

# Better labor practices could improve archaeological output

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An excavation site in Petra, Jordan. Credit: Allison Mickel

Archaeological excavation has, historically, operated in a very hierarchical structure, according to archaeologist Allison Mickel. The history of the enterprise is deeply entangled with Western colonial and

imperial pursuits, she says. Excavations have been, and often still are, according to Mickel, led by foreigners from the West, while dependent on the labor of scores of people from the local community to perform the manual labor of the dig.

In a recently published paper examining some of this history specifically in the context archaeological excavations undertaken in the Middle East?Mickel writes: "Even well into the 20th century, locally hired [excavation](#) workers continued to benefit little from working on archaeological projects, still predominantly directed by European and American researchers who paid extremely low wages and did not share their purpose, progress, hypotheses, or conclusions with [local community](#) members."

Over time, the teams have gotten smaller in size, but hiring and [labor](#) practices remain the same, explains Mickel, an assistant professor of anthropology at Lehigh University, who specializes in the Middle East.

"We haven't really changed the hierarchy of how we hire or the fact that workers are paid minimum wage—sometimes as little as a few dollars a day, which is not very much to spend even in their own context, for work that is dangerous and has a lot of risk to it," she says.

In a new paper, "Essential Excavation Experts: Alienation and Agency in the History of Archaeological Labor," published in *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, Mickel illuminates the ways that nineteenth century archaeologists working in the Middle East managed local labor in ways that reflected capitalist labor management models. She focuses on two case studies from early Middle Eastern archaeology by examining the memoirs of two 19th century archaeologists: Italian archaeologist Giovanni Battista Belzoni, known for his work in Egypt, and British archaeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard, best known for his work in Nimrud, an ancient Assyrian city

about 20 miles south of Mosul, Iraq.

Mickel's analysis reveals the different ways local laborers responded to similar conditions. Her examination ultimately reveals how much archaeological knowledge has fundamentally relied upon the active choices made by the local laborers who do the digging.

## **Divergent responses to exploitative labor practices**

Mickel argues that the framework established by the German philosopher and economist Karl Marx of the capitalist mode of production can be seen in 19th century [archaeological work](#) in the Middle East—and, in many ways, in archaeological projects today. This includes Marx's assertion that, she writes, "...the capitalist mode of production leads to workers experiencing a sense of powerlessness and an inability to fulfill the potential of their own skills, expertise, and abilities."

In Mickel's analysis, Belzoni's approach to securing and retaining local laborers for his work in Egypt, which began in 1816, exemplified the conditions of modes of production that lead to his workers' "...alienation in the Marxist sense," beginning with how little he paid them.

She writes: "Monetarily devaluing the archaeological work of native Egyptians in this way engenders an understanding that archaeological labor is quite literally of little worth—one that in Marx's view deeply impacts the self-image of the workers in a production process. Not only were the workers paid next to nothing for performing the manual labor of Belzoni's endeavors, they were also not involved in the conceptualization of the project. In the end, the antiquities were subsequently shipped thousands of miles away, challenging both ideologically and spatially any relationship between the workers and the archaeological objects being unearthed through excavation, as well as the

knowledge gleaned from them."

Mickel also writes about Belzoni's use of strongarm tactics to maintain the workforce he employed. These include resorting to physical violence and bribery?strategies Belzoni used, in one example, on a foreman to force laborers to return to work during a strike.

During his famed excavation of the Memnon Head in 1816, Belzoni had to leave the site for an extended period of time in order to raise funds. He believed, writes Mickel, "...that the workers and their families were too lazy to dig on their own..."

"Indeed," she continues, "no substantial digging proceeded in Belzoni's absence by the time he returned. The reasons for this surely have nothing to with any indolence on the part of the native Egyptian workforce, but rather can be explained in terms of alienation."

In examining Layard's memoir, Mickel finds that although Layard worked in the same region and during the same time period as Belzoni, his workers' responded to similar working conditions very differently.

"Operating under extremely similar circumstances," writes Mickel, "the groups of workers examined here made very divergent decisions about how best to respond to an exploitative labor system, whether to rise up demonstratively against it or to resist the devaluation of their work by establishing themselves as essential to the production of artifacts and historical knowledge."

Layard's strategies for hiring and managing a local labor force had much in common with Belzoni's, including elements of capitalist labor relations modes such as low wages. Additionally, Layard's memoirs suggest "...that he viewed the total excavation endeavor as metaphorically signifying the superiority of Western civilization over

Oriental peoples and cultures."

And yet Layard's workmen, explains Mickel, often appear in his writing as trusted experts in the excavation process: "These men developed impressive excavation abilities that Layard himself recognized, repeatedly hiring the same groups of people for season after season and site after site. One native Assyrian man whom he hired again and again, Hormuzd Rassam, ultimately went on to lead his own excavations on behalf of the British Museum at places like Nimrud and Nineveh; Rassam even published his own archaeological memoirs for popular distribution like Layard and other archaeologists of the time"

Mickel compares these two contexts and concludes: "Operating under extremely similar circumstances, the groups of workers examined here made very divergent decisions about how best to respond to an exploitative labor system, whether to rise up demonstratively against it or to resist the devaluation of their work by establishing themselves as essential to the production of artifacts and historical knowledge."

Focusing attention on the divergent decision these two groups of laborers made reveals how much is owed to archaeological workers' localized responses to a structure designed to maximize benefit to the archaeologists and minimize workers' control within the project, asserts Mickel.

She writes: "What would the archaeological record look like if this was not the case? How would archaeological knowledge be transformed if the means of its production were not controlled by archaeologists alone but shared with local stakeholders?"

## **Digging and questioning**

As part of her work, Mickel supervises and participates in excavations in

regions such as Petra, Jordan and Catalhoyuk, Turkey, while researching the history of archaeology and its contemporary practice.

Mickel has spent two to three months each summer in Turkey and Jordan, and between 2011 and 2015 spent a year at both sites, conducting dissertation fieldwork on a Fulbright grant.

"What I find in [Petra and Catalhoyuk] is relevant to a lot of other contexts because archaeology is fairly regional in its practice," she says.

Beyond digging, Mickel examines records of [archaeological excavations](#) for the individuals listed as site workers. She visits their homes and asks questions about the site workers' experiences on the excavations.

"I found that this system has led to one in which workers are doing this dance all the time in archaeology where they are integral to carrying out an excavation, they work for almost nothing, they are good at what they do, they have decades of experience in addition to generational knowledge that's been handed down. ... Most of these people, for context, their fathers worked in archaeology, their grandfathers worked in archaeology—it's almost like a family business for them to be there. So they have a ton of knowledge, but if I tell them how much I admire their expertise, they react really negatively to that label of expertise."

Mickel believes that an improvement of labor practices would benefit not just workers, but archaeology as a whole. She argues for ways in which the field could be producing better science if archaeologists were to change their [labor practices](#).

"This isn't charity work," says Mickel. "If we want to have better archaeology, if we want to know more about the past, then we need to find ways to benefit from the knowledge that local people have been hiding for decades and decades and decades from us."

**More information:** Allison Mickel, Essential Excavation Experts: Alienation and Agency in the History of Archaeological Labor, *Archaeologies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s11759-019-09356-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11759-019-09356-9)

Provided by Lehigh University

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