific in nature and some of which belong to the realm of natural science. I believe that most of us who participate in this project have been enriched by the diversity of research interests and perspectives.

Where I disagree with the post-processualists is in their rejection altogether of the possibility of cumulative understanding through science. I firmly believe that such understanding is an ideal worth striving for and I am committed to doing so in my own work. My reasons for being thus committed are several.

To begin with, I believe that, when properly adhered to, the discovery procedures and protocols of science facilitate teamwork. This is especially important in archaeology where, today,

teamwork is the name of the game. Were it not for the modicum of agreement we have about the importance of the canons of careful observation and recording provided by science, we would surely have very little to show for our efforts.

Furthermore, I am persuaded from our experience over the past three decades working in central Jordan that the methods of science do indeed lead to cumulative understanding. I really do believe that we know more today about the Madaba Plains Region than we did 30 years ago, and I really do believe that what we know today represents an advance in a fundamental sense over what we knew when we started. I attribute this advance in our understanding to several factors inspired by our shared high regard for science as a means to advance knowledge.

The scientific approach to knowledge production on our team has had important consequences for the final outcome of the Heshbon expedition. It lay at the root of Roger Boraas's insistence on rigorous excavation and recording procedures. It contributed to Siegfried Horn's willingness, despite his personal interests as a biblical scholar, to cooperate with and support a program of excavation that produced far more data about postbiblical periods than it did about biblical times. It inspired Jim Sauer's masterful achievement in deriving a solid typological foundation for the pottery chronology not only for Tell Hesban, but for Jordan as a whole. And it emboldened Larry Geraty to support overall reformulation of the project's research design in order to bring it into line with the concerns of social science. Such cumulative understanding as our team has achieved is due to the shared high regard for science among its leaders.

Seven Guidelines for the Development of Appropriate Theory

What, then, is appropriate theory for preparing archaeological publications? I would like to propose seven points to consider—guidelines, perhaps—in coming to grips with this question.

(1) Avoid reinventing the wheel: Whenever possible, select a preexisting theoretical construct.

This allows us to avoid multiplying labor needlessly. It also allows scholars to become plugged in, so to speak, to the ongoing discussion about this construct within particular communities of researchers.

In considering the question of the emergence of Israel, for example, the current theoretical construct of choice appears to be that of "sedentarization."[4] Others have been used in the past, such as the Marxist constructs of "class conflict." [5]

The point here is not to advocate a particular construct or model but to urge that, when preparing archaeological reports on sites that contain materials from this period in Israel's history, archaeologists should be explicit about any possible relevance of their discoveries to this widely discussed question. They can best do so by referring specifically to the constructs that have previously been employed.

(2) Be explicit about the fit between your theoretical construct and the evidence at hand.

Once a construct has been selected for use in interpreting a particular body of data, every effort should be made to make explicit exactly how the construct helps to make sense out of the evidence at hand. Ideally, an attempt should be made to make explicit how each different line of evidence reported in a given publication fits with the construct.

The implication of this requirement is that site reports that are organized into chapters according to types of artifacts—small finds, inscriptions, animal bones, carbonized seeds and so on—should aim to revisit the construct in question in each chapter. Not to do so is to publish laundry lists of undigested data.

(3) Call attention to instances where the fit between the theoretical construct and the evidence at hand is not good.

At some point, either in the introduction or in the conclusion of an archaeological report, it is a good idea to call attention to instances in which the data do not seem to

support the theoretical construct. Such instances should not merely be briefly noted, but deserve to be discussed thoroughly.

If, on the one hand, the discrepancy can be attributed to problems in data collection or recording, this should be pointed out. If, on the other hand, no such shortcomings apply, alternative interpretations of the data should be advanced. Whenever possible, such alternatives should be discussed with reference to competing interpretive constructs. Such openness is essential in order to promote cumulative understanding in our discipline.

(4) Embrace the challenge of the long term: consider theoretical constructs relevant to understanding data from all periods.

In publications reporting on discoveries from multiple periods—a situation that is usually the case with most tells and regional surveys—an effort should be made to make sense out of the data in its entirety. If, for some reason, such an undertaking is beyond the scope of a particular archaeological publication project, the reasons for this should be clearly stated. Any future plans for remedying this shortcoming should also be stated.

In the case of the Heshbon expedition, the solution to this problem was the development of the food-system construct. As I have explained elsewhere, this concept facilitated our progress toward final publication of our materials—which spanned over three millennia—in two important ways:

The food-system construct provided a heuristic method for fitting together data from a wide range of different lines of research: regional survey data, bone data, carbonized seed data and so on. The construct was also equally applicable to all time periods. It thus helped to broaden the scope of coverage of the Heshbon Final Publication Series to a concern for all the periods represented in the data.

Pivotal in this regard are several related constructs, namely intensification and abatement, which over the long term produce cyclic episodes of change. Such oscillations, in turn, are

reflected archaeologically in the processes of sedentarization and nomadization. Whereas sedentarization is reflected in the build-up of villages and towns and in increasing investment in field crops and fruit tree production, nomadization involves a return to more migratory, animal- and forest-based patterns of food production. Once the decision has been made to attempt to address a site or regional survey database in its multiperiod complexity, the possibility that more than one central theoretical construct may be needed in order to account for the patterning in the data should be anticipated. To account, for example, for the oscillations over time in the intensity of the local food system at Tell Hesban, we have found the world-system construct to be a useful one.

