

MEM Awards

**Remarks by the Recipient of the 2018 MEM Lifetime Achievement Award
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This acknowledgement of my work in Islamic archaeology comes as a complete surprise and therefore is all the more appreciated. It is with some humility that I would express my gratitude to Middle East Medievalists, especially as I had begun to wonder whether my field of studies had become irrelevant or just passé, a forgotten corner of Middle East studies. I will discuss this further but, first, I would offer a short account of my entrance into this arcane, if not irrelevant field of studies.

As an undergraduate, I wanted to study archaeology in the Middle East, and so I went to Iran with the Peace Corps (to experience the region and learn to teach). I returned to the University of Georgia to study with Joe Caldwell and worked on proto-Elamite ceramics from Tall-i Ghazir. He supported my move to Chicago to study urbanization with Robert Adams, who enabled me, in turn, to return to Iran to look for proto-Elamites in 1972. I conducted a survey in Fars province but

found nothing except Islamic sites. During this time, I also worked at Siraf and realized that the same problems of urbanism could be studied in the Islamic period, with even more resources. When I told Adams of this decision, he was delighted, and, thereafter, I always counseled students to choose a subject that interested their advisor but one the latter has never done themselves.

My dissertation committee consisted of Robert Adams, Paul Wheatley, and Bob Braidwood. Bob Braidwood kept me sane at times when I realized that his promulgation of the study of prehistory was as unaccepted in his day as Islamic archaeology seems today. But it was Paul Wheatley who was a fundamental resource. He showed me his manuscript on the Islamic city, what would become *The Places Where Men Pray Together* (2002), and for about twenty years we met at least once a week. I would not have finished without his final advice. Adams did not like my thesis but could not explain why. Wheatley said the problem was simple:

I had produced a deductive argument and Adams, being a social scientist, wanted an inductive argument. “Put your conclusions in front as hypotheses and write a new conclusion,” he suggested. I did so, adding no new ideas, and Adams accepted it immediately.

In my thesis, “Trade and Tradition in Medieval Southern Iran” (1979), I describe Fars province in terms of the development of Islamic cities. I found that, in the field of Islamic archaeology, this was a new and rare approach that necessitated study of historical contexts as well as art historical resources. My study of Islamic archaeology began with potsherds in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) and elsewhere. While I believe this is the first and necessary concern for all archaeologists, I will make only light reference to it here.

I began fieldwork for the Oriental Institute of Chicago (OI) at Quseir al-Qadim, a medieval port on the Red Sea (excavated with my wife, Janet Johnson, from 1978 until 1982). Quseir was not a place of great architecture, and, in fact, one of my first questions was whether it was inhabited year-round. We discovered much about the Roman port, but it became clear that the Islamic reoccupation, which followed a thousand-year period of abandonment, had only minimal housing, rather similar to coastal villages today. The Arab/Islamic occupation was explained in hundreds of merchants’ letters, which have been read and published by Li Guo (*Commerce, Culture and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century*, 2004).

We next dug trenches in the mound of medieval Luxor in 1984–1985. This was an actual “tell” not unlike the mounded remains of ancient settlements. We

discovered the remnants of over two millennia of occupation at Luxor, a stratification revealed when the temple and avenue of the Sphinxes were cleared (a destruction that occurred as late as the 1960s). We excavated two-step trenches that revealed a sequence from a fourteenth-century floor back to a Byzantine painted room (with a sculpture collection of different periods, including a head of Tuthmosis III).

Beginning in 1986, Jan and I spent almost a decade discovering and exploring the port of Aqaba in Jordan. The port recalls the attack scene in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), a portrayal that conveys only about one-tenth of the actual scale and was filmed on the southern coast of Spain. In his written account, T. E. Lawrence writes of finding “Arab pottery” and of being told of sub-surface walls in 1914. We delineated the walled city and four meters of changes from the Islamic conquest to the advent of the Crusaders. The mosque, the administrative center, the suq, and other aspects of this Islamic urban center became clear and are still being studied today. The information and artifacts are now displayed in a site museum, and Aqaba is today a major tourist attraction for Jordan.

An opportunity then presented itself to excavate the site of Qinnasrin in northern Syria near Aleppo. I teamed up with Marianne Barrucand and Claus-Peter Haase for a small but international venture (1998–2000). We avoided the very large tell of Qinnasrin and excavated the early Islamic village called Hadir, literally the “camp.” Perhaps our most important find was a house that has been converted from a traditional tent, literally a “settlement” of the Muslims.

