Cosmopolitan Archaeologies

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For a several decades now, those of us who have done our archaeological service in the Middle East have sought to disabuse ourselves of the idea that we were working at the center of it all. As the erstwhile “cradles of civilization” have failed to appeal to new generations of archaeologists, the biblical and ancient Near Eastern pasts are developing a distinct quaint colonialist aura (Steele 2005). Despite this, our persistent, if inflated, sense of our central place in the discipline remains a constant. Thus, many of us have discovered that our feelings over the return of popular attention to our region, while accompanied by the sobering realization that the events that precipitated it are tragic ones, are not entirely unalloyed with satisfaction.

It is a surprising development for an archaeological subspecialty not exactly known for its timely debates that happenings in our field are engaging the interests of journalists and television reporters. Nevertheless, whether it is seen as a thorn in the imperialist side, a cauldron of extremism, or a last stand of tradition in the face of a commodifying modernity, the region now exerts a profound effect on many aspects of our culture. In analyses focusing on the role of religion (Ahmed 2003; Halliday 2000; Jan 2003; Antoun 2001), economic underdevelopment (Silverstein and Makdisi 2006), victimization and the struggle for subaltern status (Lindholm 2002), popular culture and its discontents (Stein and Swedenburg 2005), colonialism and violence (Dawisha 2003; J. Cole 1992), and the internet and globalization (Hill 2002), our colleagues in the social sciences have sought understanding of this effect with admirable zeal.

The notion that Middle Eastern cultures and values are fixed and immutable is a theme in many of these explorations with some scholars who willingly confront the fallacies of this concept (Massad 2001) and others who suggest that a primary concern in the region is the maintenance or invention of traditions that can be embalmed for future generations (Lewis 2001, 2004; Huntington 1998). Most of these
tomes, having been spawned in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, have a subtext, whether acknowledged or not, of either decrying (Little 2004; Lockman 2004) or supporting (Lewis 2004) the current policy of the United States in the Middle East even though political analysts of all stripes have begun to detect a certain lack of precision on what that policy now is.

What our government excels at, however, is not transparency in its political or strategic aims but clarity in the realm of values. As President Bush famously admonished: “We must never forget that this is a long struggle, that there are evil people in the world who hate America. And we won’t relent. The folks who conducted to act on our country on September 11th made a big mistake. They underestimated America. They underestimated our resolve, our determination, our love for freedom. They misunderestimated the fact that we love a neighbor in need. They misunderestimated the compassion of our country.” In this famous foray into neologism, the president articulated what he believed to be American objectives for the Middle East. On the one side is a “loving and compassionate” imperialism influenced by Western religious teachings and imperfectly realized as an antidote to Eastern religious extremism (Lockman 2004; Little 2004). On the other side, it is posited, is a violent dismissal of our values as a corrupting zeitgeist aimed at erasing religion and morality from all public life (Jan 2003; Ahmed 2003).

As a major contributor to perceptions formed both there and abroad, the archaeology of the Middle East has clear subtexts relating to almost every aspect of practice in the region (Pollock and Bernbeck 2005) and it is these subtexts that determine what is conveyed about its narrative. In what follows, I will make some exploratory movements toward fashioning a cosmopolitan adaptation of the Middle Eastern archaeological story based upon concepts that have been articulated by Appiah in Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (2006a). Based upon Appiah’s cosmopolitan philosophy and, additionally, that of Habermas (2003), Derrida (1997), and Nussbaum (1994, 2006), I will examine values that are at the heart of Middle Eastern cultures, both ancient and modern, and what they should mean for Western archaeologists practicing in the region today. From there, the sections below move backward in time from typical approaches to knowledge dissemination about the archaeology of the Middle East today to nationalist perceptions that represent a slightly earlier era to, finally, telling our story
as archaeologists of the ancient Near East through the eyes of those Victorian cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans (Appiah 2006a: 1) known to some as Orientalists.

The story will, thus, be presented in stratigraphic terms. While I am not as enslaved to chronologies as many of my colleagues, I find the activity of uncovering the conceptual layers that have formulated our discipline, as one would a site, to be as good an approach as any toward revealing how we came to be where we are. As the quote in the title of this article, from Robert Browning’s poem Rabbi Ben Ezra, suggests, “Time’s wheel” does indeed “run back” both in the ways that we continue to conduct archaeology in the Middle East and in the reverberations of “our” past in concert with all of the other pasts that have shaped the region.

Hospitality and the Cosmopolitan Archaeological Project

After having fairly dismissed the idea of “timelessness” in relation to the Middle East it may seem disingenuous to begin our reverse chronology with a discussion of hospitality—one of those presumably unchanging traits of Middle Eastern life. Nonetheless, it is difficult to find a value that has been more misunderstood, taken advantage of, and mischaracterized by Westerners in the Middle East than hospitality. Biblical scholars still see among the Bedouin of the modern Middle East the very model of what they view as Abraham’s welcoming demeanor (Vos 1999; Feiler 2001), hardly recognizing that this conflation of millennia and cultures does no more to elucidate the Bible than it does to convey an accurate sense of the modern culture.

Recently, in expressing a hope that Christians who live in Muslim countries “find welcome and respect” there, Pope Benedict sparked a discussion on the topic of hospitality and its attendant concept, reciprocity. Aside from the observation that “reciprocity,” in either its positive or negative form, is not a Christian value, quoting a medieval emperor on the inherent evil of Islam, as the pope did in this same speech, did little to assure that his hopes would be fulfilled. By conjuring up one of the worst periods in the history of relations between Christians and Muslims, the pope reduced what ideally should have been a conversation, which Appiah defines as being neither didactic nor consensus seeking (2006a: 58), between religious practitioners to an implied threat. Under the circumstances, this use of the language
of hospitality seems remarkably obtuse and his comments appear to ridicule both the cultural and religious values of the Muslim and Arab worlds.

In contrast, cosmopolitanists posit a role for global moral behavior that, it is argued, should be dependent upon an understanding, through conversation, of the values of others as well as co-extensive with global economic influences (Appiah 2006a). The prospect of one world with many perspectives applies to the phenomenon of cosmopolitanism itself—which has numerous adherents with as many different views as to what constitutes universal values. Both Derrida (1997) and Habermas (2003a) support this philosophical project although Habermas’s approach is distinctly more rational than Derrida’s. He invites his audience to consider a world in which citizens share equally in a sense of freedom to have lives of dignity but, as Derrida (1997) has noted, such a world is founded upon the notion of universal access to the form of reason Habermas espouses. Tolerance is at the heart of Habermas’s vision of a cosmopolitan world and certainly tolerance is most clearly the value that Appiah’s system is based upon. Derrida adds another dimension to the debate by suggesting that tolerance is more protective of the power of the person and the state expressing it than it is supportive of true equality.

It is hospitality, according to Derrida, that most closely approximates a true cosmopolitan worldview. “Pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality itself,” he writes, “opens or is, in advance, open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign visitor, as a new arrival, non-identifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other” (Derrida 1997: 128–29). Offered to the foreign other from the very heart of the familiar self, the place of dwelling, true hospitality subsumes the language of tolerance, which, for Derrida, is no more than a parsimonious “scrutinized hospitality” (Derrida 1997: 128). On balance, Derrida’s perspective, of the two, seems more “right” for a cosmopolitan understanding of the Middle East where hospitality is neither a quaint religious tradition nor an obligation that is undertaken only with an end in view. It is, instead, an entire network of dependent and overlapping factors—reciprocal relations that allow for a smoothly functioning social order.

In practicing our own version of hospitality and reciprocity, the consideration of adding to the economic welfare of the communities we work among should not be a secondary one. Discussing this topic on
several occasions with archaeologists whom I knew to be working in the same region as I was, I asked if they had ever employed anyone locally to work on their projects. The answers ranged from doubts as to whether their government licenses would permit them to do so to implications that the people in the area were unreliable, untrained, and untrustworthy. Apparently those who held the latter view had not reflected that sites are entrusted to the people living near them whether archaeologists are there or not. In this instance, the hospitable solution is also the practical one.

This not too startling revelation came to me while I was working in the Dead Sea region in Jordan. During the winter months, in preparation for a project, I arrived to find that the local small complex of mud brick houses, which were uninhabited the previous summer, now had people living in them. From the beginning of my work there, young people from those houses would attempt to converse with me, bring tea to me while I was working in the field, and even send me back to Amman with produce and cheese—all of which I attempted to refuse with no success. I had become a regular, but still reluctant, luncheon guest by the time I was joined on the project by Mohammed Balowneh, an archaeological inspector from the Jordanian Antiquities Authority.

