

CONFESSION OF A NATIONALIST ARCHAEOLOGIST

by

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ABSTRACT

Criticism on the nationalistic tendencies of Israeli archaeologists is analyzed and classified into three types : ethical, political and ideological. Based on the experience of the writer, it is suggested that ideological subjectivity in archaeological work is inescapable, and that it does not necessarily detract from the value of the work.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article Shay (1989) criticized the nationalistic tendencies of Israeli archaeologists. Other criticism came from Trigger (1984) and Bowersock (1984).

Reflecting upon an article which I am preparing on Gamla for a popular archaeological publication, I learned that I too would be classified as 'nationalistic', but also that I am in the generally respectable company of most Israeli archaeologists (Bar Yosef & Mazar 1982 : 310; 322).

Three types of criticism are aimed at nationalistic archaeology; that it is unethical, that it involves politics, and that it does not conform to the supposed universal objectivity of science. As for the first two – I side with the critics, with some reservations which are to follow. My aim in this paper is to elaborate on the third kind. I suggest that nationalistic archaeology in Israel can be free of the first two vices and rest only on ideology, a form of non-subjectivity, and that this need not detract from the scientific value of the work done.

DEFINITION

Loosely defined, the function of nationalistic archaeology is to "bolster the pride and morale of nations and ethnic groups" (Trigger 1984 : 360). In Israel, this generally applies to the study of the Biblical period (roughly the second millenium B.C. until the fall of the First Temple in 586 B.C.) and Second Temple period (from about 540 B.C. until the end of the Bar-Kochba revolt in 135 A.D.) which is called "the focus of Israeli national pride" (Shay 1989 : 769; Shavit 1987 : 54).

Admittedly, probably more Israeli archaeologists study these periods than any others. A contrary opinion is voiced by King (1983 : 211), who thinks that the archaeology of Early Judaism (ca. second century B.C. to the fourth century A.D.) is a "relatively neglected era in Palestinian Archaeology". I believe that nowadays there is a reasonable balance in the study of other periods as well (Broshi 1987 : 32; Ussishkin 1982 : 95), and that whoever deals with non – 'mainstream' periods is scarcely "made to feel very much alone" as Bowersock (1984 : 134) claims.

THE FIRST TWO TYPES OF CRITICISM

"How you look at the evidence depends on *what* you want to know and *why* you think it may be important" (Dever 1980 : 42).

The criticism is sometimes in the ethical domain, over the deliberate misinterpretation of the archaeological record or the use of questionable methodology to further some national aspirations. Some archaeologists were (and are) accused of such manipulations, but on the whole Israeli methodology is accepted as properly scientific in the sense that no evidence is deliberately withheld or distorted. The *value* of Israeli methodology, compared to New Archaeology methods is, however, a different question (Dever 1973; Meyers 1987 : 24*). As far as I know no one has been accused of absurd excesses, such as those of Kossinna (1911; 1912; quoted in Trigger 1984 : 360) who tried to prove the supremacy of the German race and that Germany was the homeland of Indo-European peoples. Indeed, even the late Yadin, possibly the greatest exponent of nationalistic archaeology in Israel, is generally thought to have used blameless methodology (Shay 1989 : 770). Yadin did take too far perhaps the grand phrases he habitually used to describe his discoveries (*ibid*) and actually entered politics. Others perhaps stress their feelings a bit too much (e.g. Ben-Dov 1982 : 18-19).

Sometimes the criticism is over the politicization of archaeology. This was put very bluntly by Bowersock (1984 : 134) who claims to quote an unnamed Israeli archaeologist who simply equated archaeology with politics. Olsen (1986 : 36) claims that a scholar is a political person and that "archaeology is, if anything, politics". To this I agree only to the extent that because of the exposure archaeology receives in Israel, the politicization of it is done mostly by politicians and not archaeologists. An extreme case, involving religion, politics and archaeology, was the "City of David incident" (Shanks 1981). Gamla is also a case in point; with the best of intentions, how can I keep a political group from using Gamla as a tool for claiming the legitimacy of annexing the Golan Heights, for instance (see also Olsen 1986 : 34).