World systems are intersocietal and intercultural networks by means of which local regions are impacted by and themselves impact other local regions. Such systems are particularly important in understanding how empires are formed, expanded, consolidated and destroyed.[6]

World systems typically involve some sort of hierarchical relationship involving center and periphery regions. Over time, as empires rise and fall, centers shift from one region to another, resulting in a cyclic pattern of expansion and contraction of power and influence. In the Old World, such centers have included Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome and Byzantium.

When the food-system and world-system constructs are combined, we gain a much deeper understanding of the forces that shaped the cultural histories of places like Israel and Jordan over the long term. For example, in both countries cyclic intensification and abatement of settlement and land use have been documented, involving complex interactions between the local food system and the wider world system.[7] What remains is for these episodes to be systematically modeled, compared and analyzed in terms of persistence, patterns of change, evolution, scale and energy.

(5) Seek out and put into service theoretical constructs that illuminate selected periods and places only.

As a consequence of embracing the challenge of the long term, we must face the possibility that in order to grasp what is going on during certain periods, theoretical constructs may be needed that do not apply in all periods. Examples of such constructs are domestication, urbanization, bureaucratization and ruralization.

That a push toward the domestication of plants and animals began during the Mesolithic era and took off during the Neolithic is a well-known fact. To speak of domestication of any sort during the Ottoman period, however, would be strange. Another example: the construct of extinction may be especially appropriate for understanding changes in plant and animal communities during the recent past (as well as over the millennia).

The construct of urbanization has been widely used to make sense out of data from the Early Bronze Age II and III and in Middle Bronze Age IIB and C. It appears not to be as useful in dealing with other periods, such as the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. It appears to be appropriate, however, as a framework for dealing with the Late Iron Age, the Roman and Byzantine periods and the modern period in our region.

The construct of bureaucratization is often used in tandem with that of urbanization. It refers to the creation of bureaucratic institutions by means of which administrative assistants of various kinds execute the agenda of some leader. It is not safe to assume, however, that bureaucratization is an inevitable phenomenon involved in the growth of cities. This relationship is one that biblical archaeologists might well be able to help illuminate through their research.

Recently, the construct of ruralization has been applied successfully to understand what happened during the Early Bronze Age IV and at the end of Middle Bronze Age IIC in Palestine. It has also been used with reference to later periods. Suffice it to say that there are many such constructs from which to choose in making sense out of data from a particular historical period or place.

(6) Make explicit the scientific dimensions of your theoretical construct.

A recent publication by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Project 2061) provides seven key concepts that are worth keeping in mind as we put various theoretical constructs into service to help us interpret our finds. These represent ideas common to all attempts at understanding in the sciences:

System: Any collection or organization of parts that function or interact together, that have some influence on one another, and that appear to constitute a unified whole.

Model: A simplified imitation or example that can exist in a physical, mathematical or conceptual form.

Persistence: Refers to ways in which systems do not change, including stability, equilibrium, conservation or symmetry.

Change: Various forms of change exist that help to explain natural phenomena, such as trends, cycles or irregularities.

Evolution: Refers to the fact that the present arises from materials and forms of the past.

Scale: A reference to ranges in magnitude that include such dimensions as size, duration and speed.

Energy: The basis for growth and function in biological and other systems.

All theoretical constructs represent *systems* of various kinds, be they the solar system, the ecosystem, the immune system or the systematics of subatomic particles. In order to get a mental grasp on how these various systems work, simplifying concepts that we call models are sometimes used. Such models leave out the trivial details and focus attention on the crucial features of the thing modeled—the features that make a difference.

Models, in turn, are used as a means of generating hypotheses. As these are tested, they provide information that leads to refinement of the model, and so on. Persistence, change, evolution, scale and energy are concepts that can help to describe the interactions of the parts of systems. Whatever the theoretical

construct(s) we may use, these are dimensions that should be fully explored in order for us to learn as much as possible from the data we have.

(7) Use theoretical constructs to grasp and communicate, not to obfuscate or impress.

Regardless of which theoretical construct(s) is adopted to aid the task of synthesizing and publishing the results of our fieldwork, the ultimate aim is not to impress or obfuscate, but to offer as unambiguously as possible our best effort at interpreting the finds. The scientific enterprise is not about never being wrong, but about doing our best to grasp and communicate the meaning of the findings from our field and laboratory efforts.

Finally, we seek out and put to use various theoretical constructs in order to grasp and understand. When appropriately used, these constructs help not only us, as primary investigators, to understand, they help our colleagues to grasp and understand as well. Thus, appropriate theory sets in motion and facilitates the process of peer evaluation and debate by means of which knowledge production becomes cumulative in our own discipline and beyond. Isn't this, after all, why we go to the trouble of publishing in the first place?

NOTES

[1]John J. Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1981).

[2]Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman, eds., *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeology and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (Washington, DC: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi/Israel Exploration Society/Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994).

[3]William Foxwell Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (London: Penguin, 1960); G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962); Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Archaeology of the Holy Land* (London: Ernest Benn, 1960); Yohanan Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982); Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000—586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990); Walter Rast, *Through the Ages in Palestinian Archaeology: An Introductory Handbook* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992).

[4]Finkelstein and Na'aman, *From Nomadism to Monarchy*.

[5]George E. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962), pp. 66-87; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

[6]C.M. Sinopoli, "The Archaeology of Empires," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994), pp. 159-180.

[7]Øystein S. LaBianca, *Sedentarization and Pneumatization: Food System Cycles at Hesban and Vicinity in Transjordan* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews Univ. Press, 1990); Finkelstein, "Introduction: From Nomadism to Monarchy—The State of Research in 1992," in Finkelstein and Na'aman, *From Nomadism to Monarchy*, pp. 9-17.