

29 June 2005

Palestinian, Israeli Scholarly Teams Preserve Shared Heritage Sites

Local communities encouraged to participate in site protection

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Washington -- Since 2001, two teams of scholars and scientists, one based in Israel, the other in the Palestinian territories, have worked on a cooperative project to preserve historical sites that are important to the Jewish, Muslim and Christian religions.

The project, called the People to People Exchange Program, was funded by a \$400,000 Department of State grant as an outgrowth of the U.S.-brokered Wye River Accords, signed by Israeli and Palestinian negotiators at the Wye River Plantation in Maryland in 1998.

The Israeli team, from the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa, focuses on the historic and religious structures in Akko, northern Israel, one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. The Israeli team is led by Ann E. Killebrew of Haifa University. She is assisted by Mina Evron, head of the Zinman Institute and Wye Project co-coordinator. Participants on the Israeli team include Israeli Jews, Israeli Muslims, Israeli Christians, Germans and other Europeans, and Americans.

The Palestinian Association for Cultural Exchange (PACE) team focuses on heritage initiatives in two important biblical sites in the West Bank: Beitin (old Bethel) and el Jib (old Gibeon). Team leader Adel Yahyeh, an archaeologist and PACE's director, said, "Both were in a fragile state, threatened by roiling political currents and largely neglected."

Rehabilitation was achieved "in close cooperation with the people of the two villages," he said. The Palestinian cadre also was a diverse group, with Germans, Italian-Americans, and various university grad students and interns.

For three years, the Wye teams' mission was to (1) clean, clear, and as much as possible restore or rehabilitate antiquated structures in ancient towns; (2) secure sites from petty thievery and vandalism, crimes that have diluted the sites' value and discouraged tourism; and (3) educate local populations about the work. Arab Muslims, Arab Christians and Israelis alike were encouraged to embrace the idea of heritage, preservation and shared traditions. In Israel, especially, the idea of guarding against bulldozing the past was stressed.

Here are some of Wye's many hard-won accomplishments:

At ancient el-Jib/Gibeon:

- Cleaning, restoration, and terrace and fence construction for wine cellars, olive presses and pools.
- Basic cleaning and preservation work at an important Old Testament cistern.
- Promoting traditional Palestinian weaving, ceramics, stone cutting and other heritage-preservation activities.

At Akko:

- Compiling major historical sources from the year 2 B.C. to 1948 and digitizing British Mandate Archives.
- Organizing 20th century oral histories.
- Starting or furthering work on dilapidated, poorly restored or threatened structures built atop Crusader remains at Serai (Hanna Abu Uqsa), in the Block 10 district, and at Beit Shukri.

Both Killebrew and Yahyeh said their teams are convinced that preserving the Holy Land's heritage requires close cooperation among all concerned. But conflict and jurisdictional disputes often dashed the teams' hopes of visiting each other's areas. Yahyeh said that joint efforts were limited to "conferences and regular meetings here and abroad" to attend workshops and present papers on the challenges of preserving world-heritage sites in wartime.

Determined to go forward, the teams used e-mail and "exchanged ideas and presented the outcome of our work on the three sites to one other and to other scientists," Yahyeh said. Among the concrete achievements, Killebrew said, was the English translation and printing of a 300-page report of the Wye heritage preservation activities.

Artifact looting was targeted by both teams as threatening site preservation and detracting from the economic potential of tourism, and, consequently, efforts were made to encourage communities to take responsibility for protecting the sites.

Archaeologist Sandra Scham, a member of the Israeli team and a close colleague of both Yahyeh and Killebrew in the Wye project, said some Palestinian sites were in "no man's land -- nobody was looking after them."

"Subsistence looting by people without jobs has pretty much stopped," she said. She added that some of the State Department funding has "gotten local people involved in both preserving and guarding the sites," many legacy sites in the region have been "cleaned up, kept clean, and made more attractive."

Killebrew said that trade in historical artifacts takes place openly in Israel and is driven by Western antiquities collectors and fed by Israeli and sometimes Arab suppliers. Local committees, however, are developing a stronger sense of ownership over the sites where they are living, she said. "It really is up to the local people to protect the sites," she said.

That is why overcoming "artificial boundaries between people" was part of the Wye community education workshops, Killebrew said.

Can other regions profit from the Wye River experience? Yes. Killebrew thinks that in Israel, and increasingly in the Palestinian areas, the idea is growing that "you can't just go in, excavate and walk away from a site," leaving open holes and doing other, subtler forms of damage. There's a need for "more accountability [by the archaeologist] to the site itself and to the communities connected to these sites."

The Wye project leaders hope to keep its promise alive. Joint workshops for Palestinians and Israelis about their respective work are planned in July at the University of Haifa, under the co-sponsorship of the Turkish and American embassies, to illuminate the many shared-heritage communities. Akko alone has 26.

In February, at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, team leaders presented prepublication papers summarizing the results of their three years of shared-heritage work and of community-education programs aimed at involving local people in site-preservation after the teams leave. The U.S. State Department co-sponsored the conference.

The larger hope, expressed by Scham, is that the work of Wye will inspire others in the Middle East. "Colleagues of ours have a U.S. Institute of Peace grant for some meetings with Palestinians and Israelis, to do research. We

consulted with them on their grant application. They'll probably ask us to attend the meetings. So the original scope of Wye has expanded outside our own group." She added, "We're hoping that we get additional ECA grants we've applied for, and support from others like the Middle East Partnership Initiative (a State Department program), so that we can continue to work together."

At stake are countless sites throughout Israel and the Palestinian territories representing the cultural and religious legacies of all three monotheistic faiths.

"Investing in heritage preservation is not about preserving the past but rather investing in the future. That is why projects like ours deserve international support. They give hope to the people in a better future for them and for their country," Yahyeh said.

Looking toward the future, Yahyeh is working to strengthen the nascent Palestinian Antiquities Authority and to create a Palestinian School of Archeology. Mina Evron is interested in being involved in coordinating landscape archeology in the West Bank. Ann Killebrew is involved in creating a Web site for the PACE and Haifa teams.

(The Washington File is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

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