Unearthing the Ottoman present

Ali Sipahi

Veli Sevin, Necla Arslan Sevin, and Haydar Kalsen. *Harput: Kale Mahallesinde Osmanlı Yaşamı*. İstanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2011, 275 pages.

Uzi Baram and Lynda Carroll (eds.) *A Historical Archaeology of the Ottoman Empire: Breaking New Ground*. New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000, 272 pages.

In the last twenty years, the historiography of the Ottoman Empire has edged away from elite-centered narratives in favor of ordinary people's history. It is true that, in the 1960s and 1970s, the economic and statistical analyses of historical periods had a lot to say about the masses; however, the new social history differentiated itself by its emphasis on human experience and the subjective perceptions of the world, rather than objective truths. The sources of history, of course, have never been impervious to changes in the theory of history: instead of books and periodicals, the millions of documents in the Ottoman Archive stood out as the most reliable reference for the history of common people, and tiny details in this ocean of documents were made to serve when imagining everyday life in the Ottoman world. However, the archives rarely surpass conventional sources like travel accounts if we ask for mundane details of "a perfectly ordinary day," of "the dailiest day possible,"[1] i.e., what kind of games children used to play, whether houses had windows, how big a workshop was, or what type of necklaces were popular. In the current literature, a criminal event, a construction project or a peasant rebellion

Ali Sipahi, University of Michigan, Interdepartmental Program in Anthropology and History, Tisch Hall #1029, 435 S. State St., Ann Arbor, MI, 48109-1003, USA, asipahi@umich.edu.

1 These phrases belong to the contemporary reviewers of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. See, Marc Manganaro, *Culture 1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 105.

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are easily put in the abstract context of power relations or governmental policies, but seldom if ever does the actual scene of the event really matter. Despite the awareness in the last fifty years that materiality matters, and that space is not a background for social relations but an essential part of it, the spatial dimension of Ottoman history has been confined to flows of capital and people, or to the panoptic gaze of the government. To promote an alternative methodology, the following essay refers to several works that give archaeology a central role in writing the history of everyday life. After contextualizing the recent excavations at Harput, Turkey, it discusses some of the more radical trends in historical archaeology.

Harput: Kale Mahallesinde Osmanlı Yaşamı [Harput: Ottoman Life in the Castle Neighborhood][2] is the first book-length study which sheds light on Anatolian social life in the nineteenth century through the medium of archaeology. The book is the product of five years of excavation of one neighborhood of Harput, the old town of today's Elazığ in Eastern Turkey. Although the findings are an inadequate basis from which to re-write the history of the region (the work was terminated early due to financial difficulties), the study should be considered as a methodological intervention in Ottoman historiography. The archaeologist authors brought to light a neighborhood below ground, with its streets, toilets, mosque, shops and houses. Bracelets, rings, coffee pots, tobacco pipes, kerosene lamps and wares had all been prevented from perishing and were preserved in their authentic places (room, mosque, street, etc.) thanks to the soil filling the site. In other words, the excavation provides a three-dimensional image of the neighborhood frozen in the nineteenth century. Thus, the study not only exemplifies a new methodology for the Ottoman historians, it also calls for collaboration between historians and archaeologists (rarely seen so far) and, most importantly, hints at what *a history of the ordinary* and *spatial history* would and should look like.

The institutionalization of archeology as a scientific discipline in the early nineteenth century was the result of the awareness that the history of mankind far preceded biblical times. As it was accepted that the roots of human civilization were to be found hundreds of thousands (rather than a few thousand) years in the past, non-written sources—namely material remains—emerged as the only legitimate evidence for understanding the ancient world. Hence, according to the new division of labor, the disciplines of history and archeology specialized in written

2 Veli Sevin et al., *Harput Kale Mahallesinde Osmanlı Yaşamı* (İstanbul: Ege Yayınları, 2011).

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and material sources, respectively. Archeology thus mattered only when history failed to say anything about a distant period. That is why the concept of *historical archeology* appears paradoxical, forces us to rethink disciplinary boundaries, and calls for promising collaborations: perhaps of an historian and an archaeologist collaborating on a project, not about the distant past, but the nineteenth century. Although, for some scholars, historical archeology suggests the evaluation of material evidence with the support of written sources and vice versa, many others offer a more radical definition of the sub-discipline: historical archeology as the archeology of the recent past.

