

NOTES AND REVIEWS

# Overcoming Structural Violence: The WAC Inter-Congress in Ramallah August 2009

Reviewed by BRIAN HOLE

As I went through the last of many security checks at Tel Aviv airport on my way out of Israel, the woman checking my passport looked at information on her computer screen and asked me some very pointed questions. ‘Why are you anti-Israeli?’ ‘I’m not!’ I replied. ‘You were at a conference in Palestine — it was anti-Israeli. Why did you go?’, she asked. ‘It was an international archaeology conference, it wasn’t about Israel. I’m just an archaeologist — I’m not involved in politics’, I replied. This last statement was of course not 100% true as we are all political to some degree, but I didn’t want to make things more complicated than they needed to be at this particular moment. In fact, archaeology is probably more inescapably entwined with politics in Israel than anywhere else, and I could tell that my protestation didn’t really wash with her — but satisfied that I was at least leaving the country, she eventually let me through and onto my flight.

The conference referred to above was the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) ‘Inter-Congress’ on ‘Overcoming Structural Violence’, held in the city of Ramallah in the occupied West Bank from 8 to 13 August 2009. The following is a review of both it and the surrounding events and issues. I experienced these as a graduate student visiting both Palestine and Israel for the first time, so my interpretations should be read in this light. To be honest, the biggest question in my mind when I’d arrived in Israel ten days earlier had not been one of confronting the politics of the Israeli–Palestinian situation. I was more curious to understand the state of the WAC and whether it faithfully represented its founding ideals, especially that of being truly representative of all those concerned with archaeology from all areas of the world. All organizations need to change through time in order to maintain their relevance and effectiveness, but several people I’d spoken to recently felt that WAC was now straying too far from this central principle. An initial impetus behind the formation of WAC had been a desire to have a world organization not controlled purely by scholars from elite Western institutions, but with equal representation from throughout the world (Shaw, 2006: xvii). This is to a degree inevitable — people from richer countries will always have more time and resources, allowing them to put time into something like WAC. But the point is that WAC, regardless, should strive to

represent the concerns of the global archaeological community. A range of issues had amplified the feelings of discontent in recent times. These included the role of a member of the WAC Executive in advising the UK government on targets to avoid during the Iraq war (Hamilakis, 2009: 46) which some viewed as an endorsement of the conflict, the decision to allow sponsorship of WAC by the Rio Tinto mining company (Haber, 2009: 40), the holding of congresses in expensive first world locations such as Washington and Dublin, and the controversial involvement of one of the WAC 6 hosts with the Irish National Roads Authority (Ronayne, 2008: 122; UCD, 2008: 199).

The Ramallah Inter-Congress promised to be a good opportunity to assess these concerns, as even the WAC website intimated a self-conscious realignment with the organization's original principles:

True to its foundational principles, the World Archaeological Congress will hold its first 'Middle East' meeting to focus on the powerful relationship between archaeology, heritage and politics [...] Today as Palestine moves closer to official statehood, WAC decries the often destructive politics that define Israeli-Palestinian relationships. We note the on-going damage to the archaeological record but also the potential of a shared cultural heritage to build towards peace. We call for participation in this strategic InterCongress to demonstrate how archaeology can serve political ends for the greater good. (WAC, 2009)

One of the main reasons for holding the conference in the setting of the West Bank was to ensure that Palestinian archaeologists would be able to attend, as they are seldom able to travel outside of the occupied territories and not at all to Israel, where issues directly concerning their heritage and the archaeology of their region are discussed without them. This inclusion of the Palestinians is fully in line with WAC's principles, though, of course, the current political situation made a completely inclusive conference impossible. In the lead-up to the conference, the organizers posted a message on the website noting that they had been informed that Israeli scholars would not be able to attend due to their government's regulations, and that they would seek to create a video link so that they could still follow the presentations. In the end a live link did not prove practical due to insufficient internet bandwidth, but the conference was filmed with the intention of posting the footage to the web later on.

