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NARRATING CONTESTED PASTS: LESSONS LEARNED AT TALL ḤISBĀN

Øystein S. LaBianca and María Elena Ronza

Abstract

This article begins by discussing the challenge of how to deal with conflicting views of the past, that frequently confound efforts to engage the local community in attempts to preserve and present particular cultural heritage sites. In the case of Tall Ḥisbān, Jordan, our solution to this problem was to emphasize the site's connections to global history. To this end, we have highlighted stories about continuities between the past and the present, about the changing environment, about changes in food procurement strategies over time, and about the resilience of the local population in coping with a long succession of imperial interventions. The article goes on to provide examples of twelve different strategies trialled at Tall Ḥisbān to engage the local community in heritage site preservation and presentation. It is posited that success in engaging the local community depends less on any one single strategy than on unabating persistence, willingness to be flexible, and on the synergetic interaction of multiple interconnected strategies, trialled over an extended period of time.

Heritage sites can be thought of as narrative nodes or dots on the round sphere we call Earth, where one particular event or a series of events of assumed importance to the story of humanity took place and/or continue to unfold. With such a global perspective as a point of departure, the operative question becomes: Important to whom? A related question is: How do particular nodes acquire importance as cultural heritage sites?

A case in point is Tall Ḥisbān in Jordan, which is one among hundreds of cultural heritage sites (all potential narrative nodes) along the highland plateau overlooking the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. From the perspective of numerous 19th century travellers to the site, and from that of the archaeologists who started excavations there nearly fifty years ago under the banner of the "Heshbon Expedition," its importance was its presumed association with the biblical account of the conquest of the "promised land" by the Israelites (Horn 1982). Early travellers also recognized the site as an important Hellenistic, Roman and early Christian (Byzantine) ruin (a supposition that has since been borne out by archaeological excavations). Renewed excavations at the site, begun in 1997, have brought into full view its significance as an important Islamic heritage site, adding valuable insight to narratives about the character of rural outposts in the hinterlands of the Umayyad, Abbasid, Ayyubid, Mamluk and Ottoman empires (Walker 2011).

But of what significance was this narrative node, this object of academic and pious inquiry by scholars and pilgrims from abroad, to the people who live in and around this ruin today and whose claimed association with the site is said to go back at least to the sixteenth century AD? There are many answers to this question. To begin with, discoveries on the site's summit of human interments from the Late Ottoman period attest to its importance as a burial ground. Ethnographic interviews with the local population revealed that certain of the tall's many caves were used by local families as shelters for people and animals on a seasonal basis. The tall's importance as a place to shelter flocks of sheep and goats is also attested by several circular enclosure walls made of field stones; the unmistakable residue of herding

stations. Also significant to the local population has been the large quantity of anciently quarried and cut stones contained in the collapsed and partially standing ruins of ancient buildings on the tall. These have provided ready-to-use building materials for new generations, as can be seen, for instance, in the Late Ottoman heritage buildings still standing in the village today. And, last but not least for antiquities hunters, the tall has been, and continues to be, a place to search for ancient objects, which are sold in the antiquities market; even if all such activity is illegal. Beside these many practical aspects, the tall may also, at one time, have played a sacred role in the life of the surrounding community, as is attested by the local name of the tall itself "al-Musallah," a place for prayer.

The commencement in 1968 of archaeological excavations at Tall Ḥisbān by Andrews University archaeologists, in cooperation with the Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DoA), had significant consequences for locals living near the tall. To begin with, the erection of a fence around its perimeter by the DoA changed the perception of the site, diminishing its centrality in the daily life of the village. The use of the area inside the fence thus became subject to government regulations and monitoring; not especially a welcome development from the point of view of many in the village, as it limited, temporarily at least, access to the site by local herders and their flocks. But the coming of the archaeologists and their government partners also had its up-sides. It brought a source of cash to many families in the village, as fathers and sons received seasonal employment, working for the expedition. It brought opportunities to connect with bureaucrats and other individuals from Amman and beyond, from whom favours could be sought on behalf of individuals, families, and the entire village, and it provided daily opportunities to learn a new language, and to form new friendships between the locals and the members of the archaeological mission.

But perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the encounter between the foreign archaeologists and their Jordanian hosts pertains to how the purpose of the expedition was understood by its various participants. During the early years of this encounter, there was much puzzlement about the many strange procedures introduced by the archaeologists, especially their seeming obsession with careful separation and documentation of layers of soil and with collecting broken pieces of pottery and animal bones. The notion that what the archaeologists really were after was Turkish gold, has remained a suspicion in the minds of locals for the entire time that archaeologists have been working at the site. To notions such as these can be added the troublesome idea that what the expedition really was after was proof that Tall Ḥisbān indeed was biblical Heshbon, the Amorite city which, according to Numbers 21:21-31, was conquered and rebuilt by the tribe of Reuben. This was, of course, indeed a much hoped-for outcome of the original Heshbon Expedition, at least in the minds of its founding director, Siegfried S. Horn, his faculty colleagues, students and of his financial sponsors (Horn 1982).

What emerges from this brief overview of various participants' engagements with Tall Ḥisbān as a narrative node is that the tall has, as it were, multiple pasts, each with their own constituencies and curators. From the perspectives of those who live there today, it is a link to past generations through its association with once vital burial grounds, residential caves, cisterns, herding stations, and pastures. From the perspectives of the early travellers, the founders of the Heshbon Expedition, and many of the tourists who continue to visit the site, it has special meaning as the leading candidate for the Heshbon remembered in 37 different passages in the Hebrew Bible. From the perspective of Classics scholars, it is an important junction town in the Roman Province of Arabia; strategically located where the Via Nova Triana intersects the road to Jericho and Jerusalem. To Christian pilgrims and early church history devotees, it is an important ecclesiastical center; the seat of a bishopric during Byzantine times. And to students of the history of the rise and spread of Islam, Tall Ḥisbān is important because of what it can teach us about rural livelihoods and governance along the often contested frontiers of successive kingdoms, caliphates and empires, including those of the Umayyads, Abbasids, Ayyubids, Franks, Mamluks, and Ottomans.

Given such a situation of multiple narratives,

each with their own curators and stakeholders, it should come as no surprise that decisions about which narrative(s) to highlight when presenting a site to the public can easily become a conflicted and challenging undertaking. Conflicts arise, of course, from the fact that each stakeholder has his/her own desired past (Scham 2009); stories about the past that have deep emotional meaning to a particular individual or group. A good example is the claim that Tall Ḥisbān is biblical Heshbon. As already indicated, this was a *desired past* of the original excavators of the site, and it continues to be a longed-after desired past that has deep significance to many Jewish and Christian pilgrims to the site. Muslim visitors have also come to see the site for this reason. At the same time, this claim is *contested* by many archaeologists (and staff of the DoA), who question it on archaeological grounds. In the case of some locals, the suggestion that Ḥisbān is biblical Heshbon is simply *forbidden*, as evidenced by their destruction of signage mentioning the Old Testament connection. Yet, it is a claim that members of the tourism industry have recently rallied to highlight, because presenting Jordan as "the land of the Bible" is a business model that seems to work well for many travel agents in and outside of Jordan. In this case, the Old Testament connection becomes part of a marketing scheme; a propaganda past[1].

