ARCHEOSTORIE®
JOURNAL of PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

VOLUME 4 / 2020

Topic of the Year: Connective (T)issue

ISSN: 2532-3512

How to cite this volume:

Please use AJPA as abbreviation and 'Archeostorie. Journal of Public Archaeology' as full title.

Published by:

Center for Public Archaeology Studies 'Archeostorie' - cultural association
via Enrico Toti 14, 57128 Livorno (ITALY) / *archeostorie@gmail.com*

First published 2020.
Archeostorie. Journal of Public Archaeology is registered with the Court of Livorno no. 2/2017 of January 24, 2017.

ARCHEOSTORIE™
JOURNAL of PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY

VOLUME 4 / 2020
www.archeostoriejpa.eu

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ARCHEOSTORIE JOURNAL of PUBLIC ARCHAEOLOGY
www.archeostoriejpa.eu

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Community archaeology 2021: building community engagement in Jordan at a time of social distancing

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the challenges of adapting—and changing—a community archaeology project as a direct consequence of the global pandemic. COVID-19 has affected our interactions with local communities, driving home the need to create forms of socializing that can withstand physical distance. We will present here the associated challenges and problems, but also the opportunities, that emerged from starting a community archaeology project in Jordan at the time of social distancing and travel limitations. Our case study outlines the difficulties of initiating a community engagement program with the communities living around the site of Tell Ya'moun, the area of the Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empire survey project, during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Open Access **Peer Reviewed** **Keywords:** decolonization, public outreach, COVID-19, Tell Ya'moun, Middle East

Introduction: COVID-19 and community archaeology

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on human life around the world, resulting in more than four and half million deaths, deeply impacting our economy, and likely affecting communities' livelihoods for years to come (McBride et al. 2021; Gould 2020). While the pandemic is slowly being brought under control, the effects on academia, and specifically archaeology, are becoming clearer, indicating the need for the heritage sector to find more flexible and digital ways to connect with audiences worldwide (Gould 2020; Europa Nostra 2020). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted systemic problems in archaeology, specifically in our approaches to planning, implementing, and thinking about public engagement. It has also provided us with the necessary time to pause our hectic pace and reflect on how our discipline interacts with different stakeholders and could be more inclusive and wide-reaching (Chirikure 2020; Gamble et al. 2021; Trakadas and Corbin 2021). The impossibility of travelling and the need to social distance are just two of the main obstacles that archaeologists faced over the last year. These obstacles resulted in an inability to conduct actual fieldwork for those archaeologists working in different countries than their own, forcing us to discuss the basis of the fieldwork model that we are comfortable with, and upon which our employment is often based (Douglass 2020; Ogundiran 2020).

Community archaeology is a collaborative endeavor between local communities and archaeologists, and in recent years it has become an integral part of fieldwork experiences (Matthews et al. 2011; Nicholas et al. 2008; Naser and Tully 2019; Thomas 2017). The challenging and constructive relationship between different stakeholders has made community archaeology a central practice in the postcolonial debate, whereas its participatory nature provides fertile ground for discussion on decolonization and the practice of a more inclusive and multivocal discipline (Abu-Khafajah and Rabady 2013; Lorenzon 2021; Naser 2019; Porter 2016; Rabady and Abu-Khafajah 2021). The

How to cite Lorenzon, M., Miettunen, P. 2020. Community archaeology 2021: building community engagement in Jordan at a time of social distancing. *Archeostorie. Journal of Public Archaeology.* 4: pp. 23-34. DOI: https://doi.org/10.23821/2020_3b/

interaction between archeologists and local communities, especially in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region where our project is located, has been a central topic of debate in community archaeology, and the need to shift the discipline towards citizen control and the empowerment of local communities has been successfully argued by archaeologists long before the pandemic (Abu-Khafajah 2010; Arnstein 1969; Kersel and Chesson 2013; Lorenzon and Zermani 2016; Mickel 2021). The need to make citizen participation a priority in the archaeological decision-making process has been constantly argued for and promoted by community archaeologists as a way of sharing power and agency with local communities (Figure 1).

