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Archaeology as a Vendetta

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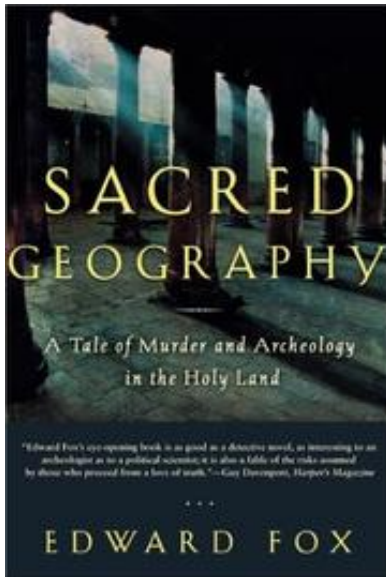
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Peer reviewed

## THEN DIG

Peer-reviewed archaeology blogging

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## Archaeology as a vendetta

*A belated post from yesterday as I couldn't get onto the Berkeley server and because I couldn't make up my mind about which book I was going to blog.*

*Sacred Geography: A Tale of Archaeology and Murder in the Holy Land* by Edward Fox is a book I've been meaning to blog about for years. Various things have put me off, but the key one is the theme, violence and the location, the West Bank. There's a possibility that it's a case of sticking a lightning rod into a site, because a small but vocal minority do like to argue that saying side A doesn't deserve everything they get means that you secretly want side B to be massacred. Ratchet up this tension and what you get is the West Bank as described by Fox. A place where ordinary people try to live while extremists fuel violence to attempt to polarise communities and strengthen their own political position.

It's in this place that the American archaeologist, Albert Glock, worked. It's not unusual to find American archaeologists in the Levant, but Glock was unusual.

From the article Cultural Bias in the Archaeology of Palestine in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*:

*Albert Glock, the head of the archaeology department and the founder and director of the Institute of Archaeology at Birzeit University, was murdered by unknown assailants in 1992. He wrote this article, previously unpublished, in late November 1987 for presentation to several universities in India and Pakistan.*

Beyond that trying to eke out more facts objectively is difficult. In the afternoon of the 19th of January 1992, Albert Glock visited the home of his assistant in Bir Zeit in the Occupied Territories. Three shots were heard and witness say they saw someone dressed like a member of Hamas jump into a car either registered in Israel or a Jewish settlement (you can tell by the colour of the numberplates) on the West Bank with two accomplices. An ambulance was called but took two hours to arrive and the Israeli army took a further hour to arrive. At the time there was an intensification of violence in the West Bank following the collapse of another round of peace talks. Foreigners were targets for Palestinian anger. Additionally Glock had been involved in a fractious dispute with a Palestinian member of staff over a job appointment. The murder has not been solved, but a member of Hamas interrogated with what we now call *enhanced interrogation techniques* made a vague reference to BirZeit University that could be related to the killing.

Israeli police have closed the case. The murder remains unsolved.

There are more details and depending on the order I present them I could slant the presentation of the facts one way or the other. Laying out the details without getting pulled into the wider political debate of the region and taking sides is difficult. Fox does this well, which is why I'm not really willing to give more information about the killing. It would spoil the book for you. So what can I talk about?

While it's hard to ignore the Political (capital-P) issues in the death of Glock, Fox also draws attention to the political (small-p) implications of archaeology, though this being the Middle East, even that p is probably in bold letters. Glock was working on Palestinian archaeology because he thought the Palestinians were not being served by the archaeology of the region. Rather than having over two thousand years of history, some archaeologists felt that 2000 years of the past had to be removed in order to get to the history. In a less contentious setting, much medieval archaeology was lost in Britain by excavators eager to find the important stuff in the Roman layer. Equally you'd be a brave archaeologist to find a magnificent classical mosaic in Greece and dig underneath to find out about the earlier occupation of a site. Investigating the strata between modern Israel and ancient Judea has more meaning than simply finding out what happened in between.

As for Fox's description of Glock, if I were murdered and in a state to care about afterwards I'm not sure I'd want Fox writing the book about it. I'd want someone who has Mr Clippy appear in her word processor to say: "Hello, it looks like you're writing a hagiography. Would you like some help?" Glock is someone who went looking for archaeology away from the easier sources of funding from rich Christian philanthropists and set up a new institute in a place where archaeology was seen as a tool of the enemy. It would be easy to get carried away. Fox's Glock is very human, with human faults. If Fox is accurate then while I could admire Glock's work, I'm not sure I'd have liked the man.

As for the conclusion, I've lent the book to a few friends and got a different answer back each time as to who they think did it. There is a tendency for people to think people who shot at them in region also shot at Glock. I've not been shot at in the Middle East, so I don't know if that gives me some objective distance or if that's a lack of useful experience.\*

If you hear "Glock was shot by someone who appeared to be from Hamas who escaped in a car that appeared to be registered in Israel", and you immediately know who did it then congratulations! You're not going to enjoy the book. If you're looking to piece together the clues and you aren't discomfited by the sense paranoia and claustrophobia that sometimes comes across in the descriptions then you could find this interesting.

There's a couple of places you can read about the murder of Albert Glock on the web. The mysterious death of Dr Glock The Guardian Who killed Dr Glock? "Archaeology is not a science

[www.escholarship.org/uc/item/9jc6x3np](http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/9jc6x3np)

Geoffrey Wheatcroft on the assassination of an American who became caught up in the land disputes of the Middle East *New Statesman*

Archaeology Magazine's review

Brief review at NY Times

Reviews on Goodreads

Published as *Palestine Twilight* in the UK.

\*This is not a request to be shot at in the Middle East or anywhere else.