Significantly, it is thanks to a long history of engagement with the local community that these conflicting desired pasts have gradually come to light. This engagement began during the first phase of excavations at Tall Ḥisbān (in the late sixties and early seventies), with the policy of involving the local clan headmen (mukhtars) in the process of hiring workmen, and resolving any conflicts that might arise between expedition staff and the locals. This fostered a sense of cooperation and trust between the village elders and the expedition leadership, which also allowed for occasional exchanges of ideas and concerns about the overall goals of the project. The participation on the dig not only of staff (representatives) from the DoA, but also of a number of archaeology students from the University of Jordan and elsewhere, ensured that the extensive Islamic remains unearthed by the seminarians from America were given their due attention (Sauer and Herr 2012) Finally, encounters in the local village, which resulted from the initiation in 1973 of ethnographic and taphonomic investigations by the author, his wife, and his students, which aimed to expose the processes by which the remains of domestic and wild animals enter the archaeological record. As the majority of the ethnographers who assisted with these inquiries were women, a way was thus opened up for local village women to be heard, and provide input with regard to the goals and activities of the expedition.

In contrast to the largely unplanned efforts at community engagement of the original Heshbon Expedition, the initiation in 1997 of a second phase of fieldwork (under the banner of the Hisban Cultural Heritage Project), was animated to a significant degree by a vision of engaging the local community in the maintenance and presentation of the site[2]. Perhaps the most important insight that has come from nearly two decades of deliberate trialling of different strategies for engaging the local community in Tall Ḥisbān is the importance of the power of *synergy and persistence; the realization that progress depends less on one single strategy than on the interaction of multiple interconnected strategies trialled over an extended period of time*. Furthermore, the most important lesson we learned is that *flexibility* is a key to successful community engagement, for as new facts emerge, one has to be ready to recraft ones strategies to suite new circumstances. Without striving to be exhaustive, the following are twelve examples of diverse strategies for engaging the local community, which have

1. See, for example, the following web-site maintained by the Jordan Tourism Board: http://pt.visitjordan.com/e_book/biblical_17-24.pdf.

2. The genesis of this explicit vision of engaging with the local community is attributable to three key factors. The first was the author's learning about community development theory and best practices research, through spearheading the development at Andrews University of a graduate program in international and community development. The second was the warm endorsement and offer of financial support of the Department of Antiquities when presented, in 1996, with a proposal to clean up and undertake restoration related excavations, focusing in particular on its Islamic remains. And the third was the enthusiastic welcome from the Municipality of Hisban and several local residents, on learning of our proposal to resume work in the site.

been trialled with varying degrees of success over these two decades:

1. *Making Capacity Building a Priority*. To illustrate, at Ḥisbān we have worked to gradually extinguish the notion of "workmen." Instead, we have made it a point to treat our local paid workers as students like ourselves; partners in discovering best practices for uncovering, restoring, preserving and presenting what we find. Whenever a teachable moment presents itself, we take advantage of it, thus deliberately investing in building understanding and knowledge among our local and visiting students. In this way, we have sought to win the allegiance of locals as allies in taking care of the site, and the commitment of foreign students as ambassadors, to alert the world of the precious and fragile Jordanian heritage.
2. *Investing in Building Local Allies.* To illustrate, when visitors from the local village show up at the site (including school age children), we take the time to explain something about what we are doing and what we are finding. In this way, local knowledge and attitudes about the project and the tall in the wider community gradually begin to change, in ways that are in line with the goals of a sustainable future for the site.
3. *Looking for and Affirming Local Care-Takers.* Local care-takers are not only allies, they are individuals who have shown a special interest in the site and in the work going on. They may or may not live near-by, but they are persons who hold the site and the project in high regard, and who report on their voluntary efforts between seasons in helping to look after the site. Such volunteers are critical in our attempts to build a cadre of local partners who care for the site, and their efforts need to be acknowledged and encouraged.
4. *Working with Local Teachers and Schools.* We have had one or more local school teachers working with us at the site nearly every season. We partnered with one of these local teachers to develop a curriculum for use in the local school, to teach children about the history of Tall Ḥisbān, and about the many ways a tall such as ours can be used to build interest in learning about science, the history of the world, and their own history. We have for many years now partnered with another school teacher, who has helped us paint and maintain the 35 explanatory signs we have placed throughout the site.
5. *Making Local Merchants and Craftsmen Our Partners*. Whenever feasible, we have made it a point to buy our supplies from local merchants. We buy our second breakfast from them and, when available in their shops, we purchase equipment used in the excavations. Similarly, if we need something made, such as the 35 signs that dot the hill today, we have the local ironsmith make the signs. This is a win-win situation for all, as it makes allies from these local businesses, as well as benefiting their bottom line.
6. *Seeking Cooperation of Local Government Agencies*. Critical to our efforts at engaging the local community has been the excellent support we have enjoyed with the DoA. In particular, we have benefitted greatly from the persistent efforts of certain of their staff, by helping us to forge collaborative partnerships between various government agencies. For example, over the past ten years, our site has been cleaned by the crews that regularly clean the village streets and empty the garbage. To allow these crews to go inside the fence of Hisban required negotiations and agreements in writing between the Municipality of Hisban and the DoA.
7. *Establishing a Visitor Welcoming Area.* It is important to have a welcoming area, where an overview of what the site is about can be shared with locals and visitors alike. In our case, our landscape team designed and constructed a seating area, where tour guides can give an orientation to their groups. We have also placed several large explanatory panels, all made by the local ironsmith, adjacent to this welcoming area. These panels explain how an archaeological mound or tall comes to be, and orients to the main historical periods discovered at the site.
8. *Making Insertion of Pathways and Explanatory Signage a Priority.* One of the