The dimension of understanding that the latter’s presence began to add to the proceedings was one for which I remain grateful. With limited Arabic skills on my side and little to no English skills on the other, I had found my seemingly pleasant encounters with the local people uncomfortable and burdened with guilt, as I had determined that these were not people who could afford to entertain me on a daily basis. My colleague said to me one day as we were eating, “You know these people are very poor?” I said that I did and had tried very hard to refuse their generous invitations. Dismissing that as the reason for his comment he continued by saying that it would be good to hire people from among my hosts for my project. As far as the hospitality was concerned, he told me later, “It’s important—it has to be done,” indicating that the obligation falls on both the host and the guest.

The idea that, in choosing people to work with, one might do so on a personal basis is not entirely foreign to our culture. The element of the relationship added by hospitality is intended to operate as an affirmation that one’s host is correct in fulfilling social obligations as, hopefully, one’s guests will be correct in fulfilling theirs. We may recognize this necessity yet, all too often, we will continually take advantage
of the obligation on one side, as I did, without attempting to assume it on the other. Archaeologists working in these countries are no less guests there than tourists—and, one might well argue, they should be more aware of their obligations in that respect by virtue of having spent much more time in the country.

A colleague of mine, a Palestinian archaeologist working in the West Bank, maintains that the employment of local people on archaeological sites can demonstrably reduce the amount of looting that goes on there (Yahya 2005: 75–76). There are model archaeological excavations, some of them mentioned elsewhere in this volume, that integrate a system of sharing, both in economic and in educational terms, with surrounding communities. Çatalhöyük (Hodder 2000), the Kruger National Park Project (Meskell 2005a), and the Rahmatabad Project in Iran (Bernbeck et al. 2005) are good examples. Most archaeology in Israel and Jordan has not incorporated these ideas and research remains firmly under the control of “professionals” and their students. In this sense, we might say that the “Orientalist” scholars of the past assessed this situation more correctly than we—dependent as they were upon a local work force, rather than a host of wealthy Western students. It seems that, in evaluating the theoretical harm done by their views on Middle Eastern culture and society, some of us have elected to counter it by eliminating any economic relationship between ourselves and the local people entirely. To deconstruct the Middle Eastern past in terms of the perspectives that have sustained us for so long may require an acknowledgment that the lineage of our discipline is not a noble one. This does not, however, preclude salvaging something of validity from the idealistic fabrications of our forebears.

Misunderestimating the Middle Eastern Past

Rejecting our past history piecemeal, rather than as a whole, is a seriously complex proposition. It requires a consideration of all of the legacies of the discipline, including a perennial favorite that few wish to disregard—the idea that enlightened and scientific concepts can be subsumed into archaeological practice without doing damage to postmodern concerns about serving the public. Science, so Appiah (2006a: 39) tells us, runs interference with attempts to understand through true conversation. How many archaeologists working in non-Western countries have heard their colleagues expound upon the “unscientific”
methods of locally trained scholars? I would venture to say that most of us, at one time or another, have had this experience. Science is still the last bastion of the colonialist defense.

Misunderestimate, everyone’s favorite presidential blog word as expressed in the speech concerning the attacks of September 11 cited above, seems to be a particularly apt term for these kinds of mistakes in judgment. It might be defined (if it existed) as “to misunderstand and underestimate simultaneously.” The context in which the president uses this word also should have some resonance for us. Even though it is clear that he does, in fact, know the word “underestimate,” as he uses it in conjunction with “resolve,” “determination,” and “freedom,” “misunderestimate” is, peculiarly, reserved for “love,” “compassion,” and, on numerous other occasions, his own abilities. One has to assume that Bush is well aware that whatever love or compassion is displayed by citizens of the United States toward each other is of virtually no concern to its enemies. The suggestion is, rather, that these are “hidden” qualities—ones that are not readily discernible. It is this gnostic aspect of our Middle East policy that has been assiduously relied upon in numerous follow-up discussions as to the direction of our interventions in Middle Eastern political processes (R. Marshall 2005).

