

# TOMATO SEASON IN THE GHOR ES-SAFI: A Lesson in Community Archaeology



Figure 1. Tomato boxes in the Ghor es-Safi.

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January is tomato season in the Ghor es-Safi region of the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan. For most people this is a mildly interesting factoid but not of much actual relevance – unless you are involved with the tomato industry or perhaps if you are an archaeologist (fig. 1). Since 2009 we have been “following pots” at Early Bronze Age (ca. 3500–2000 B.C.E.) mortuary sites on the east bank of the Dead Sea in Jordan. Follow the Pots explores the intersections of this ancient landscape: we are interested in the traditional archaeological investigation of early urbanism and increasing social complexity, the examination of the many lives of Early Bronze Age pots associated with this landscape, and the multiple and contested values of this archaeological heritage to various stakeholders, which include government and museum professionals, archaeologists (both foreign and local), tourists, and local residents. We are attempting to reconstruct the story of this important area of Jordan in the past and the present, which has proven to be a thought-provoking adventure in community archaeology.

As archaeologists with a history of interest in the region, we are very concerned with the destruction of the ancient landscape as the result of looting. To appreciate this environment in the past and in the present, we are examining the material remains from a unique perspective: we are including current local interactions with these landscapes. How do (if they do) the people of

the Ghor es-Safi region associate with the artifacts and places of the dead? We are intrigued by the many lives, sometimes contentious, that the pots buried with the Early Bronze Age people have experienced (fig. 2):

- (1) Earliest lives: as original grave goods buried alongside a revered ancestor.
- (2) Their second life as an archaeological object, recovered as part of systematic, scientific excavations undertaken by archaeological luminaries like Paul Lapp, Walt Rast, Tom Schaub, Mohammad Najjar, and David McCreery.
- (3) A third life as looted objects, illegally removed from cist and shaft graves, and charnel houses in order to supply the burgeoning demand for objects from the Holy Land.
- (4) And finally we consider their life as collected object – on a mantelpiece, in a museum exhibit, or in the classroom as an educational tool. We are absorbed by the multiple meanings these objects hold for their possessors: signifying the Holy Land, conquest over travel to a distant land, didactic devices, or acquired objet d'art.

*Follow the Pots* is part of the Expedition to the Dead Sea Plain's (EDSP) exploration into this region of Jordan at the Early Bronze Age sites of Bab adh-Dhrras, Fifa, Safi, Khirbet Khanazir, Naqa, and Numayra. Under the direction of R. Thomas Schaub and Walter Rast, over the last 50 or more years EDSP has investigated



**Figure 2.** Pots from excavated tombs, housed at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

the way people lived and died through excavation and survey at these cemeteries and settlements (see [www3.nd.edu/~mchesson/newedsphome.html](http://www3.nd.edu/~mchesson/newedsphome.html) for further information), that Rast, Schaub, and Chesson have referred to as a landscape of the dead (fig. 3).

In revisiting the notes and records of these sites, we realized that the discipline of Near Eastern archaeology had undergone a series of methodological innovations and theoretical transformations – local public engagement is one of them, not previously addressed by the EDSP. Identifying the need for a comprehensive site map and some further recording at the cemetery site of Fifa, we were challenged to think about the use of a decimated landscape in reconstructing the past. Unfortunately this particular landscape of the dead has been the focus of methodical and sustained plunder for decades due to the unchecked demand in the antiquities marketplace for Early Bronze Age pots from cemeteries at

places like Fifa – an EBA IA site first identified by Frank in 1932. Our research emerged from the convergence of three major elements: an effort to analyze and publish research conducted at the legacy sites of Bab adh-Dhras, Fifa, Khirbet Khanazir, Naqa, and Numayra from 1960s to 1990 by the EDSP; the decades of intensive looting at most of these sites; and the widespread sale of the looted material on the global antiquities market.

