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Journal

Department of Near Eastern Studies, 10(5)

Author

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Publication Date

2010-12-01

DRY DIG

ETHICS AND ALCOHOL IN MIDDLE EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

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There were two people there, both archaeologists, and both recognized me from the meetings. So I had no choice but to sit down and have a beer with them [Kent Flannery 1982:265].

It did not take me long to discover that alcohol consumption is an intimate ritual in archaeological practice. I recall my first anthropology club event when I was an undergraduate in the early 1990s: field projects from the past summer gave summaries of their work, each ending with slide images of empty beer cans and clever innuendos about hangovers and campfires. To me, these stories were funny. They revealed a quirky human element to a discipline I was just beginning to join. This initial impression would be reaffirmed in the coming years during graduate school cocktail hours, at the annual SAA conference bar, and, of course, during field research. As my career interests shifted to the Middle East, I found that the ritual of alcohol consumption was deeply embedded in archaeological practice there as well, despite any local or religious customs attempting to discourage the practice.

Not that I mind a drink—I enjoy a cold beverage (or two ... or...) as much as the next archaeologist—but I have grown to realize that the discipline's relationship with alcohol has grown complicated for practitioners, especially those who are designing projects that engage with communities and stakeholders. Consider this: in 2009, the Dhiban Excavation and Development Project, a project I co-direct with colleagues in the Middle Eastern kingdom of Jordan (Porter et al. 2005, 2007), decided to ban all alcohol consumption. We made this decision for several reasons. Less alcohol would reduce the chronic levels of dehydration our team members experienced in this hot, arid climate; it would reduce project and personal expenses; and hopefully it would increase professional behavior among team members. The Dhiban Project would be growing in size over the next few years and it was time to instill some protocols. We had plans to increase the number of undergraduates from the United States, many of whom we anticipated would be under that country's legal drinking age. We would be required to abide by our home

institutions' rules if we were to receive their full sponsorship.

However, our primary motivation for banning alcohol was the fact that we were living in a rural Jordanian town of 15,000 people, nearly all of them Muslim. Alcohol is forbidden in Islam, although today each country has different legal policies about its purchase and consumption (Devasahayam 2003; Kueny 2003). In Jordan, Muslim and non-Muslim alike can purchase alcohol, and it is common to see, especially wealthy, Jordanians drinking in resort hotels, bars, and restaurants, but in Dhiban, no such public displays of drinking are visible or welcome. The town is located next to the site, and a number of our research goals are designed around community collaboration and economic development. In order to build and maintain productive working relationships, a positive persona was therefore necessary. And, as we were determined to make the cultural experience of living in Dhiban just as important as the archaeological field school, we realized the prohibition would be necessary.

So in 2009, the 23-person team of professors, graduate students, and undergraduates attempted a "dry-dig." Despite a persistent grumbling, the season was a success with the project attaining many of its research goals. The team stayed relatively healthy, too. After most of the students and staff had left, the codirectors were relatively pleased with the team's discipline and respect for the local community. But soon after, when cleaning off the roof of the men's house, we found a neatly hidden garbage bag of empty beer cans and liquor bottles, evidence that not everyone had followed the rules....

* * *

From where, exactly, did this relationship between the discipline and the drink arise? The question deserves more systematic study than can be afforded here. If allowed to speculate on origins, one could cite the fact that archaeology as a discipline emerged in tandem with modern leisure activities and access to consumables made possible by the Industrial Revolution and the Victorian Age (Davison 2004:33–35). Antiquarianism was



Figure 1. Tall Dhiban with contemporary Dhiban in the background—view toward the south (Photo: J. Porter).

then a gentleman's discipline carried out by often well-to-do European elites possessing the necessary capital (Levine 1986). The upper class embraced alcohol consumption while temperance movements discouraged it among the lower class, as they were believed to be unable to hold their liquor. European colonial endeavors overseas also meant that the comforts of home—among other things, a steady supply of one's favorite drink—needed portability to keep one from “going native.” Antiquarian archaeology cannot be blamed for everything, perhaps. At some point in our disciplinary practices, many archaeologists adopted a perspective that if one spent a hard day sweating outdoors and working with their hands, they had earned the right to relax with a drink and friends.

