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Editors:

Jaime Almansa Sánchez & Elena Papagiannopoulou



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Online Journal in Public Archaeology

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REVIEWS



Rafael GREENBERG

Archaeological Intervention on Historical Necropolises. Jewish Cemeteries

[Laia Colomer ed.]

Museo D'Historia de Barcelona
ISBN: 9788498504323
445 pages, 2013

This well-produced volume comprises a complete, tri-lingual (Catalan, Spanish and English) record of the seminar held on 15 and 16 January 2009 in the Barcelona Museum of History. It includes twelve full-length papers and five transcribed round-tables and debates with 31 discussants, ending with a brief joint declaration signed by the specialists invited to the seminar.

The immediate catalyst to the conference was the controversy surrounding a proposed landscaping and development project impinging on the ancient Jewish burial ground of Montjuïc, a largely neglected hill dominating the southwest quarter of Barcelona. It comprises, however, a much broader discussion of the ethics, politics and legal issues surrounding the excavation of medieval Jewish cemeteries in Spain, with case studies from Sagunt, Tàrraga, Lucena and Seville. The ramifications of the debate clearly extend beyond these particular cases, since cemeteries often serve to crystallize issues of heritage, empowerment, identity and ethnic rights. This makes the volume a significant contribution to an ongoing debate on the treatment of historical human remains (Stutz 2013).

While several papers focus on the nature of the archaeological interventions themselves and on planning and development issues,

the main interest for a broader readership relates to the politics and ethics of excavating historical cemeteries, particularly in places where demographic continuity has been interrupted, as in the case of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. This is the focus of the leading papers in the collection, as well as that of the debates recorded in it.

Laia Colomer's excellent introduction spells out the main themes: the role of knowledge and the circumstances of its production; the standing of secular law and legal institutions vis-à-vis religious practice and political exigencies; the question of the ownership of heritage—whose heritage is at stake: that of the local community, the religious community, the nation, or indeed of the world?; and finally, the responsibilities that accompany heritage custodianship.

Reviewing the state of affairs in Israel, where tempers have often flared over archaeological interventions in ancient cemeteries, Renee Sivan introduces a thread that runs through many of the presentations in the volume, particularly those offered by archaeologists: politics and ideology (often construed by specialists as expressions of ignorance) are a threat to scientific practice. This contrasts rather markedly with the approach taken by Neil Silberman. In a typically wide-ranging and thoughtful essay that builds on decades of experience at the interface between archaeology and community, Silberman takes politics and values as given, and seeks a way out of the zero-sum game that typifies the confrontation between 'science' and 'tradition'. He places civil society at the center of the discussion: the obligations and rights of all who would be partners in civil society require us to set up procedures of consultation that will balance the pursuit of knowledge, the preservation of the past, and development for the future: "Gone are the days when scientists had unchallenged power to treat human remains as mere laboratory specimens... [or] when national administrations could assume themselves total control over a nation's antiquities". Calling for a fundamental restructuring in the treatment of human remains, Silberman seems to be suggesting that everyone must take a step back and recognize the multiplicity of coexisting value systems in modern society.

Max Polonovski reviews the complexities of defining the true heirs to Jewish cultural continuity in Europe, ultimately taking

a catholic position which partly echoes that of Silberman, citing French minister of Culture Catherine Trautman who said, "Just as the cathedrals of France belong also to the Jews of France, the Jewish heritage is not only the heritage of the Jews but the heritage of all".

Archaeologists, planners and legal experts provide the contributions to the middle part of the volume: Matias Calvo and Vincent Lerma on Sagunt, Anna Colet and Oriol Saula on Tarrega, Daniel Botella on Lucena, Isabel Santana on Seville, Oriol Clos and Ferran Puig on Montjuïc and Gemma Hernandez on the Catalan legislative framework for dealing with cultural heritage. Though brief, the archaeological reports convey the importance of the sites themselves for the reconstruction of a Jewish existence obliterated by expulsion and religious suppression. At the same time, the limitations of salvage work conducted under severe constraints are painfully evident. This raises a possibility that is hardly mentioned in this volume: is preservation without excavation ever an option?

The transcribed discussions are well worth reading. They range far and wide, touching on issues of cultural continuity and representation, the authority of law and science, the value of consultation, the creation of ad-hoc coalitions for establishing ethical practice, the imposition of limits on archaeology, empowerment through research (knowledge pursued and deployed), and the definition of 'dignity'.

For the most part, the locus of significant discussion in this volume is within professional discourse; the public is present only as an external entity. This is most clearly reflected in the immediate product of the seminar, the Barcelona Declaration on Ancient Jewish Cemeteries. The declaration focuses on what may be termed 'professional best practice', privileging the values embodied in scientific archaeology and physical anthropology. In contrast to the statements made by some of its signatories, it makes virtually no reference to any process of consultation with the public at large concerning the excavation of cemeteries and effectively begs the question of 'respect'. After all, much of the debate about the excavation of cemeteries revolves around differing conceptions and perception of that loaded term.

None of this detracts from the value of this volume, which constitutes a major contribution to a global discussion on presence and absence, memory and forgetting. Whether expressly stated or merely implied, the debate is very much about the agency and the rights of the dead, as construed by their self-appointed advocates.

References

Stutz, L.N. 2013. The Dead as Witnesses, Victims and Tools. In Tarlow, S. and Stutz, L.N. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Death and Burial*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 801–816.

BLOG REVIEWS UNTIL VOL 4

Almansa-Sánchez, J. Audiences... A review of the CASPAR session at TAG-on-Sea 2013 (Bournemouth University) - 11 February

Papagiannopoulou, E. Multivocality and Technology: Review of a lecture at the Irish Institute of Hellenic Studies at Athens (IIHSA) - 14 February

Touloupa, S. A 30-year retrospect of the Greek Ministry of Culture educational programmes: an insider's insight - 25 April

Touloupa, S. When Public Archaeology is conflated with Cultural Tourism - 7 July

Ion, A. Some thoughts on the 20th European Association of Archaeologists Conference in Istanbul - 26 September

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Book

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Edited book

Durbin, G. (ed.) 1996. *Developing Museum Exhibitions for Livelong Learning*. London, GEM.

Section in book

McEwan, C., Silva, M. I. and Hudson, Ch. 2006. Using the past to forge the future: the genesis of the community site museum at Aguablanca, Ecuador. In H. Silverman (ed.), *Archaeological site museums in Latin America*. Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 187-216.

Internet reference

United Nations 1992, *Agenda 21*. Retrieved on 29 January 2010 from WWW [http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/res_agenda21_00.shtml]

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Work reports and reviews will not need to pass the peer-review process, but will be commented by the editor.

We will be publishing one volume per year (first trimester) and although we are willing to receive papers the whole year, full articles for next-year's volume should be sent before October in order to complete the process with time.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact the editor at: jasarqueologia@gmail.com

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