Just as the president has no problem conveying meaning through nonexistent words, we attempt to paint our pictures of the Middle Eastern past through the medium of the nonexistent, but nonetheless meaningful, “collective memories” of our listeners. The “biblical” versus “Near Eastern” versus “Middle Eastern” past are radically different versions of the same archaeological record adjusted for different audiences. In exploring how far some of our notions about the past in the Middle East may have moved us toward the untenable present, one need only look at the ways in which the archaeology of this region is taught and its artifacts interpreted. The idea that “important” material culture is that which reflects religious rather than secular ideology is axiomatic for archaeologists who traditionally assign “ritual” functions to enigmatic objects. This both continually re-creates and reinforces the view that the East is more religious (read “irrational”) than the West (Said 1978; JanMohamed 1985). In this light, it is understandable why seals are given major significance among archaeological finds in the region. In fact, the meaning invested in them has inspired many famous forgeries of these items (Vaughn and Rollston 2005) and the discovery of different forms of seals generates archaeological excite-
ment far in excess of their value in providing information about ancient cultures. The “loaded symbolism” of these objects can be directly traced to religious perspectives (that is, seals or bullae with biblical names on them) or indirectly, in terms of the sense of both the finality and the approbation they represent. For example, on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, religious Jews express the wish to be happily sealed in the Book of Life while for Christians the breaking of seven seals heralds the end of the world and for Muslims Mohammed is the “Seal of the Prophets.”

A long-range perspective that incorporates outdated origins of the state models (Service 1964; Carneiro 1977; Wittfogel 1967) is still popular both in and out of the classroom. A preoccupation with towers and walls in Middle Eastern archaeology, as symbols of boundaries, borders, and landscapes of control, of nationalism and militarism, suggests more than a mere superimposition of the present on the past. Such preoccupation reflects a continuing classificatory mindset that requires either a hierarchical or unconnected relationship between cultures and societies. Most archaeological data suggest that this is likely to be a complete mischaracterization of past realities. Nonetheless, when it comes to the ancient Near East, the choice of relationships between sites traditionally comes down to conquered, conqueror, or disaffected.

To the extent that the region’s archaeological record demonstrates a secular ideology it is always assumed to be as a result of that mysterious force in the ancient world known as “hellenization” (Mazar 2000). This is not to say that an interest in establishing a synthesis between Eastern and Western civilizations is not, also, an obsession. A theory that has long fascinated scholars of the ancient Near East—“The Axial Age” (Jaspers 1953)—juxtaposes the so-called universalizing philosophies of Europe and Asia. This simplistic construct can literally be placed into the service of any view on religion and politics. The familiar unctuous rhetoric of politicians who speak of values shared by all of the world’s great religions, values that curiously sound quite particularistic, implies that the appeal of this concept lives on.

In recent decades, critical historical perceptions of the consequences of religious intolerance, from martyred Christians to the Holocaust, have become a common thread in our education, so much so that it has created a distrust of religion in public life that fundamentalists are now finding so deplorable (Antoun 2001). While we are wont to abrogate the role of religion in politics, education in the Middle East focuses on
economic and political factors as the most insidious historical forces (Zubaida 1999; Ahmed 2003). While our historical education represents the Crusades as a period of religious activism, heroic to some but alarming to many others (Scham 2002), Arab education emphasizes that Crusaders were impelled by a feudal system that economically disenfranchised younger sons (Maalouf 1984).

These kinds of differences, though they seem only to extend to interpretations of certain historical episodes, can result in some bizarrely mismatched perspectives in the field between archaeologists and the communities in which they work. Our concern with delineating space and material culture as either sacred or secular, ritual or functional can suggest to others that we are bent upon viewing religion as a force apart from all other aspects of society and culture (Zedeno 2000). Our categories tend to be mutually exclusive rather than overlapping. Thus, in a sense, Western scholars might be considered as extreme in our thought as we have deemed others to be in their deeds (Appiah 2005: 138–41). We can excuse this tendency as a “reasoned approach,” but is a dedication to reason inherently superior to a zeal for god and country? We assume so, yet in the end there is little incontrovertible evidence that we can summon to support this proposition.

Nationalism and Patrimonial Archaeology

One might expect that cosmopolitanism and nationalism are mutually exclusive. Indeed, given the kind of damage that is possible, cosmopolitan perceptions of both religion and patriotism might be assumed to be fraught with misgivings. Curiously, neither Appiah nor Nussbaum (1994, 2006), who has written extensively on this subject, are dismissive of these as emotional attachments. Suggesting that cosmopolitanism, rather than being an alternative to these feelings, might be viewed as the imagined community writ large, Appiah seems to declare that his own brand of “rooted” cosmopolitanism encompasses the soul of patriotism and religious feeling if not all of their outward expressions (2005: 155–210).

The cosmopolitan patriot can in fact maintain local attachments alongside of an appreciation of difference not only through tourism but also as a result of migration, nomadism, and diaspora. “In the past, these processes have too often been the result of forces we should de-
plore; the old migrants were often refugees, and older diasporas often began in an involuntary exile,” Appiah writes. “But what can be hateful, if coerced can be celebrated when it flows from the free decisions of individuals or of groups” (Appiah 1997a: 618). The conundrum of cosmopolitan patriotism arises with the realization that the “roots” of cosmopolitanism are firmly planted in this coercive past. Appiah’s own family history might be said to have resulted from multiple migrations, forced as well as chosen.

To be a cosmopolitan patriot is to be unique in one’s understanding of the relationship of individuals to places and from a contemplation of what makes us different rather than like our nationalist neighbors. “Becoming a citizen of the world is often a lonely business,” Nussbaum (1994: 6) tells us. “It is, in effect, as Diogenes said, a kind of exile—from the comfort of local truths, from the warm nestling feeling of patriotism, from the absorbing drama of pride in oneself and one’s own.” Nussbaum’s argument that “cosmopolitanism seems to have a hard time gripping the imagination” in comparison to a patriotism “full of color and intensity and passion” (Nussbaum 1994: 5) reminds us, as archaeologists, of the difficulty in getting people to care about places that they don’t view as their patrimony.

The postmodern dilemma is how much of a dichotomy between cultures one can embrace fully while, at the same time, attempting to comprehend the cosmopolitan society. The unspoken assumption of many postmodernists, that there is a “bad” nationalism that has incited nations to seize power and a “good” nationalism that empowers formerly colonized people to control their own past, needs to be examined carefully. This problem might best be approached by a further examination of whether there might be a distinction between nationalism and patriotism. Nationalist archaeology, which we have all come to condemn, may be distinct from patrimonial archaeology, although the latter concept is not one that should make us entirely comfortable. Nevertheless, just as there are a host of factors beyond simple intellectual curiosity that motivate scholars, both as individuals and as members of groups, what other people make of places is neither predictable nor controllable.

Rather than an argument for universalism, multiculturalism, or globalization, Appiah’s cosmopolitanism (2005: 222) has, at its heart, a message for anthropologists and archaeologists (see also the chapter by
Breglia, this volume). People, that is, individuals, in all of their unregulated glory and resplendent with a sense of choice, trump cultures. Take heed any one of us who would preserve aspects of cultures that their practitioners are no longer interested in, for in a cosmopolitan world there is a right to select those affiliations that one would remember—and those that one would rather forget (see the Benavides chapter in this volume). In the Middle East, it is unfortunately the most politically and socially engaged archaeologists who have discovered this hard lesson. Several of my colleagues in Palestine and Jordan have become involved in movements toward reviving original crafts—looking upon it as an authentic way in which to stimulate the interests of communities in their pasts. These activists are not people who lack understanding about the region—many of them, in fact, were born there. They were, however, educated in the West and, as Appiah notes, therefore are wont to seek an uncontaminated and pristine version of their own cultures (Appiah 2005: 136). All of these endeavors, well intentioned as they are, have had virtually no impact, economically or otherwise.

What this means for archaeologists elsewhere is also a rather daunting prospect. Our visions of pickling the past must fall aside in the face of such a perspective. What is left is a sense that the past was formed not so much by those anonymous automatons that constituted past “cultures” but by individuals. We have known this for some time, electing to couch this realization in the term “agency” in order to maintain a safe distance from it (Dobres and Robb 2000; Dobres 2000; Pauketat 2001). Coming back to seeking the “Indian behind the artifact,” in reality rather than just symbolically, we find that our views about preservation and authenticity are based upon a concept of cultural difference that is bounded and that fails to admit difference on its own terms.

There is no real prescription for making either heritage or archaeology value neutral, and such a project would eventually be destructive of the entire enterprise of understanding past cultures (see the chapter by Colwell-Chanthaphonh, this volume). We cannot simply leave the question at that, however, because to do so would reinforce the kinds of categorizations that we have been so comfortable in making in the past. In Near Eastern archaeology in particular, we find it difficult to resist the typological temptation. The traditional “pottery reading” that takes place at most sites in the Near East, ostensibly done in order to educate students, is really a performance intended to gratify
archaeologists. This is perhaps where the expression “non-diagnostic” entered our vocabulary as a substitute for “I don’t know.” This kind of thinking is not conducive to the conduct of real conversations with the people we work among.