Today, drinking alcohol on an excavation seems so natural. But that does not mean the practice manifests itself in the same way. The culture of alcohol consumption differs from region to region and often seems dependent on access in local, often remote areas, and the historical milieus in which archaeological research have evolved. Beer may be the drink of choice for North and Latin American archaeologists, but it has only become a mainstay in the Middle East during the last two decades, thanks to the wider availability of local manufacturers and American and European imports like Amstel. Before beer, gin was the preferred Middle Eastern drink, a choice largely

informed by the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European archaeologists working in the region. The drink remains very much in vogue today, so long as one can afford the gin, find the tonic and ice, and tolerate a lemon—the lime being rare in many areas of the region. The anis-fermented drink *arak*, known in the U.S. as the Greek drink *uzo*, is a strong second in popularity as it is easy to find given the many local distilleries around the region.

Middle Eastern archaeology presents an interesting limit test. Today, as in the past, projects pay little attention to local attitudes about drinking, despite their awareness that alcohol is prohibited under Islam. If alcohol is prohibited, it is usually due to the fact that the project is sponsored by a religious organization that forbids drinking for doctrinal purposes. Why such ambivalence abounds is partly explained by the fact that archaeologists are almost never required to abide by local practices. Communities often granted archaeological projects an exemption, explaining their behaviors as odd and unfortunate for foreign guests. However, in the past decades, some but not all Middle Easterners have been turning to principles they believe foundational to Islam in an attempt to strengthen families and societies in the wake of what they believe are encroaching “Western” values (Tibbi 2002). Expressions of piety are key to such new awareness, which would be a combination of actions like going

to mosque and wearing certain clothes, to not acting, like abstaining from drugs and alcohol.

During the Dhiban project's first two seasons, we had not given much thought to the consequences of alcohol on the project. We did our best to drink privately, within our rented houses in domains that were considered our own. In a recent season, a few project members regularly consumed one, and sometimes even two, cases of beer per night. Accustomed to these habits from their daily routines at home, these large amounts did not appear to alter their performance. They did not get sick, become dehydrated, or miss our 5:30 AM mornings, although the large expense did set back their travel finances. The problem with their behavior was two-fold. One was that they drank on the roof of our rented house, a space that is only semi-private in crowded communities like Dhiban. Unlike in the interior of houses, one can observe and be observed by their neighbors on rooftop patios, a visibility that matters for a society in which socializing between unrelated men and women can be regulated highly, and people pass judgment on each other's moral fortitude from afar. The second problem was getting rid of the evidence. Carrying garbage bags full of aluminum cans and glass bottles to the garbage bin made a distinct clang that our neighbors easily recognized as the artifacts of the previous night's activities. The community had little difficulty arriving at the conclusion that project members were similar to the stereotypes of Westerners they viewed on their satellite televisions.

So as the project grew more serious about community archaeology, ethnography, and economic development, we realized that it was time for us to reevaluate our own practices in light of local circumstances. We reasoned that if we were to be charged with excavating and then representing Dhiban's cultural patrimony, we should be perceived as something more than drunk and immoral foreigners. In order to make sure that new team members knew what they were getting themselves into, we wrote a project handbook describing the modest clothes people should wear, how interactions between genders would be governed, and not least, the prohibition of alcohol in Dhiban. Prohibiting alcohol from the project was not a popular decision with most project members, especially graduate students. Some believed that the handbook's description was a mere formality to appease university lawyers or Jordanian officials, and that it would not be implemented in practice. In its absence, alcohol became a joke around which project members could bond. When desperate, people made the 45-minute bus ride to the nearby town of Madaba, where kiosks sold beer and Christian restaurants permitted the public consumption of wine and liquor.

We admittedly did not give much thought to how project members would react to the prohibition. We were the directors, after



Figure 2. The minaret of Dhiban's main mosque in the center of town. In the foreground are the trenches from excavations in the 1950s (Photo: B. Porter).

all, and everyone was aware of the rules before they arrived. We had assumed that because most, if not all, of the graduate students had encountered discussions of ethics, archaeology, and descendant communities in their seminars, they would understand the need to make these adjustments in the everyday practice of field research. Furthermore, we assumed that their awareness of archaeology's origins in imperialist projects, especially in the Middle East, would provide an additional rationalization for the changes. But this was hardly the case. Project members instead believed that despite these circumstances, this project should be the exception to such rules. To me, these contradictions between awareness and practice suggest that our ivory tower discussions regarding ethics and archaeology can ring hollow when practiced in the field. Ethics are easy to talk about—and make for great conference sessions—but can they overcome traditions that are so deeply embedded in the discipline?

