



Virtual World Project

History and Archaeology

Although archaeology and history are today independent disciplines, any work in the archaeology of Levant will eventually have to address issues stemming from historical texts. This is true for all archaeology of cultures that produced texts, but especially true for the archaeology of Israel and Jordan because of the role that the Bible has played in the history of that archaeology.

The archaeology of Israel and Jordan has often and traditionally been characterized as “biblical archaeology.” That is, its subject has been the archaeology of the people and the region of the Bible, and its purpose has been to correlate the archaeological data with the biblical record. Indeed, much of the earlier archaeological work done this century has had the purpose of bringing clarity or verification to a biblical story. On the positive side, this connection between the Bible and archeology is responsible in part for the popularity (and romance) of archaeology for the general public. Moreover, the results of biblical archaeology have indeed shed much light on the biblical literature. But on the negative side, biblical archaeology has had the tendency to blur the methodological limits and domains of the disciplines of archaeology and history (and biblical studies in particular).

Students of the history and the Bible need to beware of a common naïve assumption regarding the relationship between history and archaeology: Archaeology serves to complement history and to support or falsify the historical record. This assumption is an expression of the commonly held priority that is given to literary texts. Literary evidence often sets the agenda for the research of non-literary material culture. The corollary to this assumption is that non-literary material culture is mute, cannot speak, without an appropriate context supplied by literary evidence. Unfortunately, this assumption expresses a naiveté about the role of material culture (symbolic expressions) for constructing meaning about the past.

Indeed, it is because of the inherent deficiencies of historical texts for understanding the society, economy, and religion of an ancient people that archaeology provides such a valuable resource. But the material remains of archaeology are not subordinate to the textual record for historical study. Like texts themselves, material remains are symbolic expressions encoding messages about the past. They similarly require a critical interpretation before they can be used in understanding the past. Material remains are thus not mute; rather, the historian must learn to “hear” what they “speak” about the past in dialogue with the questions posed to them. For example, faunal remains “tell” about the economy of a people, about their vocations, about their diet; architectural structures “give witness” to the social and gender stratification of society and to the kinship structures and relations within a

village; cultic artifacts “speak” about the theology and religious practices of an individual, a family, or a community.

Archaeology provides a different kind of evidence than literary texts, such as the Bible. In contrast to the biblical texts that have undergone several generations of revision and editing, and to other literary texts whose content has been selectively chosen by an author, archaeological evidence is analogous to primary sources. It is frozen in time, attesting to the ancient world first-hand. Archaeological evidence has not been subject to the secondary reformulation that is characteristic of the literary process. Archaeological remains are random and unintentional. They constitute, therefore, an external witness to the past. In this way, archaeological evidence is more “objective.”

What Archaeology Cannot Do

Because archaeology provides a different kind of evidence than from texts, archaeology cannot be expected to make definitive contributions to several basic historical problems. For example, archaeology cannot contribute to the problems of chronology beyond the broad limits determined by ceramic or radiocarbon dating. Archaeology addresses chronology through typologies of material remains that lack the precision of the chronological framework established by texts. The basis of typology is that human culture changes gradually and within limits. When a broad range of features and artifacts from stratified archaeological contexts are compared, a typological sequence can be established into which new features and artifacts can be placed. This typological sequence then becomes a means for dating the material uncovered in a new excavation. The major artifact used in typological dating is pottery. Pottery sherds are virtually indestructible and are found at every site in Israel and Jordan for every period since the Neolithic period. Moreover, whole pottery vessels were easily broken, leading to the production of more pottery and to rapid changes in the pottery repertoire. As a result, a large database of pottery has enabled archaeologists to establish a typological sequence by which they are able to date layers of human occupation in an excavation. Although this pottery typology is tied to an absolute chronology by occasional dated inscriptions that are found in sealed archaeological contexts, the changes within the pottery sequence provide a chronological precision of no greater than a few decades.

Other historical issues to which archaeology cannot make a definitive contribution include the problem of ethnicity. Archaeology can provide much of the material content of ethnicity, but it cannot finally define the ethnic groups because such a definition also involves shared cultural values and self-perceptions. Ethnicity involves both material and ideological components. The identification of the early Israelites in the archaeological record, for example, has been a continual problem in this regard, for the early Israelites appear to share the same material culture as the Canaanites. Some interpreters attempt to get around this problem by identifying the inhabitants of the new settlements in the central hill country at the beginning of the Iron I period as early Israelites and those inhabitants who continue to occupy the Late Bronze cities and towns as Canaanites. However, such an interpretation cannot be supported by the archaeological evidence, and in any case is only possible because of the implications of the biblical text (e.g., see Joshua 17:14-18).