To obtain a more complete picture of the lives of pots, we included an element of community archaeology in our application to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for funds to support new fieldwork in the region. Reviewers suggested that we might encounter opposition from fellow archaeologists as we placed archaeologists and looters as equal

voices in the discussion of archaeological landscapes. Comments and criticisms were incredibly helpful in reconfiguring the project, but still we failed to take into consideration the lowly tomato, a point which will become clear in the following.

**Figure 3.** Walter Rast (left) and R. Thomas Schaub (right) looking out over the Fifa landscape, 1989.



In the winter of 2011 we carried out archaeological ground-truthing and mapping of Fifa, producing detailed maps and successfully testing a hypothesis about the uses of Google Earth in monitoring archaeological site looting (fig. 4). As a second prong of this project, we sought input from interested stakeholders who may be directly or indirectly associated with the looting of the area. We hoped to move beyond a privileging of archaeological knowledge (typically produced by both foreign and Jordanian archaeologists) over local interpretations of the past.

The cemetery of Fifa contains thousands (an estimated 10,000-plus) of EBA IA cist tombs whose use spanned the emergence of the first walled, urban settlements in the region. In the archaeology of the southern Levant this site represents an in-

survey and reports of increased looting at the site in 1989–1990, Rast and Schaub excavated eleven tombs (eighteen were identified) at Fifa, the first formal project carried out at the cemetery (fig. 5). In response to local accounts of plunder in 2001, Mohammad Najjar returned to Fifa, excavating some 50 graves as part of a Jordanian Department of Antiquities salvage excavation. Our recent fieldwork in the area in combination with data from these earlier projects has led us to estimate the presence of approximately 10,000 looters' pits covering the area, a level of destruction that potentially distorts our understanding of mortuary practices during the emergence of Early Bronze Age urbanism in the region.

Under the Jordanian Provisional Antiquities Law No. 12 of



**Figure 4.** The looted landscape at Fifa, surveyor Hugh Barnes in the background.

credibly important resource for researchers: it is one of only a handful of large excavated Early Bronze Age cemeteries. As previously mentioned this site has been the focus of plunder for at least 40 years. As part of their *Survey of the Southeastern Plain of the Dead Sea* in 1973 Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub reported looting of the associated material culture from the tombs at this cemetery (Rast and Schaub 1974). The subsequent Southern Ghors and Northeast 'Arabah Archaeological Survey (conducted by Burton MacDonald) formally identified the cemetery as Site 76 and the later Iron Age structure as Site 75 (MacDonald 1992) noting some illegal disturbance of the site. Based on their earlier

1976 it is illegal to (1) trade in antiquities, and (2) to excavate and remove artifacts without the permission of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. However people have been plundering the site of Fifa since the early 1980s in order to acquire Early Bronze Age pots to sell on the market. A quick Internet search for "early bronze age pots" on EBay offers a number of items at auction priced between \$100 and \$300. It is the ceramic vessels and not the other Early Bronze Age grave goods – lambis shell bracelets, carnelian beads – that appear in the various markets (online and in the licensed antiquities shops in Israel). Our surface survey in 2011 revealed a number of complete bracelets,

basalt bowl fragments, carnelian beads, and broken limestone maceheads littering the surface, discarded in the quest for pots. Preliminary ethnographic research conducted by Kersel confirms that visitors to the region want artifacts (pots only) with biblical associations. This consumer demand has occasioned a recent change in the sales descriptions accompanying the pots for sale. In past ten years “from the time of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs” or “from the Holy Land” have replaced descriptions of archaeological time period (the Early Bronze Age) and place (archaeological find spot).