Unless they possess a second passport (as many do), it is not legal for Israelis to enter Ramallah without special permits, usually granted only to journalists. It is possible for them to get across the border illegally if they are lucky enough to get through the checkpoints without being questioned too closely, but they are running quite a risk in doing this. Only two Israelis did take their chances to come across and participate, which was an admirable demonstration of openness and commitment. Of the others who were interested in the conference topic, many considered the security situation too dangerous. It should also be noted that approximately four out of five Israeli archaeologists work for the Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA), a governmental organization that was likely to oppose the conference on political grounds (and eventually did so), and thus had to consider their future career prospects. It was also difficult for some international attendees to get there — with Sven Ouzman from South Africa, for example, requiring two days to get through the Israeli control at the Jordanian border, and then being forced to violate the terms of the 'Palestinian

Authority only' visa they had given him six times by crossing the Israeli-controlled areas of the West Bank in order to reach Ramallah (Hass, 2009).

For those foreigners who did manage to attend however, the venue of Palestine was an educational experience in itself. It is one thing to hear about the situation there via the news media, but the time spent in Ramallah and the organized excursions enabled us to experience first hand what it is like under occupation, with the separation wall and settler roads dividing and controlling their landscape. This made it much easier to understand the challenges that archaeologists there face on a day-to-day basis.

The principle aim of the conference was to discuss the relationships between archaeology and forms of structural violence, both in general and then specifically in Palestine. To this end there were sessions organized on international case studies of structural violence, the current state of Palestinian archaeology and the challenges it faces, and on specific issues such as looting and education, among others. By the end of two days of papers, the major issues encompassing structural violence and archaeology, with a focus on Palestine in particular, had been discussed in detail and these were then reinforced through very informative trips to Nablus, East Jerusalem and Jericho.

Several papers concentrated on structural violence outside of Palestine. These included an insightful and thought-provoking comparison by Reinhard Bernbeck from the Freie Universität Berlin of the control structures employed by the Assyrian empire with those of the modern USA, in which many clear parallels can be drawn. Focusing on more recent times, Sven Ouzman from the University of Pretoria also stimulated discussion by identifying many similarities between the ways in which archaeology was used to reinforce nationalism and state control in apartheid South Africa, and the situation in Israel today.

While a lot has been written in recent years about the controversial role of advisory and 'embedded' archaeologists in the Iraq conflict, this conference did not concentrate to any extent on that issue. There were, however, two extremely interesting talks on the Blue Shield organization, delivered by Friedrich Schipper (Austrian National Committee of the Blue Shield) and Holger Eichberger (Austrian Society for the Protection of Cultural Property), which detailed the background to the organization and in particular the way that it works in Austria. The Blue Shield in Austria aims to achieve a situation where the country's military is responsible for protecting its heritage during conflict situations, and insists that its staff be high-ranking military officers. This is very different to the case of archaeologists acting in consulting roles when their country attacks another, which can also be interpreted as both endorsing the military action and assisting the armed forces in killing enemy combatants more efficiently. While perhaps not all countries can afford to implement a programme on the scale of the Austrian one, there is surely a case for an organization such as UNESCO providing funding for it in those countries that can't. At the very least, if a country's own citizens have made known what their heritage sites are with the verification of an independent body, then that removes the impetus for a foreign military to place their own archaeologists in a moral quandary.

The rest of the conference focused on structural violence and archaeology through the lens of Palestine. This provided an opportunity for the international participants

to gain an understanding of a complex situation with a long history, and for the Palestinian participants to discuss and try to solve the very real and pressing issues that they face. Hamdan Taha began the conference with a summary of the issues confronting Palestinian archaeology from the point of view of the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH), of which he is Director. The list he covered really put into perspective the overwhelming challenges facing the department, including attempting to combat the looting that is currently rife, preserving sites damaged in the conflict with Israel and those either destroyed or alienated by the building of the separation wall, and carrying out salvage excavations in a time of increasing development activity. Damage to sites due to fighting has been particularly severe in Gaza (Milstein, 2009), but Taha reported that since the Hamas takeover his department no longer has any overview of what is happening there. On top of this they need to develop heritage legislation for a fledgling state, and begin planning for a more peaceful future by looking at the establishment of World Heritage sites to encourage tourism. He explained that all of this needs to be achieved in the face of a severe lack of both staff with adequate training and of academic and professional information resources.