THE SOURCE OF CRITICISM

Shay (1989 : 769), following up on Meyers' (1987) claim to the relative isolation of Israeli archaeologists, believes that this isolation is reinforced by the fact that modern archaeology (that is anthropologically oriented New Archaeology) differs from Israeli archaeology in focusing less on national traditions. It appears to me that even European archaeology is still largely nationally oriented – not to mention third world countries (Trigger 1984 : 358-9; Olsen 1986) – so that

Shay's argument best serves to point to the source of most of the criticism : the home of New Archaeology.

Most criticism seems to come from American scholars, who, to put it in a simplistic way, do not have the possibility to search for their own ancient past in their country (Bowersock 1984 : 141). It is instructing to note that there is no direct reference to this 'branch' of archaeology in the Code of Ethics or in the Standards of Research Performance of the Society of Professional Archaeologists in the U.S.A. (Greene 1984 : 22-27). These deal mainly with the archaeologist's legal responsibilities to the public, employers and peers, not stealing your fellow researcher's data, preparing well for a project, publishing promptly, etc. The closest reference to nationalistic archaeology is found in "Four Statements for Archaeology » by the Society for American Archaeology which states : "The archaeologist does not discard classes of information in favor of a special interest" and "Wilful destruction, *distortion*, or concealment of the data of archeology is censured..." (Champe *et al.* 1961) (*emphasis mine*).

BACKGROUND

Some words on Gamla and its excavator, Shmarya Gutmann, are in order, to better understand my views on the matter. Being a self-made historical archaeologist, Gutmann is a somewhat controversial figure in Israeli archaeology, though a well respected and liked public figure. He has been a major activist in various organizations of the Zionist movement since the Thirties. He was a messenger to the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe before the war, to try and make them immigrate to Israel before it was too late; before and after the establishment of the State of Israel he held high positions in the military intelligence; he conducted confidential diplomatic transactions for the State.

Between all these he found the time to instill the love of the land into thousands of young people by leading trips of the youth movements to all areas of the country. Especially dear to him were the Negev and the Judean Desert, where he led groups at the time Palestine was under the British mandate, without permits and under difficult logistic and safety conditions. At this time his interest in the history of the country was aroused, and especially in the late Second Temple period (from the Hasmonean revolt in 165 B.C. – to the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D.). His trips took him to Masada, the famous desert fortress where a group of Zealots committed mass suicide rather than fall into Roman hands after a long siege in the year 73 A.D. After studying Josephus' accounts of it he undertook a major survey of the mountain, which he conducted intermittently for over ten years. His work on Masada resulted in a book in which he offered not only the results of the survey, but also insights into the importance of the mountain to both ancient Jews and Romans and to the modern state (Gutmann 1965). He played a major part in the drive to excavate Masada, a project finally undertaken by Yadin. Not surprisingly perhaps, in this age of a renewing Jewish settlement in the country, the first Jewish researchers took interest in Jewish subjects almost exclusively (Broshi 1987 : 26; King 1983 : 134-135; Shaviv 1987 : 46, 54). Gutmann was also preoccupied by the whereabouts of Gamla, believing it a missing link in the history of the Great Revolt of the Jews against the Romans (66-73 A.D.) and a site of no less significance than Masada. He was not satisfied with Dalman's (1967) identification of the site and after the war of 1967 tried to identify it on the Golan.

Gamla was one of the first cities to fall to Vespasian on his march from the Galilee to Jerusalem in late 67 A.D.. Its key location on the route where help was expected from Babylonian Jewry made it imperative for the Romans to take it. Having been abandoned after its fall in October, 67 A.D., Gamla offers an almost unprecedented opportunity to study a Roman battle site as it was left, the development of a Jewish city which existed from about the middle of the second century B.C. until its fall, and a huge Early Bronze Age settlement (ca. 3200-2500 B.C.). The wall of this Early Bronze Age settlement may be responsible for the tradition in the Jewish literary sources that Gamla is a walled city from the time of Biblical Joshua (Tosefta; 'Arachin 5 : 37). Josephus is, however, the main source on the city – its location, topography and the very vivid description of the battle (War, IV 1).

The description of the final moments of Gamla is similar in many ways to that of Masada. This created the commonly held belief that five thousand of Gamla's defenders and citizens committed a mass suicide by jumping off the cliff, rather than fall in Roman hands. Bolstering this belief would be in our nationalistic interest. The evidence however does not support this. Based on topographical and demographical considerations, as well as on the fact that at Gamla there was an actual battle fought, contrary to Masada, where the defenders had time for deliberation, Gutmann believes that people were actually trying to flee down the steep slope in sheer panic with the inevitable result of many dying.