In his examination of looting in this region, former Director of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities Ghazi Bisheh (2001, 115) cites a number of factors affecting the decision for locals (from the towns of Fifa, Ghor es-Safi, and Mazraa) to loot: unemployment; a lack of awareness of the importance of cultural heritage; the fact that archaeological sites are viewed as an impediment to growth and development; and the prevailing attitude of local inhabitants that unearthed artifacts are a legitimate source of income. This list of reasons for looting is not dissimilar to the motives identified by Jennifer Goddard (2011) in her ethnographic study of looters from the Four Corners region of the American Southwest. Goddard (2011) suggests that illegal excavation in the American Southwest is part of local identity formation and ties to the landscape. In interviews these looters state that “looting is a social right, if not an obligation” (Goddard 2011, 185), contributing to social cohesion and a sense of community. This study is a useful model for comparison with the local practices in the Ghor es-Safi region, where looting is a pursuit that has become ingrained in the local culture, perhaps an element of community solidarity, which has unfortunately produced the decimated landscape of Fifa.

Currently the site resembles a pock-marked lunar landscape, with looters’ trenches extending across rolling hills far off into the distance. The ground is covered with the spoil heaps of dirt, skeletal remains, and broken artifacts. Such a scale of destruction makes complete documentation of all looters’ pits impossible, but as part of the *Follow the Pots* project we are attempting to address the germane question posed by Webb and Frankel (2009): is a cemetery that has been robbed and pillaged for generations worthy of systematic research? Additionally, we were concerned with how we could incorporate the local community in this study.

In thinking about our landscape, and our research goals, and taking into consideration the Wenner Gren comments, and the mixed reactions of fellow archaeologists, we came to the conclusion that we were starting down an atypical path of investigation in the Near East and Jordan, in particular (see Kersel and Cheson 2011). As prehistorians/Early Bronze Age specialists who work in the Middle East, we are aware of the fact that our areas of research do not take center stage in debates about community archaeology, although this issue of *Near Eastern Archaeology* and the successful three-year ASOR session on community archaeology have proved that these are evolving areas of awareness (fig. 6).

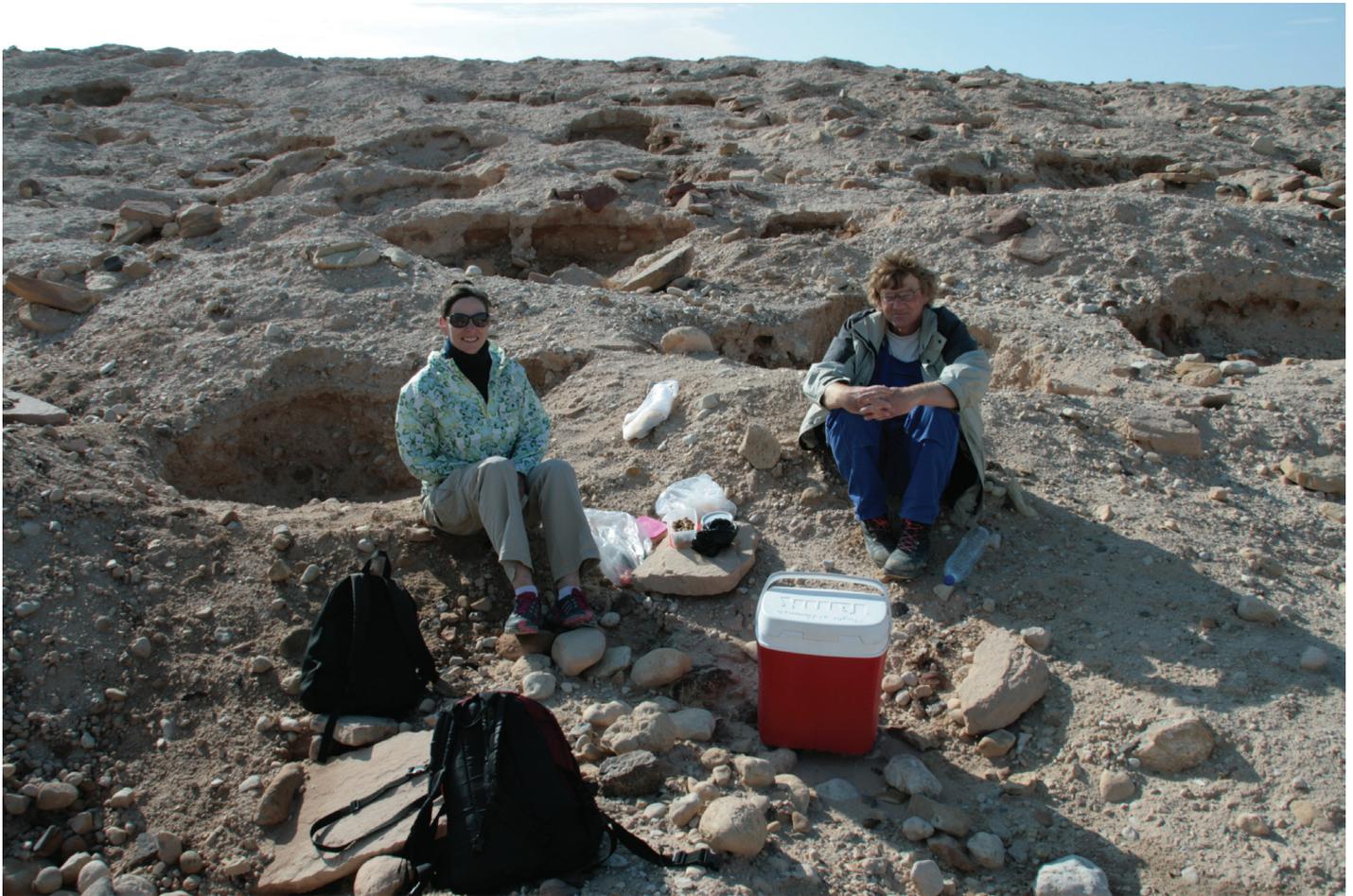
Terms like community archaeology, public archaeology, and local engagement bring to mind practitioners like Sonja Atalay, Carol McDavid, Anne Pyburn, Paul Shackel, and T.J. Ferguson