Here is a little twist in my story. What complicates this project prohibition at Dhiban, ironically, is that alcohol consumption already persists among some locals in the town, albeit quietly and in the shadows of social life. Alcohol consumption is not something discussed in polite company, and when it is, it is usually joking accusations between young men about each other's nighttime behaviors. Perhaps even more ironic is that the most convenient place to drink is the very place where we excavate! The site is littered with broken bottles, evidence that



Figure 3. Remnants of glass alcohol container and cap found on the surface of Tall Dhiban (Photo B. Porter).

the site sees many nighttime visitors. This summer, our hired personnel from the community and I spent an hour cleaning up the plastic bags, on the site in advance of the arrival of important guests. As we cleaned up the broken bottles, we took great delight in accusing each other of being the ones responsible for leaving the bottles there in the first place.

So given alcohol's clandestine presence in the community, one might argue that the project might as well follow suit. I think there are several good arguments against this rationalization, some of which made above about health and expenses. Perhaps the most nuanced counterargument for me is the cultural explanation. In the Middle East, archaeologists who choose to live and work in rural communities are considered guests, a highly regarded position that requires them to play by host's "rules." This is especially true in Jordan, where reciprocal obligations between guests and hosts are particularly strong (Shyrock 2004). An Arabic proverb sums up this relation best: "The guest is the slave of the host, but the guest is a poet." That is, the guest must abide by the host's wishes, eat and drink what he is served, and

converse on topics of his host's choosing—but upon leaving, the guest can either praise or disparage the host's hospitality. Following this cultural logic that mediates our presence in Dhiban, I would argue that there are good grounds for following ideal cultural norms, even if those that set them are not living up to their own standards. Some will critique this position as unnecessarily pandering to arguments for cultural relativism common in the Middle East that seek to justify gender inequalities and tolerance for extreme religious viewpoints. But can one argue in response that alcohol consumption, like access to potable drinking water and education, is a universal human right? Hardly—rather, a community that entrusts a team of outsiders with recovering and representing their cultural patrimony deserves more respect.

* * *

A few days after discovering the hidden containers on the roof, the directors started to wonder if the prohibition would be enforceable in future seasons. Perhaps we were asking too

much of our team? We considered the possibility of a controlled outlet for eligible project members to have the opportunity to drink, but on our terms. One idea was having a designated space and time where members could buy a cold one that the project had purchased beforehand. There would be a slight mark-up on each purchase to account for the costs of transportation and renting the extra space. There would also be a limit to the number that could be purchased each night. Whatever we decide to do in future seasons, I suspect that our decision to at least manage consumption will always be unpopular.

I am not arguing here that the relationship between alcohol and archaeology grow disentangled, but rather we consider how consumption practices unfold in the everyday practices of the discipline, especially in field research settings. Archaeologists are rarely local or indigenous to the places in which they conduct their research, even in North America. We are always and already seen as outsiders bearing strange practices and assumed to be ignorant of local customs. As foreigners, we are often given a pass for our poor behavior, but pleading cultural ignorance when we are fully aware of our hosts' expectations does not justify an exemption. When learning local customs, we will no doubt discover contradictions in logic and practice, as any wise ethnographer will implicitly anticipate. Indeed, measuring our alcohol consumption can lead to the interrogation of other "naturalized" disciplinary practices that rest just beyond the limits of our awareness, but not our hosts'. Such a shift would require that the conversation about archaeological practice that is occurring at the cerebral level about representation, ethics, and law take a more pragmatic turn to consider quotidian practices such as the treatment of hired laborers (Berggren and Hodder 2003); the presentation of ourselves to local, sometimes descendant communities; and the need to learn indigenous languages and customs (Zimmerman 2005). Obviously this conversation has already begun, but just how we do this is certainly worth more discussion in our ranks—no doubt a good topic of conversation at the next SAA conference hotel bar—see you there ... I'm buying the first round ...

Acknowledgments. Cheers to Kevin McGeough and Elizabeth Galway for their bibliographic assistance, Claudia Liuzza for her feedback, and Bruce Routledge for the epigraph.