The three main themes discussed in the subsequent papers were looting and the antiquities trade, education, and the appropriation of Palestinian heritage. It is no exaggeration to say that the looting situation is particularly dire. Ahmed Rjoob from the Ministry of Tourism gave the staggering estimate that over 100,000 artefacts have illegally been removed from the Palestinian territories since 1989. The problem, as Morag Kersel from the University of Toronto explained in her presentation, is that while the sale of antiquities is illegal in Palestine, the opposite is the case across the border in Israel, so this is where the vast majority of the looted material ends up, either being sold to tourists there or moving on to foreign shops and auction houses. While walking through the Old City of Jerusalem several days after the conference, I came across an Israeli shopkeeper who proudly told me of the antiques shop he used to keep in English Cheshire, where he was able to sell large volumes of Palestinian artefacts, passing them off as British Roman. In another of the small shops that line the warren of narrow streets, full of dusty ceramics and boxes of coins, a framed and autographed photo on the wall showed the owner earnestly discussing an artefact with the late military commander, politician and passionate collector Moshe Dayan. The Israeli role in the antiquities trade is not insignificant — the cutting up of the landscape by roads, settlements and the separation wall makes it difficult to reach, much less protect, many sites. Similarly, artefacts excavated in Palestine by Israeli archaeologists are removed to Israel and the sites then left unprotected — a well-advertised attraction for looters. During the discussion sessions the point was made repeatedly, however, that the problem lies equally on the Palestinian side. Adel Yahya, from the Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange (PACE), described the way that the majority of Palestinian looters are driven to do so because of the state of the economy in a time of conflict, with high unemployment making it an important subsistence activity. In such times, heritage is of course not the top priority for either the general population or for the Palestinian Authority. The police thus do not have the time, resources or inclination to protect sites from looting, or from the internal development that is increasing rapidly and generally goes unchecked. It is thus on

the one hand somewhat dismaying, but on the other quite understandable, that the Palestinians are now considering legalizing the antiquities trade within their own territory (Kersel, 2008: 21), in order to at least be able to regulate it to some extent, and to enable the profits to be made in Palestine itself, rather than across the border.

Time and again throughout the conference, education was identified as a major problem facing Palestinian cultural heritage, with a crucial part to play in future development. As the public are often neither aware of the importance of local sites for both their own local history and that of Palestine as a whole, nor of the potential long-term economic benefits of heritage tourism, it was often mentioned that archaeologists need to invest more time in community education in order to reduce incidents of looting and vandalism. Yahya underlined this problem when he described the frequent desecration of Muslim graves, where the would-be looters do not realize that Muslim tombs do not contain grave goods. Expanding education is also the key to producing more professionally trained archaeologists, as only 2 out of 13 higher education institutions currently provide graduate courses (Al-Houdalieh, 2009: 165–169). Education in the Gaza Strip was reported to be especially under stress, with Hamas having taken over institutions and courses being taught by non-qualified personnel, and with resources such as books and journals being extremely scarce. Just five minutes' drive from Ramallah, Birzeit University proved to be a good example of how some of these issues are being addressed. Vera Tamari discussed the fact, for instance, that none of Birzeit's students has ever seen East Jerusalem even though it is only 15 minutes away, so the staff have to make heavy use of slides and the internet in their lessons. The university's online programmes, including the website of the Ethnographic and Art Museum ([http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/museum\\_homepage](http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/museum_homepage)), are an excellent example of the value of the internet for disseminating information to students and the community in a situation where people are not able to travel freely from place to place. Beverley Butler from the UCL Institute of Archaeology also presented an important initiative of which she is a co-author, the Palestinian National Museum Policy, which provides a five-year roadmap for development of a museums' network. Among its aims, the network is expected to 'Support learning of all kinds and at all levels, both through formal school and university curricula and in informal community and family settings' (Palestinian Authority, 2008: 2). It aims to do this partially through a pilot programme called 'Museums for Every Schoolchild', and also by reviewing and adjusting the national curriculum so that 'all Palestinian schoolchildren and students are aware of their inheritance as a resource' (ibid.: 5).