Naturally, the resurgence of religious nationalism in the Middle East has further complicated all of these questions because of our propensity to want to work at or near “sacred” sites. Jerusalem, which most of us know to be a frustrating and virtually impossible archaeological venue, still draws scores of volunteers to work on dull salvage digs in advance of construction projects. Notably, archaeologists of Muslim heritage favor survey work over excavation projects in places like Jerusalem while archaeologists of Jewish heritage want to dig up the city (Scham 2001). The religious nationalist constituencies of both support these views although the archaeologists themselves are not religious. Contested sites like Jerusalem engage their proponents in an essential war of wills over control and access to them and each side realizes that, ultimately, the fate of such places will be decided more by perseverance than by power (Scham 2003b).

While I was conducting a survey near a Chalcolithic (ca. 6500 BP) site in Jordan, a local man asked me, “What Arab peoples are you studying here?” He was with his young son and had asked the question presumably for the child’s benefit. In response to his ready classification, which I didn’t like, I was on the verge of countering with my own when it occurred to me that, since I had only the most imprecise idea of what constituted an Arab past identity, I was not in a position to comment on the question. Such an identity could easily encompass any trace of past or present cultures found on Arab soil. Just as religious Jews view all skeletal remains found in the land of Israel from the Paleolithic era forward as Jewish it would not be unusual for a Muslim in Jordan, which this man seemed to be, to make the same case about archaeological remains there.

That this was in fact the beginning of a real conversation that I failed to pursue now occurs to me. As products of our education, we archaeologists strive for certainty in determining the categories to which our data belong and we don’t invite questions that take us outside of our study boundaries. As products of a discipline that incorporates theological foundations of the nineteenth century and philosophy of the post-Enlightenment (Silberman 1998; Ostigard 2001), we
archaeologists working in the Near East in particular remain as confused as anyone else about the ways in which religious and secular ideology operate within our own culture and that of both the ancient and modern Middle East.

The Ancient Near East and the West: A Fallibilist Love Story

Spurred by a national identity developing from a fragmented base, requiring the desperate sacrifice of thousands and lasting, by some accounts, over fifty years, the Risorgimento eventually resulted in the extrication of Italy from the twin grip of imperial Austria and the papacy. It is difficult not to see in this historical episode comparisons to the situation in the Middle East today even to the extent of finding modern echoes of the redoubtable Metternich, whose famous pronouncements include “Error has never approached my spirit” and “Italy is only a geographical expression” (Reinerman 1971). Robert Browning was a cynical observer of the Italian resurgence as he was of most of the nationalist enterprises of his day (Poston 1973). He was not, like his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning, an engaged and emotional observer of the Italian revolution, even though he spent much of his adult life in Italy in self-imposed exile and many of his most famous monologues were composed there (Ryals 1996). His detachment and seeming alienation from his surroundings have caused some critics to accuse him of manifesting an “Italianism” in his perspectives on Italy that differs little, in their view, from Orientalism (Russo 1994).

Browning’s natural candor and political skepticism distinguishes him from the more impetuous poets of a previous generation. As a willing exile, he stood, perhaps, as a force between the jingoistic imperialism of his age and the fraught foreign emotional attachments of the Romantic poets. Upon his return to England a few years after his wife of almost twenty years died, he wrote “Rabbi Ben Ezra.” Like many of his dramatic poems, this one reads like an internal cosmopolitan conversation between the poet and his protagonist:

For thence—a paradox,
Which comforts while it mocks—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail?
What I aspired to be,
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been,
but would not sink i' the scale.

His conversations typically disclose without resolving and often present startling revelations. “Rabbi Ben Ezra” is a would-be lament of the aging philosopher. A lesser poet might have written a litany of regrets in such a work for thoughts and feelings not acted upon. This poem rather presents the paradox that the protagonist’s failure to achieve his aspirations was, in fact, his salvation. To subordinate all emotion to reason, it suggests, is to not live life. To do the reverse is to submit to brutality.