Events from 2001 onwards have made fieldwork more difficult and have provided a prompt to catch up with publications (Braidwood once found a group of archaeology students and counseled us, “Archaeology would be a fine occupation, if one did not have to publish”). I took part in, and organized, a great variety of lectures and conferences, including the first OI seminar, which resulted in the publication of *Changing Social Identity with the Spread of Islam: Archaeological Perspectives* (2004). That same year, I was invited to Iran and examined a series of sites for possible excavations.¹ I settled on a return to the Islamic city of Istakhr, near Persepolis. Funds and permissions were obtained and a team selected in 2005, but the final permits were denied. Visits to Saudi Arabia yielded potential for digging at Jurash in the Asir, but again no permit was obtained.

I began discussions for an excavation with Hamdan Taha, director of archaeology for the Palestinian Authority, in 2007. We agreed on a joint project at the famous site of Khirbat al-Mafjar in Jericho, which lasted from 2011 until 2015. The site was well known from Dimitri Baramki’s excavations (1935–1948), which had uncovered a palace and a bath hall highly decorated with mosaics and stucco work of the early Islamic period. I was invited

by the Palestinian Authority to explore the Northern Area. This was a building complex that had been excavated by Awni Dajani in the 1950s, but no records or artifacts are extant. We recovered an original Umayyad building complex, later transformed into an Abbasid agricultural estate.² This was the urban focus later transferred to the nearby town of Jericho (located near the biblical site).

Our work with the Palestinian Authority resulted in the creation of an archaeological park, featuring a museum designed by Jack Green and specialists from the OI. All of these endeavors were enabled through massive USAID funding using Palestinian designers and craftsmen. When we opened the museum, several Palestinian colleagues stated, “We can do this, too, and much cheaper.” Now there are several more and far less expensive museums in Palestine. This is the best sort of aid program and might be a model for future ventures.

When I started the project at Khirbat al-Mafjar, I mentioned the site to the Islamic studies faculty at the University of Chicago. With the exception of Fred Donner, they were totally innocent of archaeological knowledge, to the extent of being unfamiliar with the name “Mafjar” and its importance for Islamic studies, though most did recognize the name “Jericho.” As I discussed in a plenary paper

1. For some background on archaeology in Iran, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, see D. Whitcomb, “Archaeology in Iran and the Experience of Arthur Upham Pope,” in *Arthur Upham Pope and A New Survey of Persian Art*, ed. Y. Kadoi, 97–109 (Leiden, Brill, 2016).

2. D. Whitcomb, M. Jennings, A. Creekmore, and I. Arce, “Khirbet al-Mafjar: New Excavations and Hypotheses for an Umayyad Monument,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 79 (2016): 78–87; D. Whitcomb, “The Mosques of Mafjar: A Sequence and Some Implications for Understanding Qasr Hisham,” *Proceedings of the 9th International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East: Islamic Session*, ed. D. Genequand, 2:469–78 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016); D. Whitcomb, “Notes for an Archaeology of Mu‘āwiya: Material Culture in the Transitional Period of the Believers,” in *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, ed. A. Borrut and F. M. Donner, 11–27 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2016).

at the sixth International Congress for the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE) in 2010, there is an evident lack of definition of “Islamic archaeology” in the minds of almost all historians, many other archaeologists, and not a few of those claiming to belong to this field.

Islamic Archaeology as a New Research Discipline

I describe my research on Islamic cities to show the range of types of sites that may be investigated, from untouched places to previous excavations. The study of Islamic urbanization is only one of many possible specializations within Islamic archaeology. From the context of Near Eastern archaeology at the OI, we use fieldwork to elucidate the rise of Near Eastern civilization by tracing cities and states, and their religions, especially relationships with the biblical tradition. It may seem strange now, but the study of prehistory began with the research of Robert Braidwood, and this field was not readily accepted. Likewise, the study of medieval archaeology in the Near East experiences only slow growth.

There is a growing awareness that Islamic materials provide a connector to the past, showing the continuation of most ancient accomplishments unique to the Near East. The Islamic material also provides a connector to the present, making archaeology relevant and important to modern Middle Eastern studies. Yet the academic niche of Islamic archaeology is often misunderstood; the analysis of Islamic monuments and other artifacts is usually read as the province of art history. But the techniques and

approaches of art history, beyond its focus on aesthetic valuation, are quite different.

Islamic archaeology is practiced as a historical archaeology, providing evidence for the development of society and economy in Islamic contexts. Each project, whatever its intended goals, produces informative assemblages of artifacts that can be compared to relevant textual sources. The field lacks a clear mandate and anything approaching a guiding textbook. The result has been a wide range of interpretations of context and methodology. Like other fields that grew in the OI from comparative analyses of different sites and regions, this new research field illuminates processes of adaptation and development that define this part of the Near (or rather, Middle) East.

Previous recipients of the MEM Lifetime Achievement award offer a number of insights into what this award may mean, especially in relationship to Islamic archaeology. One of the most pertinent sets of remarks is also the most recent: that of Suzanne Stetkevych (2017), who speaks of the problematics of poetry and history. She begins by stating that “poetic materials should be more stable, and therefore more authentic than the prose narratives that have come down to us... So, we may have a body of material that is authentic, but... does not provide the information that historians are looking for—or at least, not in the form we are looking for... It is not meant to record names and dates and battle descriptions, rather... for further exploration as we deal with political, religious and cultural history” (*Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 26 [2018]: viii–ix).

If the study of archaeology may be compared with poetry, one must examine more carefully the definition of this field. When Fred Donner, the award recipient in 2016, states that “archaeology... has received a great deal of attention and has brought important insights” (*Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 25 [2017]: vi), he gives a vague acknowledgment without really exploring what the field might have contributed. One might suspect that when Patricia Crone, the 2014 recipient, first wanted to be an Ancient Near Eastern archaeologist (*Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 23 [2015]: iii), she may have been misled as to the nature of the field (alas, what contributions she might have made!). And finally, when Richard Bulliet, the 2015 recipient, complains that “the innovative methodologies that are showing such promise in the study of most other parts of the world, such as quantitative history, climate history, and material history in general, are still little explored with respect to the Middle East” (*Al-‘Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* 24 [2016]: vi), one may be sure that he has not included the progress in Islamic archaeology.

One might begin with the misunderstandings that historians sometimes have about ceramics, in particular the penchant that archaeologists have for little sherds. These artifacts form the language of archaeology. One might view the sherd as analogous to the “phoneme,” a basic sound that might occasionally convey meaning. One must turn to the pot (or other complete piece) to have the equivalent to a “word,” a complex element full of meaning or uses. More importantly, artifacts should be found together in an

“assemblage,” which may be considered the material equivalent to the sentence. An archaeological assemblage has interpretative meaning(s) based on find location and contexts, that is, natural and cultural factors.

This linguistic analogy suggests that archaeology, the study of material culture, has a distinctive methodology. The study of artifacts focuses on the idea that artifacts are found in a context or matrix that reflexively amplifies the meaning of each element. It also sees artifacts as correlative in that their physical elements may be abstracted to form categories or typologies to facilitate comparisons. Comparative studies, in turn, result in generalizing abstractions aimed at patterns of assemblages. Artifactual patterns are the basic tool of archaeology, interpretations from which wider inferences or social history may be postulated.

Interpretations, on the macrosocial plane of political events and cultural transformations or the microsocial level of private affairs and domestic routines,³ are a necessary element in this methodology. This is because archaeology is never isolated but rather interacts with other studies of particular cultural complexes. Interpretations of archaeological information may then be utilized by historians and others for particular information, building reflexive inferences for other archaeological patterns, and ultimately archaeological theory building.

The study of archaeology, following such a methodology, begins with a concern for the excavations or other field procedures that produced the evidence. This

3. See M. L. Rautman, “Archaeology and Byzantine Studies,” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1990): 147, 151.

means concern with the narrator, the archaeologist who has molded the material, and thus his or her background, orientation, presuppositions, and purposes. These factors may not be accessible but must be borne in mind during any evaluation. Such evaluations may be normal in scholarly research, but the esoteric nature of ideas derived from digging may be especially vulnerable to misunderstanding, or indeed misrepresentation.

The first MEM Lifetime Achievement award was given to George T. Scanlon in 1998. Curiously, there is no record of Scanlon's remarks on being presented the award, and, indeed, notice of the award seems to have escaped the attention of *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*. The publication, initially the newsletter of the Middle East Medievalists begun by Fred Donner and Sam Gellens, carried in its first years (1992–1995) three to six articles on archaeology or art historical subjects. Thereafter, *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* consistently included two articles in these fields each year between 1996 and 2009, during which time I had the honor of being the journal's "editorial assistant (archaeology)." This listing continued with the reorganization in 2014, though no articles on archaeology have appeared between that date and the present. A possible explanation might be the launch of the *Journal of Islamic Archaeology* in that same year (2014), though one may also suspect a change in the orientation of *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wuṣṭā* (ironically, the change happened in the same year in which Scanlon died).