The appropriation of Palestinian heritage was another major topic, and one that Palestinians are, to a great extent, unable to do anything about, as at present a significant proportion of their heritage sites are on land they do not control, or even have access to. It is no secret that Israel continues to take Palestinian territory at an alarming rate today and, despite public statements to the contrary, appears to be following a strategy by which it has no intention of honouring international agreements which call for a halt to such actions. According to Hamdan Taha, the building of the separation wall alone will transfer a staggering 4,500 Palestinian heritage sites to Israeli territory (Taha, 2010). Statistics like these help to bring home to those of us on the outside the reality and magnitude of what is taking place.

It is not only the appropriation of their physical heritage that the Palestinians have to deal with, but also what Noam Chomsky has called ‘the counterrevolutionary subordination of scholarship’, which he describes as follows:

Insofar as the technique of management and control exists, it can be used to consolidate the authority of those who exercise it and to diminish spontaneous and free experimentation with new social forms, as it can limit the possibilities for reconstruction of society in the interests of those who are now, to a greater or lesser extent, dispossessed. Where the techniques fail, they will be supplemented by all of the methods of coercion that modern technology provides, to preserve order and stability. (Chomsky, 2002: 157–158)

We had first-hand experience of this at the Inter-Congress when the Vice-Director of the IAA, Uzi Dahari, sent an open letter to WAC president Claire Smith on the fourth day, expressing his ‘indignation’ that the conference was ‘little more than a political demonstration’ (IAA, 2009). Receiving significant coverage in the Israeli press, the letter sought to discredit the conference as politically biased, claiming as evidence of this that Israeli archaeologists had not been invited. This claim was a deliberately selective and misleading use of the truth. WAC is an international organization that advertises its congresses and inter-congresses through its mailing list, inviting all members to attend. No individual person or organization receives a direct invitation. Other archaeologists in Israel were aware of the event, and apparently the flyer for the conference had even been delivered in person to the IAA headquarters. In fact despite his public protests to the contrary, Dahari himself had been emailed about the conference well in advance (R. Bernbeck, pers. comm.). The real purpose of the IAA letter was thus not to complain about inequitable treatment, but to damage the reputation and effectiveness of the conference as much as possible.

In many cases, where archaeological sites become part of Israeli territory, whether on an officially permanent basis or not, they then undergo a process of being made Israeli. An excellent example of what this means was presented by Mahmoud Hawari from Oxford University, with the case of the Citadel of Jerusalem in what is officially occupied East Jerusalem. The citadel is a very prominent part of the Old City, located at the Jaffa (western) Gate. Despite a 2,000-year history that is rich in Hellenistic, Herodian, Roman, Early Islamic, Crusader, Ayyubid and Ottoman influences, this imposing monument is today bedecked with Israeli flags and has been renamed ‘The Citadel of David’, even though the biblical king is not known to have had any connection to it whatsoever. It now houses a museum on the development of Jerusalem that presents a history biased towards a story of Jewish continuity. On an official tour of the museum following the conference, the context of the museum building itself was not mentioned at all, until we asked the guide at the end what the connection to King David was — ‘That’s a good question. Actually there isn’t any’. In reality few tourists will think to ask this however — for them the site reinforces the Israeli identity of Jerusalem, at the expense of all others who have played a role in its history, especially the Palestinians.