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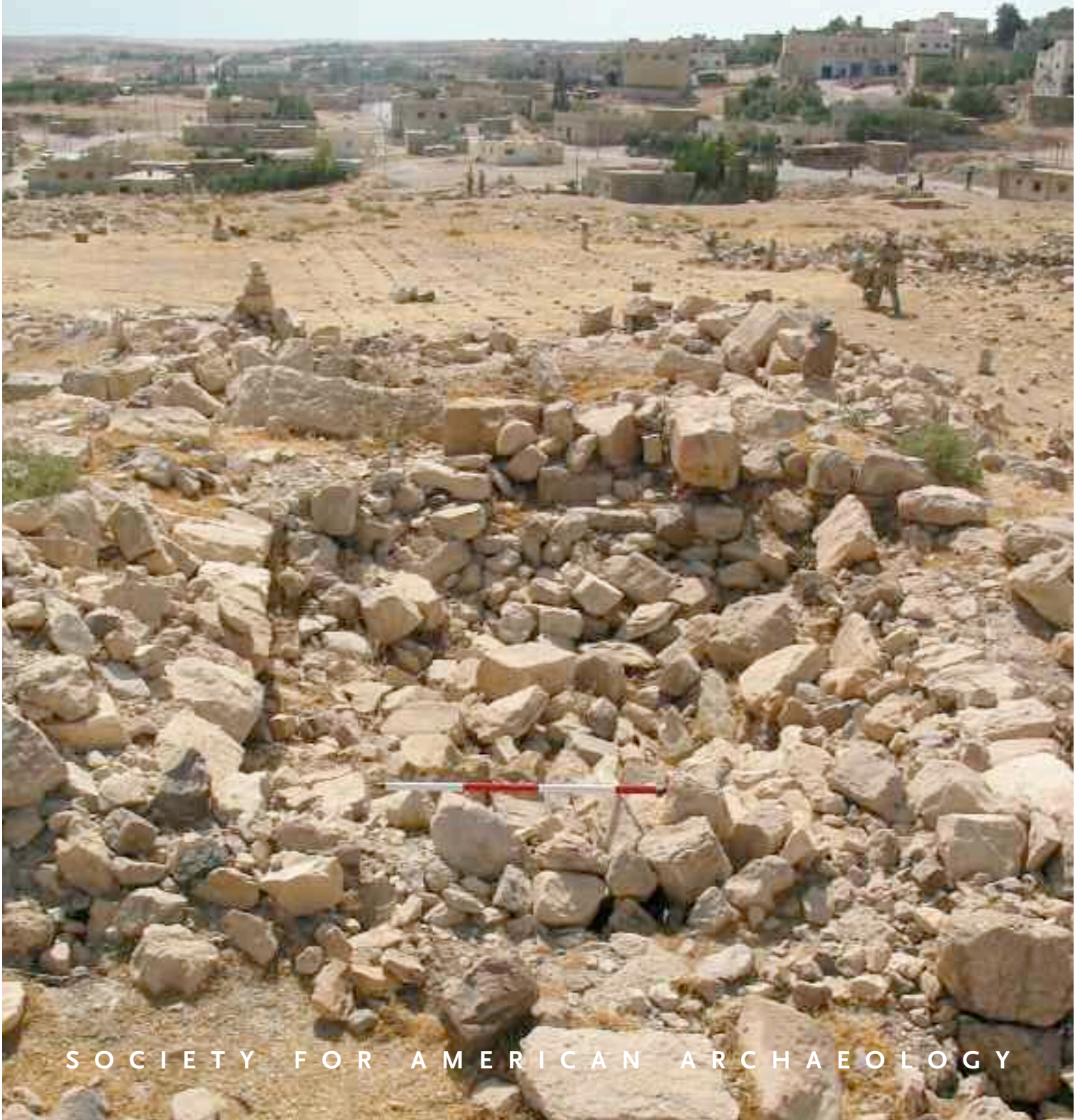
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Announcement: Needs Assessment Survey

Surveys were distributed to all SAA members on October 13, 2010 through a secure link sent to you by this email: saa-survey@associationresearch.com. A postcard containing the link was mailed out to those members without a current email address on file with SAA. We do need your participation. Please complete the survey by the December 1, 2010 closing date. Thank you in advance for your time.

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the
SAA archaeological record
NOVEMBER 2010 • VOLUME 10 • NUMBER 5



SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY