

Excavating Jewishness: Archaeology and the Making of Jewish Space

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Archaeology has long been central to the European nation-state discourse. In the Middle East, while the nineteenth century witnessed the first investigations into Jewish and Biblical archaeological sites, mainly conducted by American, British, French, and German Christian archaeologists, the first half of the twentieth century saw for the first time the birth of a “Jewish archaeology.” The recovery of the past answered not only the need for a “usable past” but also for material evidence of Jewish life in ancient Palestine. At the same time, archaeology, transposed into the European Jewish discourse, became a way to reconceptualize Jewish identity in Europe and, after the Holocaust, a way to recover the pre-Holocaust past, its topography and material remnants.

In this lecture I start delineating a broader picture of the uses of the material past in Jewish literatures (20th-21st century). Specifically, I focus on Yehuda Amichai’s Hebrew short story *Nina of Ashkelon* (from the collection *In This Terrible Wind*, 1961) as a response to the Zionist archaeological discourse just after Israeli independence. I argue that in this story Amichai allusively deconstructs and indicts the Zionist use of the material past: the Roman tomb at the center of the story points out the suppressed past of the Land of Israel – constantly appropriated, exploited and killed, as symbolized by Nina, the protagonist of the story. In his reading of the archaeological landscape, Amichai emphasizes its multilayered nature, spanning the ancient Roman to the pre-1948 War Arab past of the land, as the “subconscious of the earth,” a re-metaphorization of Freud’s conceptualization of the human psyche. This reveals subsequent cycles of migration, competition, and settlement, with no apparent original “native,” thus dismantling the Zionist appropriation of archaeology as a means to validate exclusive Jewish claim to the Land of Israel.

By way of archaeology’s epistemological model and its Freudian metaphorization, Amichai’s narrative deconstructs the mystical-political Zionist notion of the “Land of Israel” altogether. Amichai’s surreal story undermines the supposedly unshakeable bond between the Land of Israel and the Jewish people, offering a snapshot of the charged intersection between Zionism and the archaeological discourse.