

# A Collections Management Plan for Near Eastern Artefacts: Preservation and Significance

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## Abstract

The primary aim of this project is to produce a Management Plan which will assist archaeologists who are excavating Near Eastern artefact collections with strategies for short and long-term care of artefact collections. The research aims to develop and test criteria which can be used to assess the research potential and determine the significance of archaeological collections and artefacts. The purpose of the plan is to ensure the quality, repeatability and integrity of data for future research and for the benefit of wider communities.

## Paper

In 2008 Dr. Andrew Jamieson, from the Centre for Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne with Dr. Youssef Kanjou, Director of Excavations for the Aleppo region from the Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) embarked on a new era of research in the Euphrates River valley of north Syria. Part of the project involves the establishment of an archaeological repository and interpretation centre at Qal'at Nejim (Star Castle), an Islamic fortress on the Euphrates in which archaeological collections excavated from Tell Qumluq and other sites in north-eastern Syria could be securely stored and researched. The first part of the Qal'at Nejim project involves developing a management plan using criteria for assessing research potential and significance in artefact collections to be housed at the repository. It is proposed that the model will be adopted by other archaeologists excavating artefact collections in the region.

The development of a management plan with operational and organizational strategies represents a timely resource. The plan will

initiate key changes in the long-term nature of collections management in this artefact-rich region. In accordance with a radically transformed museums system in Syria, the management plan aims to address the long-term scientific, cultural and community values of artefact collections and to demonstrate methods based on best practice for collection, storage, access, protection and retention of archaeological research data and records.

Since the 1970's, international collaboration of multidisciplinary teams of anthropologists, archaeologists, geomorphologists, paleoanthropologists, and other specialists have been involved in intensive salvage and rescue excavation projects (Muhesen, 1999). In Syria, this situation arose as a consequence of the construction of dams along the Euphrates River (Jamieson, 2009). A greater understanding of the history and settlement of the north-west periphery of Mesopotamia has been revealed as a result of this research activity. Numerous sites range in date from prehistoric times through the Bronze and Iron Ages to sites of Classical and late Antiquity, Jamieson (2009), which have produced vast numbers of artefacts. Many excavated artefacts are currently awaiting further analysis while being stored in repositories which range from simple mud-brick structures in local villages to small regional cultural museums which offer limited access to researchers. The real cost for suitable, long-term management and curatorial services required for these archaeological collections, Childs (2002); Childs and Kagan (2008), has often not been factored into research design budgets by excavation Directors' whose projects have created the collections of artefacts, ecofacts and associated records. Their focus, by necessity, has been on the salvage excavation process itself and not on post-excavation care of artefacts.

Since 1984, the University of Melbourne has been conducting archaeological fieldwork and research in the middle and upper Euphrates River valley of north Syria. The projects began with the discovery of a Bronze Age fortress at El Qitar, followed in the late 1980's with an expedition to Tell Ahmar, ancient Til Barsib where evidence of a provincial centre of the Neo-Assyrian Empire

was uncovered. A joint project at Jebel Khalid between the University of Melbourne and the Australian National University (ANU) continues today with recent fieldwork revealing a major settlement of the Hellenistic period. Evidence from sites excavated in the Tabqa and Tishreen dam flood zones in this area of north Syria has supplied information on the existence of a broad range of periods, cultures and traditions Jamieson (2009). A range of challenges dealing with post-excavation conservation and the management of archaeological artefact collections has also been identified. Strategies are needed to ensure the preservation of the non-renewable collections so they are accessible for future research.

## Method

This research project will be organized to explain what is known about the challenges and problems surrounding Near Eastern archaeological collections including 'salvage' or 'rescue' archaeology. Data obtained from the first phase of observations at internationally-directed archaeological sites, Jebel Khalid and Tell Ahmar in Syria and Catalhöyük in Turkey in 2010-2011 will form the basis of understanding of the strategies and processes involved in excavating Near Eastern artefact collections. A second phase of fieldwork is scheduled from June to July 2011 at Syrian-directed archaeological sites with the aim of gathering data on methods and practice used by locally directed operations.

Once all quantitative data from fieldwork observations have been collated they will be analysed using benchmarking principles, Fernandez, McCarthy and Rakotobe-Joel (2001) and used to formulate strategies for the management plan based on best practice. The methods developed for the management model will draw broadly on and adapt project management criteria developed by archaeologists at English Heritage, *Management of Archaeological Projects*, Andrews (1991), *Management of Research Projects in the Historic Environment*, Lee (2006) for the UK and *Guidelines for Assessing and Managing Historic Archaeological Artefacts* currently being developed by Heritage Victoria, Melbourne (in prep).

In addition to the methods outlined above, Project Directors' associated with long-running, institutional excavation projects in artefact-rich areas including the Mediterranean and the Near East will be invited to participate in a questionnaire program. The questions are aimed at developing a broader perspective and understanding of the critical issues faced in managing collections for the long-term. Building on the data gathered from this level of research, conservators and curators will also be invited to participate in a separate questionnaire program with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of how the content of the plan can benefit the Museum archaeology community better.

## Results

Project hierarchies were developed for the three case-study sites visited between April and July 2010 namely; Jebel Khalid, Syria; Tell Ahmar, Syria and Catalhöyük, Turkey. This schematic representation was designed to set out the organizational and operational structures which characterize the projects' attributes. By creating project hierarchies, the organization of resources involved in conducting small, medium and large archaeological excavation projects in the Near East was identified. This step also assisted in defining the operational processes and created a structure within which to identify the various stages through which an artefact passes from the 'research design' phase to post-excavation analysis including dissemination of information. It further highlighted the need for succession planning in the context of long-term storage of artefact collections. Outlined below is a brief summary of the 2010 field season in Syria and Turkey.

### Case Study: Jebel Khalid

Jebel Khalid was a large fortified Hellenistic settlement covering 55 hectares and is located on the right bank of the Euphrates River in north Syria that dates to the early years of the third century BCE, at the beginning of the Seleucid control of the region, Clarke and Jackson (2010). It has been the subject of survey and excavation by an Australian team of archaeologists since 1984. The project has Australian Government (ARC

Australian Research Council) funding for a further four years. The storage of small finds and other artefact categories will be discussed at length elsewhere. Of 1100 inventoried objects excavated over the 2010 season only 4% were accessioned by the Aleppo Museum. Selection of artefacts is predominantly based on rarity, uniqueness, intactness, chronology (coins and text), context and the artefacts ability to tell something about the history of the period. Selection is made by the DGAM representative in consultation with the Project Director. The research significance of artefacts is usually determined by the Project Director based on the academic research questions set out in the Research Design. Table 1 data below shows how resources were allocated for the most significant operational activities undertaken at Jebel Khalid during the 2010 field season.

Excavation and Pottery Analysis - Jebel Khalid 2010						
Activity	Date	Working Days	Excavators	Diggers	Areas Excavated	Hours Worked
Excavating	27/0 4/10- 17/0 5/10	20	13	140	A, S, X	18,360
Pottery Analysis	27/0 4/10- 17/0 5/10	20	11	-	-	660
Total hours worked						19,020

Table 1 Data from 2010 excavation season at Jebel Khalid.

Data for storage space used for the long-term storage of artefacts by this project is not currently available. The project has recently embarked on a building program for a new storage facility in north east Syria.

The artefact management strategy at Jebel Khalid is to process pottery and finds efficiently and quickly. Body sherds are discarded after being washed, categorized, described and weighed; diagnostics on the other hand are washed, categorized, described, packed then stored prior to further analysis or a study season. Study seasons may occur on a yearly basis or may occur more infrequently. Therefore, unless body sherds are discarded, arrangements need to be made for storage. During this excavation season, 757kg of body sherds were excavated from Area S (H. Jackson personal communication, June 3, 2010). To store this material, it would be necessary to

distribute, ca. 10kg of pottery per plastic (H300xL500xW340mm) crate, producing 76 crates requiring storage space of 3.8 cubic metres. Fifty kilograms -50kg- of diagnostic sherds were recovered from one 5x10m trench alone in Area A requiring .15 cubic metres of space. With more than twenty trenches excavated this season, the volume of pottery needing long-term storage is significant. Twenty crates equal 1 cubic metre of space. It is not standard DGAM policy to store pottery body sherds and diagnostics in museums or repositories; rather it is the responsibility of the Project Director to make those arrangements. Over a five, ten or thirty year period proper short and long-term storage becomes a major logistical challenge which needs to be budgeted for and factored into a Research Design *plus* the cost of materials *and* an ongoing maintenance program.

### Case Study: Tell Ahmar

Tell Ahmar's era of greatest historical significance was in the ninth century BCE when it was the capital of the Aramaean state of Bit Adini. It was conquered by the Late Assyrian king Shalmaneser III in 856 BCE and renamed Kar Shalmaneser ('city of Shalmaneser'). In the first millennium BCE it was a large semi-circular city consisting of three key parts, the main tell or acropolis, the middle city terrace and a large, semi-circular lower city (Jamieson, 2009). It had first been excavated by a team of French archaeologists from 1928 to 1931 then by Professor Guy Bunnens while attached to the University of Melbourne from 1988 until 1999. Excavations resumed under the Directorship of Professor Guy Bunnens after 1999 sponsored by the University of Liege, Belgium.

This project operates on a very small budget and has government and private sponsorship for a further two years. No succession plan currently exists. Unlike Jebel Khalid, excavation of this site occurs not by trench but by feature within an area. The small team of five archaeological members and twelve local diggers usually work for six weeks in May-June with a smaller team of three members generally returning during September to excavate again or study aspects of the project. It is common for European-based projects to excavate during May-June and to

conduct analyses in July-August of the same year (A. Bunnens personal communication, June 16, 2010).

At Tell Ahmar, all pottery body sherds and diagnostics are washed and packed then stored to await further analysis. All artefacts are recorded in the field and then drawn by the excavators in the afternoons. The volume of pottery has remained reasonably constant since excavations began in 1988 with approximately 180kg each year (A. Bunnens personal communication, June 14, 2010) being recovered. The pottery and bone is stored in mud-brick buildings close to the banks of the Tishreen Reservoir and the site. This project is a salvage site. This fact is used as the justification for keeping all artefacts. The research interests of the Directors' determine the significance of inventoried objects.

Much of the accumulated pottery (diagnostics and sherds) excavated from Tell Ahmar was in poor condition. It was stored in cardboard cartons which had been damaged by dampness, causing disintegration of plastic bags resulting in some cross-contamination of artefacts. During the 2010 excavation season a substantial proportion of the Tell Ahmar pottery collection was re-packed and consolidated into plastic (H300xL500xW340mm) crates. Table 2 below details the resources expended to re-bag, re-pack and re-organize the Area C material over a twelve day period.

Consolidation of Area C Pottery – Tell Ahmar 2010		
Date	People	Total hours
08/01/10	2	18
09/06/10	2	18
10/06/10	2	14
12/06/10	4	36
13/06/10	4	36
15/06/10	4	36
19/06/10	4	36
20/06/10	4	36
Total hours worked		230

Table 2 Resources required to re-organize Area C material.

The remaining untreated pottery collection requires 288 crates for storage. Bone storage

requires 80 crates. The storage area for stone artefacts occupies 2.5 cubic metres. The pottery from Area C required 220 crates which were transported to Qal'at Nejim to be further analysed at the artefact repository during the 2011 field season.

### Case Study: Catalhöyük

Catalhöyük is a Neolithic site which lies at the heart of the Konya plain in central Turkey. Early farmers occupied the site about 9000 years ago. The mound (höyük) covers some 13.6 hectares and was home to 5,000 to 10,000 people creating one of the earliest known urban settlements. It was first discovered in the early 1950's and excavated by James Mellaart between 1961-1965. Since 1993 an international team of archaeologists led by Professor Ian Hodder of Stanford University, California has been carrying out new excavations and research Hodder (2004).

The research conducted at Catalhöyük has been well-funded and the project has well established management practices. The *Catalhöyük Management Plan 2004* aims to establish guidelines which will ensure the sustainable development of the site and has provided the Turkish Government with a 'blue print' for all other archaeological projects in Turkey. Unfortunately, for smaller, less resources projects, this level of organization is not achievable and permits have not been issued. Organizational and operational systems at this site are well documented and efficiently executed. Excavation and research phases are scheduled in five year blocks with a significant emphasis on the publication of findings. A single-context recording system is practised at this site. Analyses at this site is of a high resolution and significance of artefacts is determined by their contextual relationship with each other, the site and the surrounding landscape. Collections management policy is currently being developed by the author with the Catalhöyük management team. More work will be undertaken on this project during the 2011 field season. It is anticipated that the systems established at this site will be fundamental in the preparation of a collections management plan for Near Eastern artefact collections.

## Discussion

A number of outcomes were achieved as a result of the 2010 field season. Firstly, data gathered at Jebel Khalid illustrated what methods a long-running project like this employs for its organizational and operational activities and how resources are allocated in order to gather research data. Secondly, data obtained from Tell Ahmar highlighted some of the actual costs, both in time and financial terms, involved in the repatriation and long-term management of a significant artefact collection. Thirdly, the data revealed that governments of the Near East are becoming increasingly reluctant to issue excavation permits, even to long-running projects, unless Project Directors' provide documented undertakings for the proper long-term care for collections. The question of determining significance became clearer by gaining a deeper understanding of what constitutes significance in the context of vastly different archaeological excavations in the Near East and how that significance can be maintained for the future.

The expected benefits to the archaeological community, museums and cultural heritage management bodies by developing a management plan for collections to assist archaeologists excavating in the Near East are significant. It will include strategies for the short and long-term care of artefact collections with a range of organizational and operational strategies which will help to maintain the research significance of collections. Greater precision can be expected by adopting procedures which promote more consistent decision making, thus ensuring the quality, repeatability and integrity of primary and secondary data. Finally, greater co-operation will be fostered between archaeologists, conservators and curators which would result in better access to data and collections for researchers' and the wider community.

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