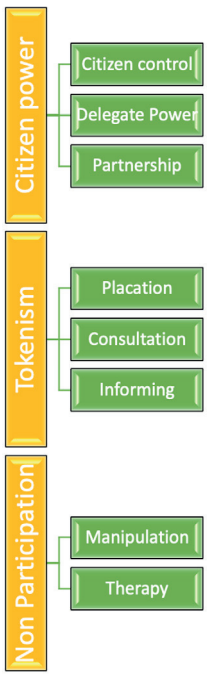

Fig. 1. Image adapted from Arnstein (1969: fig.2), showing the process of citizen participation as a ladder that visualizes citizen agency in the decision-making process.

In Jordan, community archaeology has significantly affected archaeological work over the last two decades, increasing citizen participation in archaeological heritage discovery and preservation (Abu-Khafaja 2011, 2014; Badran 2013; De Vries 2013). Damick and Lash (2013) clearly highlighted how community archaeology in Jordan has grown by combining visibility, accessibility, and the fragility of the movable and immovable heritage with local narratives, which can extend well beyond the individual case study (i.e., Azraq) to become an inclusive and multivocal endeavor (LaBianca 2017; Richard et al. 2019). Community-centered projects and citizen participation also increased the long-term sustainability of these projects, as well as impacting the preservation of archaeological areas (D'Andrea et al. 2018; Darby 2019; Kefafi 2021; Simmons and Najjar 2013). In the last 18 months, a clear trend in community archaeology indicates that projects that were started before the pandemic were able to continue their work as prior connections established trust between the partners and enabled many of the community projects in Jordan to operate throughout the pandemic (see also https://publications.acorjordan.org/2021/03/03/archaeology-in-jordan-and-the-pandemic/). The challenges faced by new projects, however, should be explored and better understood.

This pandemic has affected our interactions with local communities, impeding our ability to travel and driving home the need to create forms of socializing that can withstand physical distancing. Community archaeology as a discipline is at its core deeply rooted in social interactions and the exchange of perspectives between communities and specialists (Brogiolo and Arnau 2020; Jones and Pickens 2020). In this contribution, we plan to describe and comment on the problems we encountered and our response to the difficulties the pandemic created, but also to highlight the opportunities that have emerged from working with the Jordanian communities at a time of social distancing and travel limitations. We aim at providing a critical assessment of the challenges of adapting our archaeology project initially planned for autumn 2020 in the area of Tell Ya'moun, Jordan. Our project developed under the aegis of the Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires, University of Helsinki, and was designed to combine both fieldwork research and community outreach. While the University of Helsinki has previously conducted fieldwork in southern Jordan, our research group has not conducted research in the northern part of the country. Here we focus on discussing the community portion of the project, as this latter has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Our main aim is not just to present another successful case study on community interaction under Covid-limitations, but—and perhaps more importantly—to discuss the difficulties we have faced in the last eighteen months in starting a new community archaeology project in the region of Tell Ya'moun. Specifically, how digital applications have helped us to find some valuable alternatives to address our research questions, but also how they have not managed to solve all the challenges raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in relation to community outreach.

Problems - Not everything can happen on zoom

In the planning of any community archaeology project, several issues must be considered and accounted for. This is even more so when preparing a community archaeology project during a time of global travel restrictions and lockdowns, and the normal challenges are complicated by these latter issues. First, a conscious decision must be made on the depth of participation and partnership intended for the project, as interactions between archaeologists and the local communities can take place on many levels (Abu-Khafajah and Rabady 2013; Thomas 2017). A typical public outreach may include educational activities, such as public lectures, visits to the site, or activity packages for school children, whereas a community-based participatory research model aims for equal partnership with and by the community (Bollwerk, Connolly and McDavid 2015; De Vries 2013). Several different types of interactions can take place between and around these two quite diverse examples, all depending on the project, the culture, and the community involved (Bonacchi and Moshenska 2015; Thomas 2017; Tully 2007). Other factors include possible previous interactions, as well as the time spent in establishing networks with local communities and building trust between all of the involved stakeholders.

The element of reciprocity in community archaeology should always be considered a priority. The project should benefit not only the archaeologists, but also the community in equal measure. As community needs and expectations are never identical, deciding on the desired benefits should never be left entirely to the researchers. Instead, the community members should be included in the negotiations from the very beginning in order to not feel disenfranchised (Abu-Khafajah and Rabady 2013; Nassaney 2021, p. 126). This, on the other hand, brings forth a question about the community itself. The research area may incorporate land from several communities, each of which, in turn, can include various interest groups and sub-communities. Researchers can approach these groups in various ways. One method is to contact some prominent key figures, such as leaders of the communities, or individuals who already have experience in collaborating with archaeologists (Andrews 2019; Kefafi 2021). A more time-consuming method is to first conduct ethnographic research in the region, getting to know each community and their networks of social relations, hierarchies, and political structures. This type of study would also eventually reveal which of the communities might have the closest relationship with the research area or site (Atalay 2012, p. 128; Damick and Lash 2013). Acquiring an overall understanding of a community and its needs is a slow process. Much of this information is embedded in the community's silent knowledge and daily interactions, and is thus not openly available. To understand all of this, the researcher would have to go on location, meet with people face-to-face, and establish trust and partnership between themself and the community (Miettunen 2021).

In the current pandemic situation, this method has naturally not been an option. Working from a distance poses many new challenges. Yet, online collaboration can also hold great potential for local communities. Of Jordan's population of 10.24 million, 66.8% are internet users, 61.5% actively use social media, and a total of 78.2% have mobile connections (Hootsuite and We Are Social 2021). In a study conducted among university students in Jordan (Slaih et al. 2019), all survey participants owned a smartphone, attesting to the higher interest in and use of modern communication technologies by the younger generation as compared to the whole population. The students mostly used smartphones for communicating with family and friends (93.1%), but 90.1% were also using social media (Slaih et al. 2019, pp. 56-57). These figures attest that communities exist and are active online. Researchers attempting to establish a community project online face

similar tasks to when they are working in the real world: finding the community or communities that have relevant connections to the archaeological site or survey area, starting a discussion, and establishing trust between partners.

Despite these similarities, online communities are different from communities that exist in the real world. Identities are created and re-created online. For example, Al-Suwaidi (2013) has suggested that the active social media participation by tribal people in the Middle East has resulted in the formation of a virtual allegiance, a type of trans-local "tribalism". Many tribes,[1] tribal confederations, clans, and communities have their own pages and groups in social media. Some of them focus on promoting heritage and (oral) histories, while others are more invested in contemporary news and activities on a local level. Such groups can provide an online gateway to communities, and even before getting actively involved it is possible to find ethnographic background information about them from these online resources.

The choice to build a community of young students is, without doubt, a valid option, and brings forward the advantages of online collaboration with local scholars and university students as a means of increasing local agency. However, for a community archaeology project this type of target group may be too limited. The virtual world and online networking are —when looking at the big picture—still very exclusive, but there is a progressive shift from 'information and knowledge societies' towards 'communication societies' (Britz 2004, p. 202), in which modern information technologies carry the potential for everyone to share their perspectives and participate in the public discourse. Britz (2004, p. 202) emphasizes the importance of access to these technologies as a prerequisite for global interaction. Yet, this potential is neither equally distributed nor equally utilized. The utilization of online resources tends to correlate with the level of education (Ünver 2014, p. 911) and economic status (Jaeger and Thompson 2004). People may lack access to, knowledge of, or interest in this participation. As a result, they are at risk of being struck by chronic information poverty and becoming further alienated from the larger community, which deepens their feelings of not being able to participate in or affect the changes occurring around them (Jaeger and Thompson 2004, p.100). When choosing online collaboration as the primary approach of a community project, the researchers are, therefore, consciously choosing to exclude various groups within the community. Those who do not actively use social media can include elderly people and various marginalized groups. In north-west Jordan such potentially vulnerable communities especially include the Syrian refugees and the Dom People (*Nawar*, or "gypsies").

While archaeologists are naturally primarily concerned about the continuity, and in some cases the overall realization, of their planned projects, from the point of view of local communities both the immediate and long-term effects and the possible future scenarios related to this disruption are also matters for consideration (Abu-Khafajah and Al Rabay 2013; Kefafi 2021; Thomas 2015). According to Atalay (2012, pp. 11-12), to non-archaeologists, archaeology is a luxury. In a normal situation, it is usually the task of the archaeologists to establish the relevance of their research, and to convince the community of its benefits. Yet, without ongoing archaeological projects, life in the communities still goes on. Atalay's examples are from Native American communities, where the archaeological sites often consist of places that still hold great personal significance to the local people, and from rural Turkey, where agriculture remains the main source of livelihood (Atalay 2012) and the land used by archaeological projects sometimes affects production.