The theoretical move towards historical archaeology aims to rescue archaeology from its confinement in the ancient past, whereas the political context of the rise of the discipline suggests a specific interest in the archeology of the post-Columbian era, or the archeology of capitalism. Since the 1980s, world-systems theory has attracted scholars in every discipline, including some archaeologists, who initiated studies on the material remains of the empires and large-scale networks of capitalism from the last five hundred years.[3] Thanks to the indisputable impact of Eric Wolf's work,[4] those disadvantaged in the advance of capitalism—"the people without history"—appeared on the stage not only for anthropologists but also for archaeologists. Archaeological experts on material ruins set out to "give voice to the voiceless" and to document the power relations and inequality inscribed on the remains of capitalism.[5] Hence, in the last three decades, abandoned factories,[6] slave camps,[7] working class residences,[8] disaster areas (see Dawdy's works below) and slums have all been explored by archaeologists, paying special attention to the material signs of past social life.

Be that as it may, the scope of historical archaeological practice hardly went beyond the Atlantic world. The editors of *The Archaeology of Capi-*

3 Charles E. Orser, "World-Systems Theory, Networks, and Modern-World Archaeology," in *International Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, eds. Teresita Majewski and David R.M. Gaimster (New York: Springer, 2009).

4 Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

5 Charles E. Orser, "Twenty-First-Century Historical Archaeology," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 18, no. 2 (2010).

6 Marilyn Palmer and Peter Neaverson, *Industrial Archaeology: Principles and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

7 Lori C. Stahlgren, "Negotiating History, Slavery, and the Present: Archaeology at Farmington Plantation," in *Archaeologists as Activists: Can Archaeologists Change the World?*, ed. M. Jay Stottman (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

8 Robert C. Chidester, "Class, Community, and Materiality in a Blue-Collar Baltimore Neighborhood: An Archaeology of Hampden-Woodberry" (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2009).

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talism in Colonial Contexts assert that "historical archaeology has largely taken a top down approach to the exercise of power, examining the manner in which hegemonic power is exerted in material form."[9] The disproportionate focus on North America in the works of historical archaeology tends to impose a single narrative of capitalism based on the West's material remains. Thus, in order to "provincialize historical archaeology," this recent volume includes case studies from South Africa to Alaska, from the Middle East to California. To consider only the most relevant essay for the Ottoman context, Lynda Carroll's study of rural Transjordan in the nineteenth century (pp. 105-119) challenges the dominant narrative of tribesmen-landlord relations through a description of the built landscape. She reveals the clandestine caves used to hide products from Ottoman tax collectors; subaltern spaces hardly visible in the written sources.

The archeology of the Ottoman era conducted in post-Ottoman nation-states is an expanding field in the scholarship.[10] Baram and Carroll's edited volume, *A Historical Archaeology of the Ottoman Empire*, is the product of the first attempt to bring archaeologists and historians into the same room at SUNY, Binghamton, to discuss a new research field: Ottoman Archaeology.[11] The editors harshly criticize disciplinary boundaries and conservatism, and call for scholarly collaboration on a *material history* of the Ottoman Empire. As a research manifesto, the book offers historical archeology as an alternative way to do "history from below." Bedouins, peasants and nomadic tribes are underrepresented in written narratives, but they left extensive material imprints on the lived environment. Thus, the analysis of archaeological evidence would not only contribute to the material history, but also provide an unshakable foundation for subaltern studies of Ottoman history. For example, Carroll proposes a research agenda in which non-elite consumption in late Ottoman Anatolia is studied through the differentiation and analysis of various ceramics (pp. 161-80). Brumfield, on the other hand, resuscitates the well-known *Çiftlik Debate*[12] by laying out material evidence to

9 Sarah K. Croucher and Lindsay Weiss, eds., *The Archaeology of Capitalism in Colonial Contexts Postcolonial Historical Archaeologies* (New York: Springer, 2011), 13.