A cosmopolitan understanding of conflict and its devastating effects necessitates a similar stand between the claims of reason and emotion (Appiah 2006a). To converse in an atmosphere of contention it is necessary to approach the project with a belief in paradox. In a subsequent stanza of Browning’s poem, Rabbi Ben Ezra asks, “Was I, the world arraigned, were they, my soul disdained, Right?” An admission of uncertainty is not, as much of our Western education has taught us, a poor basis upon which to begin a discussion nor is it necessary to make each exchange a negotiation. This is rather the process of acknowledging fallibilism (Appiah 2005: 188; 2006: 144)—the imperfections in knowledge that we have persisted in protecting and passing on to future generations.

In a remarkably concise summation of all of the attendant prejudices that have accompanied the exploration of the ancient Near East, the archaeologist William Dever has said that the Bible is “not ‘history,’ but ‘His’ story—the dramatic account of God’s miraculous dealings with a particular people designated to become his chosen” (Dever 1997: 20). Less traditional practitioners would be reluctant to buy into this particular view as the basis for the discipline but, even with its essentialist faults, today’s biblical and Near Eastern archaeologists still believe in “our” story. Our story is uniquely our own, distinct from other archaeologists’ stories and, more significantly, distinct from the stories of the people we encounter. It is the conversation we have with ourselves and it admits of no distractions or diversions.

Near Eastern archaeologists are fond of beginning our story with Nabonidus, the last Babylonian emperor, who supposedly conducted the first archaeological excavation (Bahn 1999: 1–2). Most of us see
symmetry in this, rather than the irony that it actually represents, reasoning that even if Nabonidus appeared inept, or worse, deranged, to his own countrymen, at least he had the redeeming trait of intellectual curiosity. Perhaps it is well that we begin with Nabonidus as he may have established a precedent for the ways in which we have regarded the contributions of Orientalists to our discipline. No better illustration can be found for this than the reverence that both specialists in the Bible and in the Near East have for Flinders Petrie, the pioneering excavator of sites in Egypt and the Levant during the early part of the twentieth century.

Archaeological raconteurs make much of the peculiar, if not apocryphal, stories of Petrie having climbed the Great Pyramid in a tutu as well as his having willed his head to University College London so that his estimable intellectual capabilities might one day be fully explored by scientists (http://www.pobonline.com). The leading textbook used for the teaching of biblical archaeology to undergraduates informs us that it was Petrie’s methodology for excavating tells and subsequent pottery typology that constituted “a major breakthrough” (Mazar 2000: 7) for Near Eastern archaeology. General archaeological textbooks (Fagan 2005: 108; 2001: 236; Bahn 1999: 148–49; Price and Feinman 2001: 226) are no less laudatory concerning Petrie’s achievements with the exception of Wenke’s (1999: 469–470), which refers to Petrie’s “dynastic race” theories in a polite and noncommittal discussion of Afro-centric views on Egyptology.

While the standard narrative on Petrie’s contributions appear to suggest that, once again, an inquisitive spirit cancels out a seemingly harmless derangement, the correlation between Petrie’s classification theories and his overbearing racism are obvious to many in the field. University College London, perhaps feeling a particular sense of responsibility on this issue given its association with Petrie, has undertaken to ameliorate this situation on its “digitalegypt” website, which tells us that, “[Petrie’s] classification rests on assumptions concerning the evolution of human societies over time. . . . Such assumptions may be symptomatic of the social Darwinism and associated racism of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western science” (http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk).

The question of connections between “our story” as archaeologists and “the story” that now seems to be informing most of the developing views and policies on the Middle Eastern past can be understood more
easily by examining the rhetoric of all of these purveyors of the East in the West. The problem with dismissing such views as merely racist or colonialist returns us again to the old enemy of understanding—classification. On reading the letters of the early explorers of the Palestine Exploration Fund (Moscrop 2000) and the pronouncements of Flinders Petrie (Drower 1996) it is impossible to imagine that even the most insensitive encounters between these individuals and the “natives” whose aid they so attentively sought in their endeavors were burdened with an ongoing racist rhetoric. The overt racism of Western archaeologists was more likely reserved for communications with their perceived peers. Mortimer Wheeler is, therefore, famously touted for both his good relations with his Indian co-workers and his blanket dismissals of the intellectual capabilities of his Indian students (Hawkes 1982).

