

The deep past as a social asset in Jordan

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with Paul Burtenshaw and Carol Palmer

On 18 November 2014, the British Academy hosted a showcase event that explored 'The Social and Economic Benefits of Cultural Heritage'. The evening featured presentations by some of the British Academy-sponsored overseas institutes. The following article is based on the presentation by Professor Bill Finlayson, Director of the Council for British Research in the Levant.

Cultural heritage is important for the sustainable development, well-being and resilience of communities. Cultural heritage has the potential to be an asset for group cohesion and identity, for the diversity of local economies, and for cultural inspiration and vibrancy. The successful mobilisation of cultural heritage as such a social asset depends on an understanding not just of heritage assets, but of the social, economic, cultural and political context of the communities involved, their institutional capacity, and their access to resources and education, as well as their current relationship with local cultural heritages.

Jordanian heritage tourism, and local identification with heritage, is closely tied to Nabataean heritage (most significantly at Petra), classical heritage (Jerash, in the north of Jordan), and biblical heritage (the baptism site). Jordan is in a region of old civilisations, but young modern states, and the Nabataean heritage has been enlisted to help bind the new Jordanian state, along with an imagined Bedouin identity. For a country rich in heritage, Jordanian heritage tourism is based around a surprisingly small number of sites, notably Petra and Jerash, where it is dominated by big tour company tourism; and it is notorious for short visits, which have generally been built into regional tours based in other neighbouring countries such as Israel, Syria and Egypt. As a consequence, tourism in Jordan suffers from any regional instability, regardless of the actual relative safety of Jordan, and the economic benefits are diluted.

Within Jordan, although tourism is recognised as important to the economy, only a limited part of the population benefits directly, although many people continue to share a great optimism about the potential benefits. At Petra, only one Bedouin tribe, the Bdul,

benefits significantly – others tribes more marginally. Even the Bdul have had a mixed experience of the benefits, as they were moved from their traditional cave dwellings in a resettlement programme that caused considerable conflict. Their removal, while seen as essential by the heritage management community, arguably also created a rather sterilised or dehumanised cultural heritage – the Bedouin inhabitants of the caves in Petra had always been an integral part of the image of the site since its rediscovery by the west (Figure 1). Indeed, the Bedouin living in and around Petra are still a popular part of the ordinary tourist experience. The Bedouin identities presented locally are extremely diverse: the state image of martial Bedouin, represented by the uniformed desert police; the young Bdul men, who often seem to be channelling Johnny Depp and the *Pirates of the Caribbean*; the older Bedouin who are still very much in touch with their own heritage; and the visibly impoverished concrete block settlements that have replaced the more romantic image of black goat hair tents.

The Neolithic and tourism

The Neolithic is the incredibly dynamic phase of human history when many of the foundations of modern society were developed – including the foundations of food-producing economies, the social developments that enabled people to live together in large permanent communities, and the rise of increasingly formalised symbolic systems that ultimately led to religion. The Neolithic sites of Jordan (Figure 2) offer a globally significant history of enormous economic, social and ideological change which is shared throughout the region, irrespective of current borders, and which represents an asset for new perspectives on identity and social stories. Within Jordan, that heritage is unusually well-preserved and visually striking, yet surveys show few tourists know of Neolithic archaeology.

These Neolithic sites have the potential to diversify both the market and geographical spread of tourism. Small numbers of independent tourists already visit the south of Jordan, primarily for walking and touring the



Figure 1
The Bedouin appear prominently in this 1839 painting of El Deir, Petra, by David Roberts. Image: Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 2
Distribution of Neolithic sites in Jordan.

landscape, and ecotourism is relatively well marketed. These tourists stay almost twice as long as the tour company visitors, and are less sensitive to security problems, which is critical to sustainable tourism. Small numbers of tourists spending money in the right places and behaving in an appropriate way can make a large positive contribution to small communities. They seem an ideal market to target to develop the ideas of Neolithic heritage tourism.

A regular criticism of development projects involving heritage is the lack of knowledge to inform design and suitable approaches. Unfortunately, while public-benefit projects around archaeology are well-intentioned, they are not researched, and are simply imposed with a short-lived injection of funds, leading to a poor return on investments in resources.

Beidha

The Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL) is actively engaged with the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities to develop local sustainable heritage tourism. We initially commenced work at the Neolithic site of Beidha in 2000 as a response to the perceived need to diversify tourism, and to bring its economic benefits to other groups – in this case the Amarine Bedouin,



Figure 3a
Beidha: aerial view. Photo: APAAME_20020930_RHB-0258 © Robert Bewley, Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (www.apaame.org).



Figure 3b
Beidha: experimental reconstruction of Neolithic buildings.