10 Uzi Baram, "Above and Beyond Ancient Mounds: The Archaeology of the Modern Periods in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean," in *International Handbook of Historical Archaeology*, eds. Teresita Majewski and David R.M. Gaimster (New York: Springer, 2009).

11 Let me thwart a possible confusion: The term "Ottoman Archaeology" is also used for the archaeological work conducted *by* the Ottomans, in other words, for the *history* of archaeology in the Ottoman Empire. See Zainab Bahrani et al., eds., *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire 1753-1914* (İstanbul: Salt, 2011).

12 The Çiftlik Debate refers to the arguments for and against the existence of capitalist exploitation in agriculture in the Ottoman Empire. See Gilles Veinstein, "On the Çiftlik Debate," in *Landholding and*

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show that in Vrokastro area of Crete there was no landlord class and the *çiftlik* system did not hold there (p. 37-77).

Material remains are best utilized to capture regional connections through the movement of commodities. As Baram asserts, certain findings bring to light the traces of the entanglement of a region with the global world. The classification of tobacco pipes from different time periods and regional origins, for instance, has allowed the interpretation of different clay tobacco pipes found in Palestine/Israel (pp. 137-59). In other words, historical archaeology can be conceptualized as unearthing the making of global capitalism. Material remains can show us that tobacco comes to Palestine not only from Western Europe but also from West Africa (p. 151), or that women in Harput wore glass bracelets from Bohemia as well as from Egypt, Palestine and Syria.[13] Thus a historical archaeology of the Ottoman Empire has promising potential to reveal extra-regional networks, to describe the social life of commodities,[14] to understand non-elite production and consumption patterns, and, last but not least, to criticize late twentieth-century national boundaries by exposing a common heritage and shared history in Middle Eastern space.

The excavations in Harput's *Kale Mahalle* should be considered as a continuation of this intellectual endeavor in the discipline of archaeology over the last three decades. The authors of *Harput* have utilized every aspect of historical archaeology. The first hundred pages of the book are devoted to the history of the Harput region based on primary and secondary sources. The result is a competent compilation of scattered information on Harput in the writings of American missionaries, British geographers, European travelers, Turkish scholars and many others. This "historical" part of the work exemplifies a thorough method of inter-disciplinary study. In the remaining parts of the volume, readers are led on a walk into the houses and shops of the neighborhood, with the help of detailed descriptions and many images and sketches.

Of particular interest are the business houses. There are three big, multi-roomed trading houses, which have spacious guest rooms to—most probably—take care of business deals and make contracts. These houses are different from traditional shops in the style of retailers; moreover, in contrast to shops, these houses were on the periphery of the city,

Commercial Agriculture in the Middle East, eds. Çağlar Keyder and Faruk Tabak (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

13 Sevin et al., *Harput Kale Mahallesinde Osmanlı Yaşamı*.

14 Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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far from the commercial district. According to the authors, these business houses may have been owned by the bureaucratic elite of Harput. If we go one step further, these "offices" may indicate the spatial reorganization of the city according to the needs of the new middle class in the late Ottoman Empire. As suburbanization theory suggests, the new middle class may have sought distinction in the city by creating new housing and business spaces. The residences support the idea: the authors revealed at least two spacious dwelling places, one of which was probably owned by a high-ranking official such as a *Pasha*. It is emphasized that these houses did not have stables or depots, and neither were any traces of separate parts for women and men found; both common characteristics of the houses in the city. The Harput Kale Mahalle excavations thus illuminate an unprecedented image of what a bureaucratic class' everyday life looked like.