most important actions a team can take to engage the local community is to invest some time and effort in developing walking paths, viewing platforms and signage. As already stated, our signs were made locally, and the text is in Arabic and English. Such locally made signs may not have the sophistication of professionally produced signs, but if properly mounted, they have staying power, and are easy to maintain. We usually have the local school teacher do maintenance on the signs when we are in the field.

9. *Creating and Maintaining an Attractive Website*. We have found that our project and Facebook websites[3] have played a key role in keeping our local partners updated on our activities. Seeing pictures of their site, and of the project on the web, somehow makes the site significant in a whole new way; even though, for the time being, the information is still only in English.
10. *Hiring a Local Agent*. For projects such as ours, that spend only a few weeks in the field each year (and for many projects every other or every third year), it may make sense to hire a local agent on a part-time basis, who can assist with coordination of local efforts to protect and present the site. Such an agent can also be helpful with preparations for new field seasons, and with post-season follow-up. We have had such an agent assisting us for more than a decade.
11. *Organizing a Local Association of Allies (Friends).* By organizing a local association of allies or friends of the project, the benefits of civil society cooperation for a common good can be mobilized on behalf of the site. In our case, we created a local NGO (the Hisban Cultural Association), which has served as a sounding-board as we have moved forward with plans to establish a Visitor Center at the site. Our local agent played a key role in helping to formally organize and get this NGO approved by officials, such as the government.
12. *Emphasizing Continuities from the Past to the Present.* As will be explained further below, in our efforts to crystallize a narrative for Tall Ḥisbān, we have sought to emphasize continuities from the past to the present. To this end, historical questions have been re-framed as part of investigations of long-term continuities. Examples of such continuities are our research on cycles of food system intensification and abatement (LaBianca 1990), and more recently, the research on great and little traditions (LaBianca 2007). Still more recently are our efforts to situate the narrative of Ḥisbān within global history (LaBianca 2007). By these means, we have sought to avoid musealization of the tall and its remains, thereby rendering it distant, and often irrelevant, to the lives and concerns of its present-day inhabitants.

To this list of twelve strategies for engaging the local community trialled at Tall Ḥisbān, others could certainly be added, and we have no doubt there are strategies being trialled at other sites that might have relevance for our work. The point to emphasize here is that the process of engaging the local community is always a work in progress (*an emergent phenomenon),* where a number of different approaches are trialled over an extended period of time. Some approaches will show noticeable results right away, others will take more time, and some may not show any results at all, but may later on be reincarnated in ways no one had predicted. As stated earlier, what generates forward movement is not any one approach, but the cumulative effect of the cooperation of multiple approaches sustained over time. And in our case, we have still to find out how sustainable our multi-faceted intervention will turn out to be after ten years, twenty years and fifty years.