The interrelation of particular human events in a political history is also beyond the scope to which archaeology can contribute. Archaeology can demonstrate that the city of Hazor in the Upper Galilee was destroyed near the end of the Late Bronze Age, and that the city of Lachish in Judah was destroyed approximately a century later. It cannot answer the

questions: Who destroyed the cities? Was the same agent responsible for the destruction of each city? Why were the cities destroyed? What were the causes of the cities' destruction? What happened to the inhabitants of the cities after they were destroyed? Archaeology does not deal with the kind of evidence necessary to deal with these questions. For many of the problems of political history, archaeology can only remain silent.

Finally, archaeology cannot demonstrate the meaning of literary texts. The meaning of the texts is not found in the degree to which the texts correspond to what really happened in the past. Rather, the meaning of the texts is found in the interaction between writers, symbolic encodings in texts, and readers, and this meaning is beyond the scope of archaeological research.

What Archaeology Can Do

The focus of archaeology is on the material world, and it is in this regard that archaeology can contribute to the historical study of the past. Archaeology provides the material context for understanding this history by presenting the material remains of a broad spectrum of Middle Eastern peoples and places. This material provides the general setting for the history of its peoples, and through cross-cultural comparison is able to shed light on a people's material culture. For example, archaeology can provide information about the distinctive cultures of those peoples who lived near and interacted with the Israelites, such as the Philistines, Edomites, Phoenicians, Arameans, and Assyrians. Regional surveys allow us to reconstruct settlement patterns and the demographics of particular regions. The faunal and floral remains gathered from excavations enable us to reconstruct the environmental setting and its changes over time.

Archaeology also provides the specific material context for many of the events narrated in literary texts, much of which the narratives themselves do not address. The biblical description of King Hezekiah's rebellion against the Assyrian empire, for example, focuses primarily on the diplomatic maneuvers of the Rabshakeh of Assyria to coerce Hezekiah into submission (2 Kings 18-19). The archaeological evidence, however, presents a picture of Hezekiah's preparations for revolt and its tragic consequences.

Finally, archaeological remains illuminate the daily life of the ancient peoples, which supplements the literary texts. Only from archaeology can we learn about the planning and defenses of the Israelite and Judean towns and cities; the architecture of palaces, houses, temples, and public buildings; figurine, altars, and other cult objects; tombs and the different peoples' treatment of their dead; luxury items such as jewelry, carved ivories, metal and stone vessels, and imported items; and common tools and weapons. Archaeology enables us to reconstruct aspects of the society, economy, and religion of the ancient peoples that are neglected by the textual tradition. Furthermore, because archaeological evidence is random – its preservation is by chance, unaffected by human selection – it provides an alternative perspective from which to view the literary narratives. For example, the widespread abundance of terra cotta female figures in the Iron Age Jerusalem area attests to a dominant concern for female fertility that is given little attention in the biblical texts.

Levels of History

The relationship between the literary texts and archaeology can be clarified further by noting the role that each may play in history. Following Fernand Braudel and the Annales School, we can distinguish three levels or tiers of history. The deepest level of history can be

referred to as “geographical time.” It addresses the relationship of humans to their environment. This is history in which all change is slow and undergoes a constant repetition. At this level, we can discuss ecology and human subsistence. We might discuss long-range settlement patterns. This level of history presents the common fate of humans beyond the influence of conscious decision-making. In regard to the history of ancient Israel, this level addresses the Israelite settlement in the context of the oscillating periods of settlement of the central hill country. Archaeology provides the primary evidence for this level of history.

The second, intermediate level of history can be referred to as “social time.” This level addresses the social relationships among human groups. This is the level of cultural changes, and thus is a history with slow but perceptible rhythms. In regard to the history of ancient Israel, this level can address the transformation of the Israelites from a kinship based, tribal society to the formation of territorial states based on the hierarchical structural relationships of patronage. In this regard we can also focus on the rise of an “Israelite” identity and the emergence of a nascent nationalism. Both archaeology and texts, in different ways, provide evidence for understanding history at this level.

The final, surface level of history can be referred to as “individual time.” This level addresses the rapidly changing history of human events. This is the level of political history; it is at this level that history becomes narrative. In terms of our evidence, the textual record is best suited for addressing historical questions at the surface level of individual time. Archaeology can also contribute to this level of history, but generally only in supplying the material context for the events.