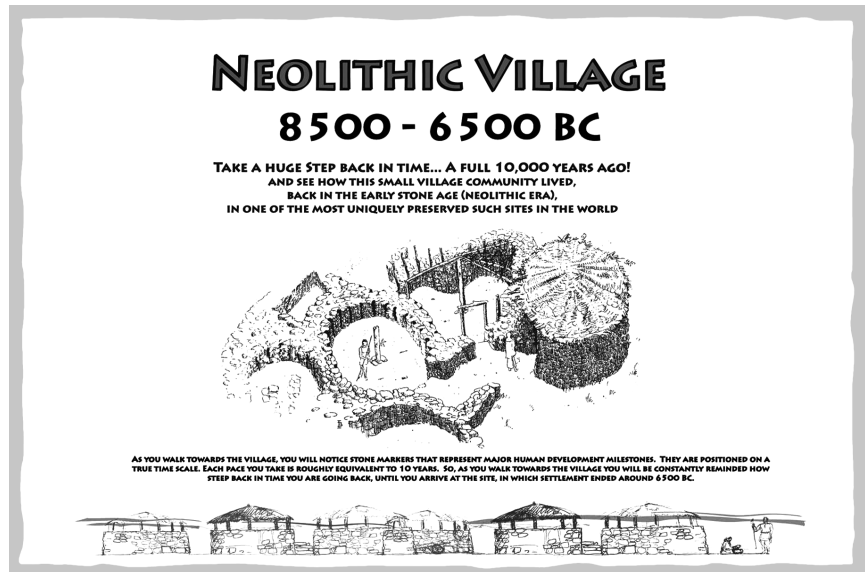


Figure 3c
Beidha: improved signs for tourists.

who felt largely excluded from the booming Petra tourism industry. Beidha was excavated in the 1950s and 1960s by Diana Kirkbride and was seen as a flagship of Neolithic research. Kirkbride had been trained by Kathleen Kenyon at Jericho and this experience inspired her to work at Beidha. The frustration of only being able to see small areas of the Neolithic at Jericho at the bottom of deep excavations through the tell, led her to use a new type of open area excavation at Beidha, to expose large areas of architecture which enabled her to understand how the community had been constructed. This methodology has since become the standard approach to settlement archaeology applied throughout the region.

Our first project, jointly run with Dr Mohammed Najjar, then Director of Fieldwork at the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, was envisioned as a community project from the start, involving as many of the local Bedouin as possible. We decided early on that we would not apply for large-scale international funding, but would attempt to build the project slowly, in a manner that made it sustainable and attracted local interest. Initial work largely consisted of removing old spoil heaps, backfilling large open excavation trenches, and conducting conservation works on archaeological remains that had been suffering from being exposed to the elements, goats and tourists for 40 years. We were joined by Samantha Dennis who developed an experimental construction project which was subsequently taken forward as part of her PhD. The Neolithic structures she would supervise building were also intended to be used as an interpretation centre, helping to make sense of an archaeological maze of collapsing stone walls. It soon transpired that the construction process and the gradual appearance of a Neolithic village was quite a tourist draw in itself, although there were moments (such as the experimental burning of one of the buildings) that were perceived as some form of active vandalism. Ever since then we have understood that having people working on-site, especially the combination of archaeologists and the local Bedouin, is a great enhancement to a visit.

Beidha is located within the Petra Park, one of the most significant tourist locations in the Levant, with parts of the local population heavily involved in, and indeed defined by, this location and the heritage industry. Beidha receives visitors, mostly those combining visits to Petra, but also people who know of the site as one of the earliest excavated Neolithic sites – and it is still very important as an early locus for goat domestication processes – a visible part of contemporary Bedouin heritage.

Anthropological research affiliated to CBRL has also examined the local Bedouin populations in light of the UNESCO proclamation of Bedouin ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage’, where an existing knowledge of the economic



Figure 4
Wadi Faynan 16, one of the world's first large public buildings, built about 11,600 years ago, with tiered benches around a central space.

potential of world heritage status, as exemplified by the Petra industry, has led to an enthusiastic florescence of traditional culture.

Neolithic Heritage Trail

We have a long engagement at Beidha, with the original excavations conducted under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem in the 1950s, more recently through our community-based site conservation and interpretation projects, and currently in a multi-agency format with the Department of Antiquities, Ministry of Tourism, the Petra Archaeological Park, and Siyaha (the USAID-funded Jordan tourism development project), putting up signage around the site. Beidha acts as one of the anchor points on the ‘Neolithic Heritage Trail’, a route that links together major Neolithic sites in southern Jordan.