The one find that more than any other supports the claim for national importance of the site is a very crude coin, probably minted locally, which bears the inscription : "For the redemption of Jerusalem the H(oly)" (Meshorer 1982 : 129).

SUBJECTIVITY IN SCIENCE

Archaeology operates in a social context and not in a 'scientific' vacuum, and therefore we should resign to the fact that it is subjective to a certain degree. If indeed one of archaeology's aims is to help social scientists to better understand the nature and direction of current and future human activity, then the archaeologist cannot detach himself from this activity – he is part of it (Trigger 1984 : 357; Olsen 1986 : 37; McGimsey 1984 : 172). Perhaps the following quote makes the point : "... we will be able to be more objective only if we learn to conceal our subjectivity less" (Scharfstein, quoted in Broshi 1987 : 32).

Shay (1989 : 771) would like to see Israeli archaeology "reappraise its traditional assumptions and respond to the new trends, which have emerged in response to the Western ideals of objectivity and universalism". Kemeny (1959), Maquet (1964), Nash (1976) and Winter (1984 : 42) agree that we cannot escape from our own cultural values and personal biases and that the quest for a totally impersonal objectivity in science should be abandoned. This is not to say though that one should not strive for separating value judgments from scientific approach whenever possible (Winter 1984 : 45). To borrow from Anthropology again :

"To define adequately an Anthropological study, is not enough to indicate its object ... but one should add : as seen by an Anthropologist belonging to [certain socioeconomic class in a certain social environment] (Maquet 1964 : 51)

IDEOLOGY

My view is that nationalistic overtones creep into archaeology when the importance of certain finds or interpretations is emphasized over others, according to the convictions and ideology of the archaeologist.

Being a member of modern Israeli society I am doing what other archaeologists in other countries do when excavating sites connected with their own history (see for example Olsen 1986) : I am looking in the record for links between the present and the past and gladly show it when I find them. Trigger calls this "affirming the links between an intrusive population and its own ancient past" (1984 : 358), "intrusive" being an adjective which is, to say the least, controversial. This is not to say that I shall *ignore* other evidence (such as the Early Bronze Age settlement) nor that I shall *create* it if not there. Only if by international consensus all archaeologists were to practice only in foreign countries and not their own, would we (perhaps) be rid of nationalistic archaeology – a suggestion neither practical nor necessary. After analyzing the data I will stress what I believe to be more important to me – namely the finds that relate to the Jewish city and to the war. Whatever I choose to stress, however, the data is there for anyone else to interpret.

The following statement by Ussishkin, substituting 'Second Temple' for 'Old Testament' and 'Historical sources' for 'Biblical sources', reflects my feelings when I approach archaeology :

"To Israeli Archaeology, this connection with the Old Testament, with the Biblical sources, is deeply emotional, and it gives us a special satisfaction, perhaps even a special happiness, when working in the profession of Archaeology. I think that this is responsible for a large part for the motivation of Israeli Archaeologists" (1982 : 95).

I arrived at Gamla as an amateur archaeologist and volunteer in 1977, and have been literally trained in the field for the past thirteen years. It is clear to me that working there under Gutmann has had a profound effect on my thinking. Having listened for years to his stories about his exploits as a younger man and his dedication to his work, I naturally came to see in Gamla more than just a site to excavate, and my interest too focused on the historical period of the Second Temple.

An archaeologist's first interest in his subject can be aroused in many ways : be it reading about it, hearing a lecture, a field trip. My introduction to Gamla is just another way, and it did not change my political or ideological convictions. But I doubt if a person can escape from his ideologies in any of the roles he plays in life (see Meltzer 1981 : 116-117). My Zionist ideology may have affected my choice of coming to Gamla in the first place, my interest focusing on a certain historical period and my wish to further the knowledge about this period by excavating at Gamla (see also Shavit 1987 : 54; Olsen 1986 : 26). It has not affected my choice of methodology nor my interpreting the record in the light of well established rules and commonly held concepts – to the best of my ability.

My nationalistic archaeology is therefore taking pride in the achievements and regretting the omissions of my distant forebears, as these appear in the archaeological – and historical – record, and sharing this with the scientific community and the public.

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