and places like the African Burial Ground, Çatal Höyük, Harpers Ferry, and Levi Plantation. Historical archaeologists have long recognized the importance of oral histories in archaeological research because they offer rich potential in compiling a comprehensive construction of past lives. Jones and Russell (2012, 268) argue that contemporary local involvement provides an opportunity to understand how people in the past and the present experienced historical landscapes, and to see how meaning is created and negotiated. The inclusion of modern voices in an



Figure 5. Tomb 11 at Fifa, excavated in the 1989–1990 season.

attempt to understand prehistory in the Middle East is far from the norm (with a few exceptions at places like Azraq Oasis, Çatal Höyük, Dhiban, and Quseir) and in our desire to approach this new project on the Dead Sea Plain in an inclusive way, we sought to combine the past with the present. To frame this research, we turned to the formative work of Stephanie Moser and her colleagues working at Quseir, Egypt, as a guide for a working definition of community and for best practice in the engagement with local communities in the Middle East (Moser et al. 2002). Moser et al. (2002) outline a set of what they refer to as methodological components that are essential for fruitful community engage-



**Figure 6** (above). Lunch in the looted landscape – Morag Kersel (left) and Hugh Barnes (right).  
**Figure 7** (below). Looted cobble-lined tomb at Fifa, 2011.



ment: communication and collaboration; employment and training; public presentation; interviews and oral history; educational resources; photographic and video archive; and community-controlled merchandising. They assert that these criteria can and should be used throughout the duration of an archaeological project, which while admirable, may not always be possible. What is most helpful in the work of Moser and associates (2002, 243) is their assertion that community cooperation is often burdened with tension, disagreement, and conflict, providing a more realistic observation of collaborative efforts. We would argue that most prehistorians who work in the Middle East often conceptualize community archaeology as giving the

odd tour to interested individuals, school groups, Department of Antiquities representatives, and colleagues. We seldom consult with local partners in the initial planning stages of our projects. Fortified with some ideas of what should constitute good community archaeology, inclusion, and local engagement, we went to Fifa, although we did not entirely heed our own advice.