Our work builds on areas of experience and expertise built up over many years in archaeology, cultural heritage management, rural economics, and contemporary politics and identity within an interdisciplinary project. Since our work began around Beidha, extensive research has been conducted in the Wadi Faynan at the base of the Jordanian plateau, the location of numerous CBRL field projects in archaeology and anthropology (Figure 4). Most recently, Paul Burtenshaw undertook an evaluation of cultural heritage tourism within the context of the Wadi Faynan tourism developments, which have been largely built around an Ecodge and nature reserve, and have been focused on ecotourism, not the cultural heritage. Wadi Faynan is now known from archaeological studies of the Neolithic as one of the earliest locations of communal architecture, and of the process of becoming sedentary – a prehistoric story that echoes with contemporary Bedouin life. Long-term archaeological and



Figure 5

Basta, a large Neolithic site from 9,000 years ago, almost urban in character with densely packed multi-storey buildings.

Photo: APAAME_20020930_RHB-0234 © Robert Bewley, Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East (www.apaame.org).

anthropological studies have established strong connections with the local community, and the recent studies provide data on the benefits that the community receives from archaeology.

For some years now, with the approval of the Ministry of Tourism, support of the Department of Antiquities, and collaboration with other international researchers from the Free University of Berlin, the University of Copenhagen, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, we have led the Neolithic Heritage Trail project to promote tourism to, and awareness of, Jordan's Neolithic heritage while providing local sustainable development. Both Wadi Faynan and Beidha act as anchors to this trail, providing key parts of the story the trail is telling, as well as practical access. This is a conscious attempt to fulfil the original objectives of the Beidha community project, aiming to work with the local populations, and to make the Neolithic heritage more accessible in itself, and also enhance it as a tourist attraction by combining it with locally guided walking tours. The local people, many of whom either have worked on archaeological sites, or have been employed as actors on the many documentaries filmed in the area, see that archaeology is important, but recognise that information about the sites is key for them to appreciate what the sites are and why they have relevance to their lives today. Part

of our work is to improve knowledge of the Neolithic past and to assess how cultural heritage assets can be mobilised in the future to benefit these communities. This mobilisation depends not simply on the availability of funds, but on having a solid understanding of the unique local contexts of relationships with the past and how they operate in the practical realities of the present.

New research on tourism and the deep past

New field research will take place at two locations – Basta and Beidha – to extend Burtenshaw's Wadi Faynan project. Before the field research work begins, we will collect background and census information on local socio-economic conditions and education levels, and establish a history of the involvement and motivation of major stakeholders, as well as the archaeological research and previous efforts to promote the heritage carried out at each site. Each of these locations contains significant and visible Neolithic heritage, but the local population and tourism contexts are different.

Basta, although located near Petra, with prominent cultural heritage – both an excavated Neolithic village and well-preserved traditional houses – currently sees little tourism despite attempts by the Department of

Antiquities to promote it. The Neolithic site lies central to the village (Figure 5), but without interpretation or facilities. Visitors often report hostility and acts of vandalism, and the site is frequently used as a rubbish dump, indicating that it has little social value.

Local data collection will take a variety of forms. A household survey will sample the local populations to establish economic activity, household composition, skills and education levels, conducting interviews covering community and personal identity, knowledge of and relationships with local cultural heritage, and opinions on local tourism. An Economic Impact Assessment, including a tourist survey, will establish the current benefits for the local population that result from tourism and research projects. In addition to these formal data collection methods, ethnographic and participant-observer activities will be employed to provide a wider context including local politics and power structures, rural economics and social organisation.

The data will first provide the opportunity for comparison between sites, including data from Wadi Faynan, to identify the key factors affecting the use of Neolithic heritage as a social asset. It will also act as the basis for a more proactive engagement with local communities to mobilise any identified potential. The project will carry out participatory approaches to allow community members to express values and opinions around issues raised in the data collection, and to build consensus on how best to enhance and use the heritage assets.

Projects will then be carried out to meet priorities identified by these activities. These will take place under the umbrella of the Neolithic Heritage Trail. The development of the tourist trail allows for different

heritage sites to provide mutual support for each other and offer a tourist experience to attract economic impact. The trail will also connect the communities involved, enhancing the sharing of expertise and networks. Initial activities for the trail will involve the community-led development of publicity material, guide training, and the enhancement of tourism skills. The foundation of the trail's development in real community understanding and 'bottom-up' processes will maximise the possibilities for the long-term success of the trail and the conservation of the archaeology involved. These processes may take the form of local heritage education through written and digital material, collaboration with local schools, guide and tourism training, or training in dealing with heritage conservation. Local NGOs, including the Petra National Trust, will be partners in such projects, and have already been engaged in primary school education around Petra.

Working with a bulldozer driver at another Neolithic excavation at the site of Dhra' by the Dead Sea, I explained that this might be the earliest village in Jordan. He replied to say that he supposed that must mean the house we were looking at could have been the house of Adam and Eve. I could only reply that, yes, I supposed it could have been. He answered 'We are all the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve' – which in a way, is kind of the point.

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