

## Books

# Where the penalty for objectivity is death

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Edward Fox

**Palestine Twilight:**  
the murder of Dr Albert Glock and  
the Archaeology of the Holy Land.

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"On January 19th 1992 Dr Albert Glock - US citizen, Lutheran missionary, archaeologist and Director of the Institute of Archaeology at Birzeit University in the Israeli-occupied West Bank - was murdered by an assassin. The witness statements were confused. The investigation by the Israeli police was shockingly inadequate." (Jacket). Because of the apparent professionalism of the shooting and also because the police failed to turn up for several hours (contrary to their usual practice in the "occupied zone") some suspected the Israeli secret service of the deed; because of the victim's bad relations with some archaeological colleagues in Birzeit, and because of the general suspicion of foreigners and "collaborators" at the time of the intifada, Palestinian extremists, particularly the Hamas organisation, were also suspected of dealing out "revolutionary justice". However Fox is unable to offer a conclusive answer to the problem, despite rather wordy descriptions of his

investigations; the case remains unsolved.

To a university archaeologist like myself this is an alarming story. In common with most academics in the West we like to think that we are somehow above and beyond politics, that our work is not only objective and unprejudiced per se but is also perceived to be so by the whole world. Yet a few moments' thought must warn us that

this is naive and that archaeologists have political and social prejudices like everyone else, as well as varying degrees of enthusiasm for conforming to a variety of regimes for the sake of their careers. Surely

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however we can agree that we don't let this intrude into our work? Yet even in peaceful Britain there can be clashes of interest. About thirty years ago the Government decided that "rescue archaeology" should be funded by the taxpayer and since then the relevant parts of the discipline have to some extent lost their status as harmless and benevolent enquirers. A few years ago

local exasperation was stirred up in a highland Scottish town because archaeologists, following legal obligations, were perceived to be grubbing around on the site of a public housing project and holding everything up. It was easy for demagogues to proclaim that mothers and babies were being deprived of a roof over their heads by this abstruse nonsense. Even hearing of this tiny outburst of hostility was a shock to me, having almost invariably encountered kindness and interest in my forty years of research-orientated archaeological fieldwork and excavation in the western highlands. We do not normally expect to be shot for our pains so the story of Albert Glock in far more violent Palestine will surely be keenly studied by all interested in the dispassionate pursuit of knowledge, as well as by those who believe that knowledge should serve a political purpose.

Edward Fox has had access to Dr Glock's papers and tries valiantly to make sense of this strange and tragic episode, presenting the story as a narrative of his own investigations. Yet at the end there is a sense of dissatisfaction – a feeling that despite the mass of detail he has pulled together the author has not really managed to get much beyond speculation, either about the likely reason for the assassination or about who might have carried it out. Much of the book is taken up with the details of the archaeology of the strip of land which borders the east end of the Mediterranean and which now comprises part of Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine. Here it is in a situation quite unparalleled in Europe (except perhaps in the Balkans), because several countries now live side by side there in a state of mutual hostility. This is because, half a century ago, a new state for Jews was imposed there by the "international community" for various reasons, not least as recompense for the Holocaust; the other main justification was the Biblical evidence for the existence there of Jewish states early in the 1st millennium BC.

Fox's description of the modern

archaeological situation seems eminently plausible. The governments of Israel and Palestine may well have diametrically opposed ideas about what kind of research should be carried out in the area – each wishing to validate its own territorial claims to the land – and both local and foreign archaeologists could well be affected by all this bias, even subconsciously, as Fox claims. I do not know enough about the field to make a reliable judgement (though the views of Israeli archaeologists – conspicuously absent from the book – on Fox's assertions might make interesting reading) but can readily accept that strong emotions have entered the archaeology of the Holy Land, with all the risks to academic objectivity that that implies. There is also the additional risks that the more violent elements will see archaeological research as a political weapon.

That being the case the origins and personalities of the archaeologists practising locally become important; tact and diplomacy are obviously essential, especially if you are a foreigner. Here we do get from Fox's painstaking research quite a complex picture of the victim; Dr Glock seems to have been rather an awkward and insensitive character, perhaps not quite fitted by his origins, training or aptitude for the positions he finally found himself in under Israeli rule; from 1970 he was a research professor at the Albright Institute in Jerusalem and its Director for two years from 1978; from 1980 he was a full time member of Birzeit University (where he had already been teaching for some years) in the "occupied West Bank" where he established an Institute of Archaeology.