The 2011 intensive field survey at Fifa produced some excellent results, thanks to Mohammad Aly, Hugh Barnes, Isabel Ruben, and Mohammad Zahran. We created a comprehensive plan of the site of Fifa, mapping the archaeological features (from all periods) visible on the surface and thoroughly documenting the extent of the 6.4 ha site, which had not previously been done. We documented and created a typology for the three types of tomb construction at Fifa (fig. 7). Establishing a database, we recorded cobble-lined, slab and cobble, and boulder type; we conducted a preliminary assessment of the distribution of the tomb types for comparison with the earlier work of Rast and Schaub in 1989 and 1990, and Najjar in 2001.

We tested the Contreras and Brodie (2010) hypothesis regarding the use of Google Earth as a tool for monitoring archaeological site looting. We concluded that one can use Google Earth to chart change over time but that in order to estimate the loss of cultural heritage, groundtruthing is essential for a thorough picture. For instance, we determined that each hole visible on Google Earth does not equal a robbed tomb: some are blank holes where looters began work, subsequently realized that there was no tomb, and moved on to begin a new excavation. From Google Earth these holes are often indistinguishable. These results are immensely helpful in understanding the mortuary practices of the Early Bronze Age, patterns of looting in the region, and the efficacy of Google Earth, but this story is still incomplete without the element of engagement with the community.

We scheduled our field season for the winter of 2011 so it suited Kersel's academic schedule and our surveyor's employment schedule. However, it was tomato season. In not one of our conversations did we consider the effects of the season other than reckoning with potential rain delays, flooding, and the consequences of winter weather. In the area of Ghor es-Safi we were thus dramatically unsuccessful at engaging with local communities – we could not get people to come by for tea to chat – for one reason: they were all busy harvesting tomatoes, something we had not factored into our project design. Tomato season in

the Ghor es-Safi meant that no one had any time to talk to us about their “perceptions of landscape” or the “effects of looting.” Had we consulted with locals at the initial planning stages of the project, we would have had the opportunity to rethink our tim-



Figure 8. Early Bronze Age surface finds from Fifa survey, 2011.

ing in the area. This was an incredibly valuable lesson in community archaeology.

We also encountered an additional unforeseen difficulty: a Ph.D. student comparing the nature of looting in the American Southwest with looting in the Dead Sea Plain in Jordan left the Ghor es-Safi the week prior to our arrival. There was no issue with overlapping research interests but as part of the Ph.D. project, local community members received financial remuneration for the information they provided. Had we known we might be expected to pay for knowledge, we could have included it in our research protocol, which was subject to review by an Ethical Review Board. If we were at all successful in getting people to agree to meet with us, they then wanted to know how much they would be paid. We did not contemplate having to pay for information and had no permission to do so, and yet the precedent had been set. If we had sought greater local collaboration before heading into the field, we might have predicted this element of our research. Another significant lesson in community archaeology learned.

The combination of tomato season and the issue of compensation led us to hold off on the local engagement portion of our fieldwork. We returned in June of 2013 to complete missing elements of the fieldwork and will again in November/December of 2013, times better situated in the yearly seasonal calendar (we have been assured of this by our local contacts). Asking questions regarding the Early Bronze Age cemeteries and settlements and artifacts will hopefully provide a more inclusive picture of

the uses of the landscape of the dead in the past and present, and at the same time offer insights into the lives of the pots (fig. 8).

We are sure that practitioners of community archaeology, wherever they work, would agree that every day is an adventure: at times a wild, exciting ride and at other times an exercise in frustration. It is doubtful that we could have envisaged the extent to which actions of a previous researcher would affect our project, but we should have foreseen the impact of the tomato season. Local collaboration is the key to a productive project and we now know that greater cooperation is essential to the future success of the *Follow the Pots* project.

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