

## **Open Letter to my Academic Colleagues Participating in “The First International Conference on Archaeology and Site Conservation of Judea and Samaria”**

Last weekend, I found a full-page ad in the *Haaretz* newspaper informing the public of an impending four-day conference on Israeli archaeology in the occupied West Bank, in the upscale Dan hotel in East Jerusalem. The opening ceremony of the conference – the largest archaeological conference conducted in Israel in recent memory – features unspecified public speakers and keynote speeches by scholars from the Austrian Academy of Sciences and Cornell University. The academic sessions include papers delivered by members of every research university in Israel (the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Bar-Ilan University, the University of Haifa and Ben Gurion University), as well as speakers from Italy, Malta, Australia and the United States.

Funded generously by the Ministry of Heritage and the outgoing minister Amihai Eliyahu (of the racist and homophobic Jewish Power party) and sponsored by the “Civil Administration” of Judea and Samaria (the Occupied West Bank), the University in the settlement of Ariel, Bar-Ilan University and other Israeli organizations, this conference serves no urgent professional purpose (for example, mitigating the terrible loss of heritage incurred in the ongoing war in and around Gaza and in the West Bank), nor has it been convened as an academic conference, with the typical call for papers and registration process. Rather, it is a showcase for the work of settler-adjacent archaeologists and their collaborators, timed to coincide with a political push in the Israeli parliament for the archaeological annexation of large parts of the West Bank and with the promotion, by settlers in Israel and their supporters in the U.S., of ethnic cleansing in the Gaza Strip.

I confess that I am appalled and disheartened by your participation. You are no doubt aware of the dubious ethics of much of the archaeological work in the occupied territories and East Jerusalem and its contravention of the Hague convention and protocol (1954) and the New Delhi recommendations (1956), both signed by Israel. These stipulate that only the most necessary measures for the safeguarding of archaeological sites may be conducted by the occupying power and forbid the removal of cultural artifacts from the occupied territories (unless there is an urgent need due to combat risks). They certainly do not permit academics to exploit the region’s antiquities to satisfy their curiosity or further their careers. You must also be aware that Israel and the settlers whom you have joined have weaponized archaeology in Jerusalem and the West Bank, using as a lever to dispossess Palestinians and enlarge the settler footprint. You must also have seen the program of the conference, which includes no Palestinian participants, thus highlighting the wedge being driven between Palestinians and their archaeological heritage.

None of this deterred you from taking part in the conference. Neither were those of you who live overseas reluctant to put your thumb on the political scale in what is a hotly contested internal issue in Israel – the collaboration with the extreme right-wing government that has wrought catastrophe upon catastrophe and shredded the very fabric of our democracy.

Perhaps you have been told that the conference has no political content. Well, that is at best disingenuous and at worst mendacious. To paraphrase W.G. Sebald, when morally compromised scholars claim that the field of science is a value-free area, it should make us stop and think. If the true interest of the organizers was the salvage and safeguarding of sites, they would have been better served by a low-key professional meeting of those who can actually contribute to such a cause.

At a time when most legitimate archaeological work in Israel has been curtailed by the catastrophes of the past year; at a time when Israeli archaeologists are subject to impending formal and informal boycotts; at a time when members of the extreme right-wing parties and organization threaten to renew extensive hostilities and the wholesale destruction of Palestinian homes, educational institutions and heritage; at such a time, when what we need is hope and a path to a shared future in this land, joining forces with the settlers in a show of force in East Jerusalem only takes our archaeology farther down the road of exclusionary, self-congratulatory isolation.

I hope you take these words to heart.

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