Even on a local level, the communities may have limited possibilities to benefit from tourism. A good example is Wadi Rum, where the village of Wadi Rum has the most convenient location and thus the most direct access to serve the tourists, in comparison to another village, Dise, only 12 km to the north-east, which until now has been mostly excluded from these opportunities (Chatelard 2003, p. 150). Yet, even with such localized concentrations of the benefits of heritage tourism, it is evident that archaeology is not just a luxury, but does have both direct and indirect effects on the lives and economies of the Jordanian people.

Using community archaeology to promote cultural tourism and strengthen local economies are valid goals - if they are feasible and realistic (Atalay 2012, p. 72; Moser et al. 2002). The

hopes for creating new tourist attractions from new sites may be very high, and many communities would find it beneficial and thus desirable. However, very few archaeological sites in Jordan can really compete with places like Petra or Jerash for tourist attention. Unrealistic expectations are common, and they could turn into disappointment when the end results do not match the anticipated benefits (Nassaney 2021, p.123).

ANEE and community archaeology: communities' empowerment and geographical distance

The main aim of Team 3 "Material Culture and Community Heritage" of the Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires (Material Culture and Community Heritage 2021), University of Helsinki, is to lead archaeological fieldwork in the northern part of Jordan, a marginalized area when discussing Neo-Assyrian and Persian empires in the 1st millennium BCE, and thus a region that can provide essential data on the relationship between the heartland and margins over the *long durée*. Team 3 aims to utilize material culture to study the dynamics of empire creation and maintenance in ancient and modern communities, and is also founded on the principles of collaborative and postcolonial approaches to Near Eastern archaeology (Badran 2018; Porter 2016); thus, we aim to support a sustainable future for this heritage through active engagement with local communities. The community component is integral to all of our field activities, and moves in two main directions: first, to provide public engagement with Middle Eastern objects in Finnish Museum collections. Second, to create a sustainable heritage development project in collaboration with the modern communities living around the site of Tell Ya'moun, which Team 3 is investigating in collaboration with Yarmouk University (Figure 2).

The first aspect has barely been influenced by the pandemic, and was mainly slowed down by museum closures in the spring of 2020; in fact, the exhibition is still progressing as initially planned and will open in Finland in May 2022. The latter component, our community archaeology project, which should have taken place alongside the archaeological survey in Tell Ya'moun, has been severely disrupted. The team's original plan included travel to the area in the spring of 2020 to meet the communities and start forging the partnerships to develop a series of activities that should have developed during the ensuing years of field activity. As local community engagement forms an intrinsic part of developing a fieldwork project —from the planning stage to the research and dissemination of our results—we aimed at developing community heritage activities that *they* considered beneficial, shifting the traditional paradigm and moving ourselves away from the role of protagonists to the role of supporting characters. The Jordanian communities around Tell Ya'moun should have the decision-making power in these dynamics, and oversee the community projects. This control by the community also provides a better survival chance for the activities after the end of the archaeological fieldwork, and the empowerment of multiple communities creates possibilities for long-term impact and sustainable development in the region (Moser et al. 2002, Tully 2007).

The specifics objectives of the ANEE community archaeology project were the following:

1) To assess the project sustainability impact in the *long durée* and create new collaborations between stakeholders (i.e., universities, local communities, tourism);
2) To evaluate a more streamlined path of partnership collaboration and citizen empowerment in planning and executing community archaeology projects in the MENA, specifically Jordan;
3) To create the basis for spin-off heritage projects that can be implemented around the country.

The travel disarray of early spring 2020 disrupted our original plan, and we had to cancel the planned travel in spring 2020 to meet the communities around Tell Ya'moun. This initial meeting had the goal of discussing the communities' interests and needs, and developing the initial steps of two community archaeology projects that should have started in autumn 2020. The preliminary proposals discussed on our previous trips included the possibility of creating a digital app for heritage sites in which local communities could upload community-driven information linked to the archaeological information, such as oral histories, memories, etc., and