Albert Glock had an unusual career, training as a Lutheran missionary, graduating in 1950 and spending the next seven years as a Lutheran pastor in Normal, Illinois. In 1951 he married Lois Sohn, the daughter of a Lutheran professor of Theology. However he was evidently not entirely suited to the dogmatic, enclosed world of extreme Protestant religion in which he found himself and, through studies of ancient Hebrew, became interested in the history of the Holy

Land. His participation in Biblical archaeology began early and by 1962 he was excavating at the site of Tell Balata near Nablus, being given a "crash course" in the techniques needed by Harvard archaeologist G. E. Wright. He enrolled as a graduate student at the University of Michigan where he worked for his doctorate (gained in 1968) under George Mendenhall, "a biblical scholar who introduced the Marxist-orientated 'peasants' revolt' model of the origin of ancient Israel. Mendenhall's theory was opposed to the traditional view which held that the Israelites tribes invaded Canaan and defeated the indigenous Canaanites. Mendenhall believed that a kind of theocratic liberation movement emerged within Canaanite society, gradually transforming it into what would ultimately be called Israel" (p. 29). (A similar revolution in archaeological thinking also began in Britain in the mid 1960's, in which the older hypotheses of successive prehistoric invasions – in this part of the world not sanctioned by the Bible and therefore easier to overthrow – were gradually replaced by interpretations based on the concept of mainly indigenous development.)

Well before that Glock had been involved in the theological controversy which eventually split the Lutheran church, and he came down on the side of the "liberal" wing which argued that faith was not undermined by analysing Biblical texts critically instead of treating them as infallible. "Taking the side of the liberals in the Missouri Synod was like rebelling against his father. Taking the minority view was an instinct that he was to follow at every crossroads in his life." In leaving religion and turning to the archaeology of the Holy Land he was evidently completing his journey to scepticism. "Glock's goal was to throw off the burden of his own past, his own back-ground. At sixty-seven he was on the verge of reaching it. And then he was shot" (pp. 31-2).

The evidence described in the rest of the book certainly seems to back up the belief quoted; many elements in his curious career are explained fairly well if we assume

that Glock was searching honestly for some mental or spiritual enlightenment through his academic work and did not think too much about the effects this search might have on other people (though he would doubtless have been surprised and shocked if this had been suggested to him). A certain kind of indefatigable pursuit of detailed research work is a well known phenomenon in academia; it can involve tunnel vision, a dogmatic belief in the great importance of the work, few other interests and a certain imperviousness to alternative views. Depending on the personality and ability of the person concerned this can lead either to great eminence or to mediocrity on the sidelines but – though masses of data tend to be accumulated – an interesting and broad-minded philosopher rarely emerges from the process.

Glock worked hard at excavation and research<sup>1</sup> at Birzeit but came into conflict with colleagues and research students, in particular with Hamdan Taha, who succeeded him as Director after he was murdered. "Glock wanted a small, exclusive band of archaeological technicians who would work for years away from the common gaze, to produce an edifice of world class scholarship that would be the foundation of a Palestinian science of archaeology in Palestine. Hamdan was an evangelist; he wanted to teach the archaeology of Palestine to Palestinian undergraduates; to make it part of a Palestinian's liberal education; to raise the awareness of as many Palestinians as possible in the value to them of their archaeological heritage" (p. 213). There were constant problems with getting permits for the excavations, and evidently a problem of unrequited love for his closest assistant, a young Palestinian woman called Maya.

Glock's long personal diary describes all these tensions but the rather turgid quoted fragments show little sign of his having begun to understand them. He had trouble with the local villagers during his several seasons of work at the mound at Ti'innick (the Biblical Taanach); they seem to have thought he was looking for treasure

because in 1985 he started to excavate in a field instead of on top of the tel, as archaeologists were supposed to do. There were also problems over permits for the locals to build on land of archaeological interest. "With his familiar tone of plodding determination, sometimes earnest, sometimes pessimistic, Glock recorded the incident in his diary. 'I suspect the people to the north as those attempting to discourage our work. We need to get past this problem'" (p. 120). One wonders if the team ever sat around in the camp after the day's work was done and had a good laugh over anything.

Only the fact of Albert Glock's inexplicable murder, and perhaps a general interest in academic personalities, makes these details of the tribulations of a middle-aged American archaeologist working in Palestine of more than specialised interest. However the story should focus attention on whether archaeologists and similar academics can easily detach themselves from the social and political context in which they work and avoid becoming unconscious mouthpieces for whatever social or historical view is currently popular. A classic example of an open attempt to introduce more social and political "relevance" into archaeology was the formation of the World Archaeological Congress<sup>1</sup> and the holding of its first international meeting in Southampton in 1987. Many people thought that the old UISPP organisation<sup>2</sup> was too staid and exclusive and that a new one was needed to encourage, for example, the attendance of the indigenous peoples in white-settled countries to air their views on their own history and archaeology.<sup>3</sup> The organisers provoked a debate among British university staff and students over its ban on the attendance of South African colleagues, then working under the Apartheid regime. I thought this ban unfair, especially as there was no objection to colleagues from China and the Soviet Union, and that the archaeologists of Glasgow University should not go to the first WAC meeting; however I was heavily outvoted.