One encouraging indication for the future, however, is the growing awareness of the importance of local community participation, which we have noticed recently in conversations with local residents and government officials. The wall that once seemed to completely separate what was inside the fence at Ḥisbān from the local village is starting to come down, as local residents are expressing sentiments of pride and ownership in the archaeological site, and as such sentiments are no longer

3. Our web page is: https://.www.madabaplains.org/hisban and our Facebook page is: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Tall-Hisban-Archaeological-Park/305100879578008

perceived as a threat by DoA officials and other government stakeholders. Indeed, the emphasis on partnering with the local community in the care and presentation of archaeological sites appears to be gaining momentum as a priority within the archaeological community in Jordan.

Another noteworthy development in the case of Jordan is the emphasis now being placed on site protection and presentation by the DoA. With so many archaeological sites excavated and then abandoned, a policy of giving priority to projects that emphasize site rehabilitation and presentation has been put in place by the department. New projects have little chance of being approved if they do not include planning, expertise and funding for restoration and presentation. In the same vein, older on-going projects are also being asked to make site rehabilitation and presentation a priority. Thus, the days when archaeologists could come, dig holes, and leave, are now a thing of the past. The future of archaeology in Jordan is one in which concerns of basic research can no longer be separated from the concerns of site protection and presentation.

As we look to the future of archaeology in our region, and as the emphasis on site protection and presentation gains further momentum, increased attention will need to be given by policy makers, in cooperation with professional archaeologists, to establishing priorities and guidelines. For example, deciding which sites should be left dormant for the time being, which should be rehabilitated and made presentable, which urgently need to be salvaged, and which should be allowed to be opened as new excavations. As this conversation gets underway, consideration should be given to developing various local and regional "*narrative tours*", that incorporate selected narrative nodes; some already well-researched and readied for presentation, others to be studied and incorporated into particular narrative tours at some future time[4].

In the case of Jordan, such narrative tours might be period-specific, such as Neolithic Jordan, or Iron Age Jordan, or Mamluk Jordan. Others might emphasize the historical landscape, such as a history of water harvesting or of Roman roads. Still others might follow the careers of heroes such as Salah ad-Din or Lawrence of Arabia, and so on. Some of these narrative tours might be limited to certain regions of Jordan, others might criss-cross the entire country. Some might be designed primarily for individuals and small groups; others for larger groups. As more and more such narrative tours come on line, certain narrative nodes will be used over and over again, others less often and some only once or twice. Some tours may succeed spectacularly, some might fail spectacularly, and some will do neither. Some might eventually be discontinued, others expanded or modified; the routes and narratives of the tours should be seen as continually developing and adapting to new knowledge as well as to market demand. As experience with development and management of such tours accumulates, feedback should be provided to the teams responsible for restoring and presenting particular narrative nodes, so that the exhibits developed and the stories told there will cohere and inspire.

To conclude, we return to the problem introduced earlier in this article, namely the problem of multiple and often conflicting narratives confounding efforts to present and narrate the story of a particular site or node. In the case of Tall Ḥisbān, our solution to this problem has been, as already indicated, to emphasize continuities between the past and the present, by highlighting global history stories about the changing environment, changes in food procurement strategies over time, and the resilience of the local population in coping with a long succession of imperial interventions. We are also seeking to develop interesting ways to narrate the site as a node in global history; an effort that would no doubt be greatly enhanced, were we to someday become a node on a narrative tour that presents Jordan as a window on global history. By thus emphasizing a site's global history connections, a space can be created within which particular, sometimes conflicted, desired pasts can also be narrated. But what is ultimately the most important goal to strive for, when it comes to efforts to engage the local community in presenting heritage sites, is a compelling narrative vision, crystallized through careful scholarship,

4. A good example of a narrative path is the Abraham Path Initiative http://www.abrahampath.org/

respectful listening, collaborative learning, persistence and flexibility of action.

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