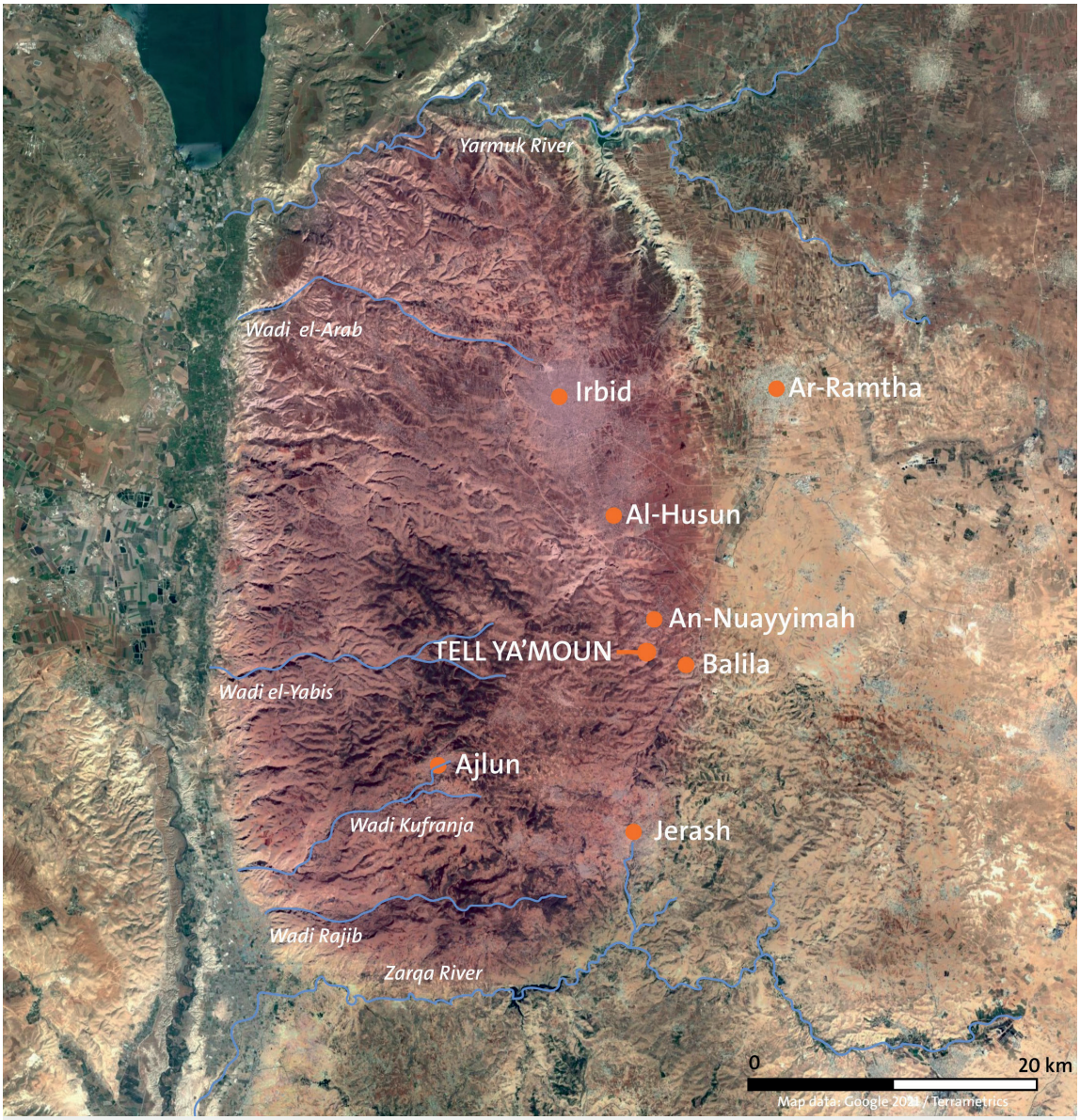

Fig. 2. Research area of Tell Ya'moun Archaeological Survey (Image by Maija Holappa; Data Source: Google Earth).