While leaving the further details in the book to the readers to explore, I want to call attention to the political implications of the Harput excavations by glancing at recent thoughts about the *archaeology of the contemporary*. Historical archaeology has recently been criticized for its reliance on the modern/ancient dichotomy, for its exclusive focus on capitalism, for its role in heritage building for communities, and for its blindness to the contemporary relevance of archaeology. In her reply to the question posed by the editors of *Archaeological Dialogues*, "is archaeology useful?," Shannon Lee Dawdy suggested that archaeology should stop doing heritage and revealing traditions.[15] She proposed freeing archaeology from history and progressive time and putting it to work for public use and contemporary politics. Historical archaeology has focused on the meta-narratives of capitalism and colonialism ("on modernity's evils" of slavery, violence and factories, etc.) rather than the ruins and *failures* of modernity/capitalism: "Often a site's period of decline and vacancy is much longer than its Golden Age or peak of production. To ignore these chapters is to ignore a substantial part of urban experience."[16]

I believe that Ottoman Archaeology can and should be a unique ground from which to reclaim the politics of history and the history of the present/now. The Kale Mahalle excavations in the castle neighbor-

15 Shannon Lee Dawdy, "Millennial Archaeology: Locating the Discipline in the Age of Insecurity," *Archaeological Dialogues* 16, no. 2 (2009).

16 Shannon Lee Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity," *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 6 (2010): 772. See also Ruin Memories: Materiality, aesthetics and the archaeology of the recent past, http://ruinmemories.org for a blog of two archaeologists who work and think on ruins and the archaeology of the contemporary.

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hood of Harput were achievable simply because this site has been an urban ruin for the last hundred years, as the city of Harput was gradually dismantled stone by stone, and a new city (Elazığ) was constructed from scratch. Although the authors refer, in passing, to the fact that the building materials were ripped down and carried away to the new city, they do not place enough emphasis on the political facts behind this reconstruction, which are: that Harput had a huge non-Muslim population before the massacres and expulsions of 1915-16; that Harput was left in ruins in part by official policy in the Republican era; that the governor of Elazığ in the 1930s ordered that the building stones be carried down to the new city; that some of the remains of the non-Muslim neighborhoods were bulldozed in the 1960s under the rubric of tourism; and that the inhabitants of Elazığ have lived through the last century in a constant relationship with a huge urban ruin five kilometers away from the city center. Like Dawdy, when looking at an archaeological site, we should not only draw attention to what was there a hundred years ago and see the missing roofs as gaps into which to project a scientific explanation; we should also ask what happened over the last century, how the neighborhood first turned into a ruin, and how the ruin functioned in the ordinary experience of urban space. The urban history of, say, İstanbul, is still waiting to be written from the perspective of its abandoned factories, failed public housing projects, unfinished parking buildings, ruinous shantytowns and vacant lands in the city center, rather than its high-security apartment complexes, ever-growing mosques, informal skyscrapers or gentrified working class districts.

The archaeology of the contemporary has been a burgeoning field in the last decade.[17] It was Buchli and Lucas' edited book *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* which suggested adopting the unique techniques of archaeology to interpret "our" world, now.[18] Although studies of modern material culture started back in the 1970s,[19] Buchli and Lucas point out that this earlier work mainly focused on the general laws of human relations with the material world, rather than aiming to elucidate

17 Rodney Harrison, "Surface Assemblages: Towards an Archaeology in and of the Present," *Archaeological Dialogues* 18, no. 2 (2011).

18 Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas, eds., *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 2001).

19 The most famous is the Tuscon Garbage Project initiated by William Rathje in 1973. His team studied the waste of Tuscon residents in order to analyze the consumer behavior directly from the material realities. See William Rathje, "Integrated Archaeology: A Garbage Paradigm," in *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past*, eds. Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas (London: Routledge, 2001). Also see, Richard A. Gould and Michael B. Schiffer, *Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us* (London: Academic Press, 1981).

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the contemporary world. On the contrary, the "archaeology of us"—a seemingly perverse title—applies archaeological methods (excavations, classification of the objects, taphonomy, etc.) to contemporary objects in everyday life to silence textual excess and to let the objects speak. Buchli and Lucas's work on a recently abandoned council house in England (pp. 158-67), Zimmerman's study of the archaeology of homelessness in the USA,[20] and Dawdy's work on post-Katrina New Orleans[21] are all examples of a political archaeology of the present. Surely, the more Ottoman archaeologists ground their work on archaeology of the contemporary instead of historical archaeology, the more they will engage with the politics of history and remembering, as well as with academic activism in Turkey.