One of the excursions organized by the conference took us around to the Silwan valley just outside the southern walls, and was equally illuminating. Our guide was Rafi Greenberg from Tel Aviv University, a critic of what he calls the ‘shallow and brutal’ archaeological projects being carried out in Jerusalem (Greenberg, 2009), whose outspoken views have already got him banned from excavations run by the IAA. The atmosphere on the tour was fairly tense, because as a result of the IAA’s

open letter from the day before we were accompanied by a reporter from *The Jerusalem Post* and a photographer from another paper, who spent most of his time taking close-up shots of each member of the party. We were also photographed several times by staff from the heritage site itself, all despite being filmed by surveillance cameras the entire time. Also with us on the tour was a friend of our hosts who has lived in East Jerusalem for over 50 years. As we arrived at an Israeli control point near the ‘City of David’ site inside the southern walls, he was refused permission to pass simply for being an Arab male. The security personnel finally relented after 15 minutes of heated argument, but this highlighted the situation local Palestinians face — their heritage is not only appropriated through biased representation, they are also refused physical access to much of it. This is not to mention the residents of the West Bank and Gaza who are currently denied access to East Jerusalem completely, and many of whom have never seen it at all.

The tour we took along the southern wall with Rafi aimed to give us a balanced picture of the historical development of Jerusalem, other than the version that Israeli and foreign tourists receive on official tours run by a conservative Jewish association called Elad that manages the site — and which is also responsible for a strategy of ‘Judaization’ of East Jerusalem by progressively acquiring Palestinian land (Rapoport, 2007). These tours actually take place in tunnels deep beneath the Old City and the neighbouring Palestinian neighbourhood of Silwan, where a one-sided story emphasizing Jewish heritage is told, with the tourists kept out of contact with the locals, under whose very houses they unknowingly walk (Ofran, 2009). A balanced view is not what we received from *The Jerusalem Post*. After listening to Rafi speak for over three hours, the reporter produced a fairly aggressive article with short, decontextualized quotes that made him sound as though he had been deliberately misleading the group. It ended by quoting Elad spokesman Doron Spielman that the tour had been ‘a political diatribe by politico-archaeologists’ and that the conference overall had ‘sullied the very name of archaeology as an academic discipline’ (Hoffman and Ryan, 2009). This was the complete opposite of what really happened, but was designed purely for Israeli readers, in order to defend the position of Elad and the IAA.

These were only some of the examples of appropriation of cultural heritage given during the five days, but I have highlighted them specifically as it was possible to experience them and gain a deeper appreciation for the issues directly, an invaluable aspect of this Inter-Congress.

In the context of the extremely difficult political situation in the region, a proposal for solving the problem of cultural appropriation should a final status agreement be reached was presented. This was the ‘Israeli–Palestinian Cultural Heritage Agreement’, which had been produced in 2007 by ‘a select group of professional and academic Israeli and Palestinian archaeologists and cultural heritage experts ... coordinated by two United States-based archaeologists’ (IPAWG, 2007). This was quite controversial because the ‘select group’ had been so select that even one and a half years after its publication many of the Palestinian delegates had never heard of it, and were extremely concerned about what was being done in their name. The document’s two US organizers, Ran Boytner of the UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology and Lynn Swartz Dodd of the University of Southern California (USC) School of Religion, were both present and helped to mediate the ensuing debate.

While on the USC website the Agreement is presented in a signed and seemingly finished form, at the conference it was described more diplomatically by Adel Yahya as a draft. The idea is certainly commendable — to have in place an agreement for what should happen to cultural heritage should a final status agreement be made between Israel and Palestine. Assuming a two-state solution, the document recommends that control of ‘immobile’ sites be completely transferred to the state they are situated in, that ‘mobile’ artefacts should be returned to their place of origin, including repatriation of museum collections, and that a ‘Heritage Zone’ be created in Jerusalem to ensure joint management of sites (IPAWG, 2007). The Israeli archaeological community had already been invited to respond to the document in April 2008, and considerable opposition to the section on mobile heritage had been expressed, with it being described as a ‘most severe blow to Israeli archaeology — or, more accurately to Israeli identity’, as this would mean Israel having to return to Palestinian control items central to Jewish identity such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, something that Uzi Dahari of the IAA unequivocally ruled out as a possibility (Rapoport, 2008). The proposed Heritage Zone was also criticized by some in the Israeli press as being too idealistic, as it would be a voluntary agreement only (Silberman, 2008).