the publication of a children's book on the historical archaeology of the area, developed in partnership with local schools and Yarmouk University. A similar approach used in the Tell Timai community project in Egypt by one of the authors had previously yielded incredibly positive results and indicated a possible path for often disconnected communities to reconnect with their own archaeological heritage (Lorenzon and Zermani 2016). Local communities are not always automatically connected with the archaeological heritage, or even aware of the remote histories, which is often due to the dissonance that archaeologists encounter in communicating our findings to the non- specialist public (Holtorf 2007). Good interactions between specialists and local communities have been proven effective not only in helping preserve archaeological sites, but also in offering opportunities for community empowerment and sustainable development (Carrasco et al. 2003; Lorenzon 2015; Lorenzon and Zermani 2016; Tully 2015; Rabady and Abu-Khafajah 2021). Our initial plan encapsulated two diverse proposals that we would introduce in a community meeting, in order to foster dialogues about the partnership and provide the community with the possibility to change the projects, as extensively as they wished, or to accept or reject

them. We also aimed at involving younger and older generations, and thus we thought of ideas that involved both. For instance, making the community part of the data creation and giving them a primary voice in how the heritage is described by sharing local histories about the sites, is a key step forward in building trust and a more citizen-powered approach that combines archaeological data collected through fieldwork with individual and community experiences of the heritage.

The ban on travelling and conducting fieldwork, which for the protection of the academic staff at the University of Helsinki continued through 2020 and 2021—this policy is currently under review as of April 2021 pending the results of vaccination campaigns in Europe and around the world—has created an objective barrier to our ability to interact with the Jordanian communities in the area. This was mainly because the travel ban delayed the implementation of the partnership with the local communities around Tell Ya'moun, as well as the collaborative designing of the community archaeology outputs. This also effectively interrupted the consultation with the local communities.

During this pandemic, social media groups and pages have been the main source for planning the ANEE community project, as contemporary anthropological research related to Team 3's study area is relatively scarce, compared to for example southern Jordan. The proposed survey area cuts through the lands of at least seven modern villages or towns: Kitim, Al-Nuʿayma, Balīlā, Qafqafā, Kufr Khal, Ṣakhra, and Shaṭanā (Figure 2). Many of these settlements have been established (or re-established) in the past 150 years. Thus, there is no long continuum in the current lands, although some of the Bedouin tribes may have been present in the region much longer. Some of the settlements, such as Balīlā, are almost exclusively inhabited by one tribe, while others, for example Al-Nuʿayma, have inhabitants from several tribes. When it comes to the history of the tribes and their movements, especially of the smaller clans, historical documentation is very scarce. Most of the knowledge is preserved in oral stories of the past, and as representations of historical facts should be taken with a grain of salt—some of the stories even directly contradict one another (Shryock 1995, p. 333). However, they provide valuable information about the local narratives, and as building-blocks of social identities they are still very relevant.

Even with our survey delays, Team 3's archaeological research could progress through the designing of a "Plan B" in other aspects of archaeology. For instance, we could answer our research questions by approaching them through a different methodology based on network analysis, use of legacy data, and satellite imagery. These same digital strategies could not be adopted as a viable alternative plan for the community archaeology project. This was due to multiple factors:

1) Lack of well-established community relationships. Our newly established relationship with local communities could not withstand the pressure of Covid stress in normal daily life, thus impacting the development of future plans.
2) Digital interactions. The local communities' access to the internet is well attested, but their willingness to participate in virtual meetings during a critical historical phase in which there is still great uncertainty regarding the future was understandably low - making heritage discussion a low priority.
3) Decolonization. While the implementation of the digital heritage applications could go ahead, we have currently paused this project, as we did not want to produce something that has not been agreed upon with the communities, designed with them, and perceived by them as useful and positive. Collaborative public outreach concretely means that community archaeologists must avoid colonial bias and universally deciding that a project is beneficial for the communities without consulting with them (Atalay 2012; Bonacchi and Moshenska 2015).

Although digital connectivity has provided wonderful opportunities during this last year, in our project face-to-face partnership creation could not be supplanted by virtual meetings. While community archaeology projects have a case-by-case approach and different aims, our case study highlighted the need for traditional forms of socializing in order to establish trust in and progressive discussions about the design of citizen-controlled community projects.

Our solution, then, is to wait to be able to go back into the field in winter 2021-early spring

2022 to start our first steps in developing this partnership with the communities around Tell Ya'moun, and then to redesign the projects by changing the way we think about cooperation and community engagements. Our main aim is now to empower local communities by shifting the leadership of the project to community leaders and local archaeologists, who are better able to assess the current Covid situation in the country and can adapt to time and space constraints in the future while we support them.