It is more likely that methodology was the ground upon which most of the clashes between East and West were fought. Any attempt to introduce cosmopolitanism into archaeology will likely fail in the realm of practice as much post-processual theory has before. Positivism is a privileged form of communication, no less so in the social sciences, and science remains our model for all modes of discourse (Appiah 2005: 57–58; 2006a: 13–15). No doubt our forbears in the field were positivists as well as racists—both of them traits that caused them to express frustration and hostility toward the slovenly habits of their workers.

If science and reason cannot be appealed to as a basis for achieving a cosmopolitan understanding of the Middle Eastern past, what is left? Though the danger of suggesting such a possibility is apparent, I believe that sentiment holds more promise. The emotional ties that early explorers and archaeologists genuinely seem to have felt toward the region are understandably dismissed by many of us as the “Lawrence of Arabia” phenomenon—an anomalous product of imperialist intervention. Said, in his typically pragmatic way, views these ties as an idealization of the East based upon fantasies and miscalculations (Said 1978). This is true to the extent that it describes the effects of such emotions on the objectified “beloved Orient,” but the question of whether this emotion in any way transforms those who have it may be more complex than we have supposed.

William Foxwell Albright, the putative originator of biblical archaeology, wrote to his mother in 1921 that “there is not a spot in the whole world which suits me like Jerusalem, not only for its associations, but
also because of the opportunities for research at the fountain head, and because of the cultivated cosmopolitan atmosphere which I love” (Long 1996). This admiration of the East may be at the heart of the problem, but it might also prefigure the resolution. There is no doubt that Petrie, Wheeler, and Albright cherished deep feelings for the East. Emotion, particularly emotion that informs the entire adult life of an individual, is not something that I am wont to dismiss lightly. Certainly, it is not to be trusted and, in the case of the Middle East, it has seldom conveyed to the benefit of real people living there. Yet, it may contain within it an uncultivated seed of understanding for difference (Appiah 2005; Nussbaum 1994).

Conclusion

The depiction of the “cosmopolitan” past is an adjustment that has yet to be made. Perhaps we have never truly believed that there is a market for this version. Cosmopolitan archaeology is not heritage studies nor is it the public archaeology of preservation and protection that is the specialty of UNESCO and the World Monuments Fund. Archaeological projects designed to incorporate notions of true conversation will address more than a concern with the examination and preservation of the site for future generations. Appiah points out that “there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value, not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (2006a: 19).

Appiah begins *Cosmopolitanism* with the story of Richard Francis Burton, whom he views as both exemplary and anti-exemplary of the mode of thought he espouses in the book. Though he was not an archaeological explorer, Burton, nonetheless, is very much a part of the ancient Near Eastern story. His attempts to embed himself within the culture of the Middle East and his linguistic abilities are looked upon even today with both envy and outrage. Burton, so Appiah tells us, was the “least Victorian of men—and the most” (2006a: 7). Where one might consider that Browning’s detachment made him largely
non-participatory (and non-critical) in the grandiose political and cultural program of the Victorian Age, we must place Burton squarely in the middle of it. By combining the passion of the dedicated Orientalist with a brutality of character that seemed preternaturally suited to the military, Burton represents the quintessence of the Western assault on the Middle East. We have newly assessed Burton as an arrogant expropriator of culture but, in doing so, we still fail to acknowledge that his views remain entrenched in Near Eastern studies. What continues to bring archaeologists to the Middle East is that Burtonian sense of confronting an exotic culture that, nevertheless, belongs to us. In our acceptance of this we perpetuate and support the attempts of Western politicians and religious leaders to affix the region and its people to a moment in time when we believed ourselves to be in more control over them.

“Time’s wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure,” as Browning, in the persona of an eleventh-century Jewish philosopher, admonishes in order to convey to his audience the futility of the active but unexamined life, of the sort that Burton might be said to personify. Although the poem indicates that Browning also was an expropriator of Middle Eastern culture, the poet never presents his vision as authentic nor does he purport to have translated the works of those in whose guise he speaks. Representing two aspects of a complex age, these Victorian cosmopolitans are as much the roots of our discipline as theology, ideology, and imperialism. We need not, however, continue to conduct our dialogue with the Middle East from either the alienated stance of a Browning or the involved but destructive stance of a Burton. The rules of engagement of Western scholars with the Middle Eastern past can still be rewritten.

Note

1 “President Thanks CIA: Remarks by the President to Employees of the Central Intelligence Agency at CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia,” White House Press Release, September 26, 2001.