Adel Yahya had anticipated a similar response on the Palestinian side, stating in his presentation that:

The participants in this process are well aware that their conclusions and recommendations may be received with a great deal of pessimism and will be considered by many as premature, if not out of context at the present political stalemate, but we are convinced that it provides a positive vision for the future of the two countries and the regions’ threatened cultural heritage ... [but] we have learned from bitter experience that the absence of dialogue and coordination between concerned parties ... will only harm the country’s cultural heritage.

Of the Palestinian objections to the Agreement voiced at the Inter-Congress, perhaps the greatest was that only three Palestinians had been directly involved in its creation, and several participants expressed their bewilderment that it had been discussed in secret, with only a slightly larger group having been consulted confidentially, to the extent that the Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage itself had not been involved, and was presented for the first time with the final text by journalists. Despite this, Yahya was correct in that the most important thing was to begin to address the issue at all — not such an easy task when both sides have such protracted differences. At the end of the day, even though a degree of secrecy was required and some noses were put out of joint, at least the Agreement is firmly on the table and being debated as a possibility on both sides, which is no mean feat at all. This exemplifies the positive role that private individuals and non-governmental institutions can play in critical situations where state agencies either will not or cannot involve themselves. This is central to the spirit of WAC, so it was appropriate that the Inter-Congress could provide a forum for this and hopefully it will also serve to encourage similar initiatives among the WAC membership.

The discussion over the Agreement brought into the spotlight the greatest problem facing Palestinian archaeology — it is not integrated. There is no one national organization with a broad membership of those concerned with cultural heritage in DACH, PACE, university lecturers and students, the tour operators, and others, in

the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and abroad. More than anything else, solving this one thing would give Palestinians an opportunity to speak with one voice based on consensus should a final status agreement come to pass, and to begin more effectively to tackle issues involving looting and education in the meantime. Without such a unifying organization, projects such as the Cultural Heritage Agreement run the risk of being well-intentioned ideas that nonetheless fail through lack of consultation and authority to act. An extremely constructive outcome of the conference, therefore, was the passing of a resolution in the plenary session that called for the setting up of such a single representative body for Palestinian cultural heritage.

## Conclusion

So was WAC's decision to hold the Inter-Congress in Ramallah wise? The answer is definitely yes. Very importantly, the Palestinian participants in the conference had a rare chance to interact directly with their peers, and to explain the challenges that they face to the outside world. As Nadia Abu El-Haj has commented on the Israeli–Palestinian situation (2001: 281), 'Modern political rights have been substantiated in and expanded through the material signs of historic presence . . . Archaeology remains salient in this world of ongoing contestation.' The IAA attack on the conference gained publicity, and probably served their aims of discrediting it within the Israeli community to a large degree. But it highlighted above all the hard fact that despite the many admirable projects under way to improve the situation in Palestine, cultural heritage is still very much a tool of structural violence that is being wielded to political ends today. The argument that a global organization such as WAC was anti-Israeli by choosing to include Palestinian scholars is disingenuous at best and pure politics at worst. Through being able to experience some of the issues first hand we came away with a much greater appreciation and understanding of this fact, and hopefully this will inform ongoing and future approaches to projects in the region.

And back to my initial question — is WAC still true to its guiding values? At the end of my trip I decided that yes, it is. The executive can at times become a little Western-focused, but despite all of the difficulties encountered, this Inter-Congress demonstrated that it does genuinely try to increase participation from all countries. Above all, it seeks an active membership — if people concerned with archaeology and heritage want to be involved and effect change, they can, and will receive help in doing so. The plenary resolution to offer support for the creation of a single Palestinian cultural heritage body is a good example of this, as is the providing of a forum for vital non-governmental initiatives such as the Cultural Heritage Agreement. To my mind therefore, WAC does still promote the inclusion and causes of those otherwise often denied a voice in the international system, as it should. It will never be perfect, but as long as it stays aligned to these principles, it will continue to have a positive impact on our profession and beyond.

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