While the pandemic has caused many setbacks and disruptions, it can also be used as a chance to take a step back and evaluate the processes and practices that have been in use until now. Archaeologists working in Jordan have already been implementing new models of partnership and collaboration in community projects before the pandemic, and we advocate for this process to continue and implement a more inclusive community practice. Even though many research projects have been put on hold indefinitely, and others have had to cancel their plans completely and shift their focus to other topics, the situation should provide an opportunity for more agency on the local level, as it did in our case study.

Future directions

When planning for future engagements, it is important to acknowledge that the most critical issue concerning the communities in north-west Jordan is how they connect to the past and the heritage sites in the region. Jordanian national identity has been largely built on tribal heritage and Bedouin culture. Historically, many of the main tribes migrated north from the Arabian Peninsula into what is modern day Jordan during the 17th and 18th centuries. Both seasonal migrations based on animal herding and the movement of smaller clans due to political or economic pressures have taken place over the years, up until the present (Peake 1934). Desolate villages and empty lands devoid of population were noted by 19th century western travelers passing through the north-west of Jordan (Oliphant 1880, pp. 130-131). While this may not necessarily be the full picture–people may have been practicing transhumance or may have been working in fields far from their settlements–the Ottoman records also attest to a decline in population between the 16th and 19th centuries (Bakhit, Pascual and Mundy 2013). The oral histories of the local clans furthermore describe their recent arrival to the region.

This lack of connection to the distant past and deep heritage may make it difficult to create genuine interest in the archaeological projects outside of their direct economic value, as oftentimes the sites are seen only as something tourists from abroad are interested in, not something that is directly related to the people and their identity. There are exceptions to this: the tribes in the Petra region, for example, have a strong sense of connection to the Nabataeans and the ancient history of the region (Al-Salameen and Falahat 2009, p.7). In southern Jordan, people and events from the late Ottoman period still appear in the oral stories of the local tribes (Miettunen 2021). It could be expected, then, that communities in north-west Jordan may also have some level of connection to the heritage of the Ottoman era. This latter characterization has been taken as a starting point for the children's book project, as this project is based on an understanding of the past as the people see it, and how the past materializes in their geographic spaces.

As the pandemic has shifted the ANEE project into studying mainly through online and published resources, the future and length of the archaeological survey is somewhat uncertain. Implementing the community outreach on a wider scale would require the presence of the archaeological team in the region over several seasons. On the other hand, small-scale cooperation is still possible. For an anthropologist and/or archaeologist to move in a region alone, or with a small team, would be much easier than for a full team of archaeologists with all of their equipment and support staff. Yet, even if the whole team would be able to travel in the field in the future, the overall time frame for the project needs to be significantly shorter and the pace of work more intense. This poses serious challenges for the community project. Traditional archaeology projects have occasionally been dubbed "drive-by" -methods, where the archaeologists appear on location, collect the data, and then leave (Atalay 2012, p. 96). If the time for the survey is shorter, there is also less time to do all the work needed for community networking. This is a considerable problem for the development of the heritage app. If the community is not

included from the beginning in defining the goals and expectations, it is very likely that they would have no interest in the end results. For an app to be useful, time and resources also need to be allocated for maintaining and updating it long after the field project has ended.

Before the travel restrictions, the community archaeology project was able to open negotiations for collaboration with Yarmouk University in Irbid. Partnerships with scholars and professionals who share the identity and cultural background of the local community have numerous benefits (Atalay 2012, pp. 92-93). They already know the community's values, interests, and needs, and are already known and trusted by the community. Projects with already-established networks and collaborations with the local archaeologists and anthropologists can plan ethnographic fieldwork online. These partners can then carry out research among the local communities, and the data processing and analysis can be done online, providing background information and building the foundations for community projects. If the international partners continue to be unable to travel, the projects can then be carried out on a local level. In the long run, this could benefit both the local communities and the research institutions, as the international partners would rely more on their work and collaboration. We believe there is still much more room and potential in community partnership and, at best, this pandemic could be an opportunity for expanding this path in a more sustainable and extensive way.

Notes

1. "Tribe" is a social structure based on family units connected through biological or constructed kinship. Large tribal confederations can also be formed through alliances and agreements. Here these names are used as equivalents for the arabic words ʿashīra and qabīla. In Jordan, tribes have diverse political, economic, legal, cultural, and social roles, and they are an integral and acknowledged element in the state's social fabric.

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