Turning to the relationship between archaeology and the field of Mamluk studies, I would like to stress that, to paraphrase a recent discussion by Rautman, Mamluk artifacts are more than mere historical illustration; their evidence may be considered necessary to overcome the intrinsic limitations of the written evidence. Throughout Rautman's seminal article "Archaeology and Byzantine Studies," one may substitute "Islamic" for "Byzantine" to produce an insightful picture of the history and state of this parallel discipline. Yet historians of the Mamluk period do not seem to be aware of this potential or able to assess the relevance of fieldwork to their research. Much of the fault for this separation in disciplinary comprehension lies with the archaeologist, and with what is currently practiced as archaeology.⁴

The role of archaeological evidence in historical research is often misunderstood because of the nature of its evidential base. Although the study of material culture deals, at least in part, with physical objects, their contribution to historical studies is no more "real" or direct than is that of the historian's more traditional documents; archaeological evidence is cumulative and not specific. In other words, one should not expect new information about specific individuals or historic events. Though new documents may be discovered, archaeological research is more concerned with patterns, repeating contexts, and associations. Thus, one may seek patterns of land use (historical geography) and

4. An approach to this dialogue is the subject of my comments in "Toward a 'Common Denominator': An Archaeological Response to M. Morony on Pottery and Urban Identities," in *Identity and Material Culture in the Early Islamic World*, ed. I. Bierman, 47–68 (Los Angeles: Von Grunebaum Center, 1995).

social organization (settlement systems), that is, broad questions of social and economic history.

Be that as it may, one may only hope that a lifetime achievement award does not mark the closure of research. Last year I returned to Khirbat al-Karak on the Sea of Galilee, where the OI dug in the 1950s, to reveal that the very early Islamic site of Sinnabra was an early Islamic palace next to a mosque (I hope one of the earliest to be physically revealed).⁵ We came to style the project as “the search for the mosque of Mu‘āwiya.” Indeed, that pivotal personality in early Islamic history might have been sympathetic to the structure of a project led by Prof. Tawfiq Da’adli, a Palestinian teaching at the Hebrew University, with collaborators from Chicago and Tel Aviv, employing local Palestinian workmen.⁶

A Return to Iran

While at the MMA, I studied the old excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, the Sasanian and early Islamic site near Shiraz. I used the Istakhr records at the OI in my dissertation and was ready to return to an excavation in Istakhr in 2005, but it was canceled at the last moment.

A recent article shares my ideas on Sasanian cities.⁷ Beginning with Jur (Firuzabad), the urban plan was laid out in circles, with radiating roads (some extending 5 km beyond the walls): twenty

sectors, axial streets, gates, and a central district with the *tirbal* and *Takht-i Nishin* (the city having a diameter of 2 km, the central district a diameter of 400 m). The circular cities of Ardashir (224–242 CE) are not all known. His son built Bishapur, again with reliefs nearby, and a fort near the entrance to the city. The royal quarter with temples was laid out in a rectangular grid, but one may also note a grey circular area on the air photograph. This was near the Bab Shahr, forming a circle (400 m in diameter) centered on the northern limit of the grid city.

One may, finally, mention the city of Jundi Shapur, investigated by Robert Adams for the OI in 1962–63. This city was famed for its blackboard grid, a design said to imitate Antioch. A Corona satellite image shows this grid, and within it one can see the circular city, again 2 km in diameter. It follows that one should also find a *tirbal* and an administrative center (would that we might take a quick field trip!). One reads that Shapur found many of his father’s cities in disrepair and rebuilt them, superimposing a western, Antiochian model. This became, then, a combination of urban traditions and possibly institutions. When I visited Iran in 2015, the director of Antiquities said to me, “You are going to excavate Jundi Shapur!” I replied, “Inshallah,” and I retain that hope today.

5. D. Whitcomb, “Sinnabra (or Khirbat al-Karak),” in *The Oriental Institute 2017–2018 Annual Report*, 145–53 (Chicago: University of Chicago, Oriental Institute, 2018).

6. See T. Da’adli, “Stratigraphy and Architecture of the Fortified Palace,” in *Bet Yerah, vol. 3: Hellenistic Philotera and Islamic al-Sinnabra*, ed. R. Greenberg, O. Tal, and T. Da’adli, 133–78 (Jerusalem: IAA Reports 61, 2017).

7. D. Whitcomb, “From Shahrstan to Medina’ Revisited,” in *Cities of Medieval Iran: Sites, Society, Politics and Culture*, ed. D. Durand-Guedy and R. Mottahehdeh, 77–99 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).