The conference itself was a fascinating experience. Most of the sessions were of

course traditional ones in which new work was described, but there were also what one might not unfairly call the sessions for political re-education. In one of these a Maori called O'Hagan told us firmly that permission for the excavation of Maori sites belonged as of right to the Maoris themselves and that "paheka" (white settler) academics had to accept this; his arguments were backed up at one point by what I took to be a haka or war chant from supporters at the back of the auditorium. It was interesting and useful to be made aware in this way of the strength of feeling among the politically active indigenous peoples of New Zealand but one did not feel that a rational debate, or indeed any debate, was taking place.

The third meeting of the WAC took place in New Delhi in December 1994 and was not only a disaster in terms of its lack of organisation but was the scene of unpleasant confrontations between different factions of Indian archaeologists over an ugly political problem; Sarah Colley gives an excellent account of the goings on, which included a near riot at the Plenary session.<sup>4</sup> The archaeologist F. Hassan gives more details from an Indian perspective.<sup>5</sup> The problem was the 16th century Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya which had been torn down on 6 December 1992 by a Hindu mob on the grounds that Ayodhya was the birthplace of the god Ram. In the rioting between Muslims and Hindus that followed all over the country more than 1000 people apparently died. One faction of Indian archaeologists claimed that the foundations of a Hindu temple underlie the mosque while another faction disputed this vehemently and has questioned the academic integrity of the first group. The WAC organisers were prevailed upon to ban discussion of the subject at the New Delhi meeting, which seems strange if the claims about the Hindu temple are true. One would have thought that a visit by the WAC delegates to the site to inspect the excavations would have at least partly have resolved the matter as well as advertised to the world that the Indian Government was a

sophisticated and rational one. Evidently the large numbers of potentially violent religious fanatics of various kinds, not all of them uneducated, made this impossible.

However some may say "That is India; it can't happen in the UK". Yet it is surely naive to suppose that the study of archaeology can ever be truly objective, especially in its current theory-driven phase in the UK. The subject deals with our past, and how we see that past too often depends on the social and political ideas of the present as well as – especially in this country which once ruled a great empire – how we see the indigenous peoples which the West once dominated.

A small illustration concerns the Outer Hebrides. Anyone who has visited these remote Scottish islands during the last few years will be aware that in many places Gaelic place-names are proliferating. They appear on new road signs alongside the English versions and undoubtedly help to reinforce the still comparatively exotic nature of the local way of life which make the islands so attractive to visitors. Equally important however is the Norse heritage, the result of many centuries of occupation and visible in vast numbers of place-names, particularly in the Outer Isles. Yet we look in vain for the original Norse versions on the road signs – the Scandinavian inheritance is played down to an almost ludicrous extent for reasons which may have something to do with the fact that Government funding can be obtained for the advancement of the Gaelic language. A good example is how the traditional name of the famous standing stone site has somehow been translated – presumably transliterated – from the traditional "Callanish" to the supposed Gaelic equivalent "Calanais" of unknown meaning; the new version has been sanctified by appearing in the title of the Historic Scotland guide book.<sup>6</sup> Yet the name may be pure Norse, from Kalladarnes or "the ferry promontory" ("nish" is ubiquitous in these parts and comes from the Old Norse "ness", a promontory). Here the alleged Gaelic form may actually be obscuring historical information.

Northern Ireland is the violent backyard of the British Isles and here if anywhere the local archaeology could be dragged into the political feuds. Suppose an archaeologist was asked to offer an opinion on whether Partition or a United Ireland was supported by evidence from ancient times, what might he say (I am not aware that the question has been asked professionally in this way – it is a hypothetical one)? Judging from casual remarks I doubt if many colleagues in 2002 would be willing to give overt or covert such backing to the Protestant cause; I suspect that most would answer that the archaeology of the island of Ireland is largely distinct from that of mainland Britain and that there isn't much which suggests a separate Ulster, linked with Britain, in ancient times. Yet honesty would require me to provide several examples of such evidence if asked (as one would really expect, considering how close Ulster is to SW Scotland), from various times from the Neolithic period to the 15th century, while doubting whether such antique material was relevant to either political side today. I would be encouraged by a new book by a southern Irish historian called Cromwell: an honourable enemy;<sup>7</sup> if the terrible story of what Cromwell did at Drogheda is a myth perhaps reconciliation is not impossible and academic research can play an important part in this.

## References

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- 7 Reilly T. (2000), *Cromwell: an honourable enemy*, Phoenix.