Recent examples of the use of archaeology to engage with the contemporary problems are the excavations of mass graves in Tunceli in August 2011 and in Diyarbakır in January 2012. In both places, the victims of "enforced disappearance"—namely the victims of secret summary executions by the state/police powers in the 1990s—were found and exhumed for DNA tests and legal investigation. On some of the excavations, archaeologists were assigned by the authorities, but the relatives of the victims and human rights activists insisted on the necessity of having an independent team of archaeologists on the site. Moreover, the Human Rights Association published a *Report on the Mass Graves in Turkey* in September 2011[22] and initiated an interactive online map-building project.[23] Now, there are 29 excavated and 224 posited mass graves on the map, almost all from the 1990s. Regarding the Ottoman period, the archaeologist Cevat Başaran's excavations of the graves of Muslims killed by Armenians has served to employ archaeology on behalf of the official ideology of history since 1991, whereas almost no attempt has yet been made to research the Armenian mass graves dug in 1915-16.

Although the exhumation of mass graves dates back to World War II, the participation of archaeologists in the process and the development of applied forensic archaeology are relatively recent phenomena.[24]

20 Larry J. Zimmerman et al., "Activism and Creating a Translational Archaeology of Homelessness," *World Archaeology* 42, no. 3 (2010).

21 Shannon Lee Dawdy, "Thinker-tinkers, Race and the Archaeological Critique of Modernity," *Archaeological Dialogues* 12, no. 2 (2006).

22 İnsan Hakları Derneği Diyarbakır Şubesi, *Türkiye'de Toplu Mezarlar Raporu* (Diyarbakır: İnsan Hakları Derneği Diyarbakır Şubesi, 2011), http://www.ihddiyarbakir.org/UserFiles/261749%C4%B0HD-TOPLU%20MEZAR%20RAPORU.pdf.

23 İnsan Hakları Derneği Diyarbakır Şubesi, "Toplu Mezar Haritası," http://www.ihddiyarbakir.org/Map.aspx.

24 William D. Haglund et al., "The Archaeology of Contemporary Mass Graves," *Historical Archaeology* 35, no. 1 (2001).

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Its first comprehensive application was in former Yugoslavia under the direction of the International Criminal Tribunal (1993), which brought about the International Commission for Missing Persons and the Joint Exhumation Process (1996-97). In the last two decades, archaeologists and other members of forensic teams have excavated mass graves and exhumed victims' bodies in El Salvador, Iraqi Kurdistan, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Rwanda, Kosovo, and most recently in Iraq.[25] As matters stand, the politico-legal contribution of the mass grave excavations is obvious, but what should be emphasized is that archaeology's peculiarity secures the revelation of the graves *as they are*: not only does every small detail of bodily orientation matter as legal evidence, but also the site as a whole is revealed *as it is* in order to deduce how the massacre happened.[26] In other words, not the material remains *per se* but the spatial configuration of them calls for the expertise of archaeology, which differentiates it from material history, physical anthropology or forensic medicine.

I hope that the excavations in Harput's Kale Mahalle will create academic and political awareness about the possibilities archaeology can open up. The historians of the late Ottoman period, urban historians and historians of material culture should utilize collaborative work with archaeologists. In contemporary times, archaeologists can work on the sites of disasters such as earthquakes, dig in the backyards of abandoned houses in the cities, or even treat living spaces as archaeological sites. Furthermore, the archaeological turn in the social sciences not only values archaeological work but, more importantly, delineates an archaeological perspective on the modern world. Special attention either to the urban ruins left by the Ottomans or by the agents of neoliberal urban transformation would question common understandings of history, remembering, and urban experience.

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25 Kirsten Juhl, *The Contribution by (Forensic) Archaeologists to Human Rights Investigations of Mass Graves* (Stavanger: Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, 2005).

26 See R. Wright et al., "The Archaeology of Mass Graves," in *Forensic Archaeology: Advances in Theory and Practice*, eds. John Hunter and Margaret Cox (London: Routledge, 2005).

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