

Remembrances from the Field – Excavating at Abu Salabikh with Susan Pollock A Photo Essay

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Where and how we practice archaeology, the places we experience and people we meet along the way profoundly affects who we become as scholars, archaeologists, and individuals. In Pollock's 1992 review article for *Journal of World Prehistory*,¹ published two years after our return from the first of an ill-fated two-year research project interrupted by the Gulf War, she began by talking about how the practice of archaeology is situated in "the real world." Archaeology doesn't happen in a political or social vacuum but in the close working relationships we have with living people, as well as the remains of those in the past we hope to learn something about. These interpersonal and intercultural understandings she wrote, "*far surpass the capabilities of any purely academic discourse to describe or explain.*"¹

In choosing the photographs for this essay, I wanted to convey the human side of practicing archaeology, the acquaintances, landscapes, people, good times, and hospitality. The Abu Salabikh field experiences were pivotal to me, even if I didn't fully realize it at the time. Putting together this essay made me think of the pictures I didn't take, sharing and preparing meals together, working late at night, hauling water, putting up all of those tents in the spring!

Between 1987 and 1990, I had the opportunity to be a part of archaeological investigations

at Abu Salabikh and Jemdet Nasr as one of Susan's doctoral students at Binghamton. These were my first experiences to live and work in a culture outside of my own, unless rural Illinois counts as a foreign place. Whether in Illinois or Iraq, emotional bonds are formed between you and a place you experience intensely, the landscapes, people and animals. We are interlopers welcomed with genuine hospitality and good humor into homes, fields, towns, and villages. And for a short time, the places we practice archaeology become our home too.

Post 1990, I had a dissertation to finish. It was difficult at times to carry on writing about people in the past while those in the present were suffering the atrocities of a war that involved my government. Not only did I worry about the people I had known, but I thought about the animals and the land a lot. I had spent the equivalent of six months living in a tent on a wind-blown plain at the edge of a desert. I returned to Iraq three different times, growing more familiar with towns, landscapes, foodways, bus stops, language, archaeology, and people. While some lose immeasurably more than others, everyone loses something in war. I don't know if I will return to Iraq, but I am grateful for the time I spent there. Thanks Susan, it is hard to find words to express my gratitude for all I have learned from you as teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend.

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1 Pollock, Susan. 1992. "Bureaucrats and Managers, Peasants and Pastoralists, Imperialists and Traders: Research on the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr Periods in Mesopotamia." *Journal of World Prehistory* 6(3): 297–336: 304.



Melody Pope, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Caroline Steele.



Field camp, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

I became an archaeologist in part because I like working outdoors and camping. I had a great time doing both at Abu Salabikh, plus I got the chance to work with some really great people. The first few days in camp each

season we would set up tents. In addition to being on the 1987 and 1990 field crews, I analyzed the lithic artifacts, and was the project photographer.



The exchange. Iraqi women sharing in the harvest with Susan Pollock, Scott Beld and Paul Welch. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Archaeologists Scott Beld, Melody Pope, Caroline Steele, Paul Welch, and Keith Dobney getting a feel for harvesting wheat with hand sickles. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Susan Pollock.

My research involved learning about harvesting cereals using hand sickles. The local village residents on our team invited us after work to share in the harvest and a meal. I love the top photo because to me it captures the interpersonal and intercultural understandings that are part of doing field work.



A new use for a plow, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



The tractor, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

A plow does double duty. The folks who worked with us from the nearby village of Abu Salabikh lent us the use of their tractor, not

only for transportation occasionally, but also as a means to haul field samples back to camp.



Field houses at Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Susan and Melody in the courtyard, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Caroline Steele.

I have always been intrigued by the archaeological landscapes, pathways and buildings, we create and leave behind. The field camp at Abu Salabikh was built by previous British expeditions to the site before our arrival in 1987. Buildings for working,

storing collections and equipment, kitchen and dining areas, and bath house surround a small courtyard. In the lower photograph, you can see details of traditional plastered, mudbrick architecture, and Susan and I putting the courtyard to good use.



Mike Charles and Keith Dobney, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Flotation and fishing! Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

In the top photo Keith Dobney (zooarchaeologist) and Michael Charles (paleobotanist) are busy processing soil samples while trying to keep the mosquitos at bay. In the bottom

photograph local village kids are having some fun when the archaeologists aren't around. Notice the boy on the right is holding a small fishing "stick" in his left hand.

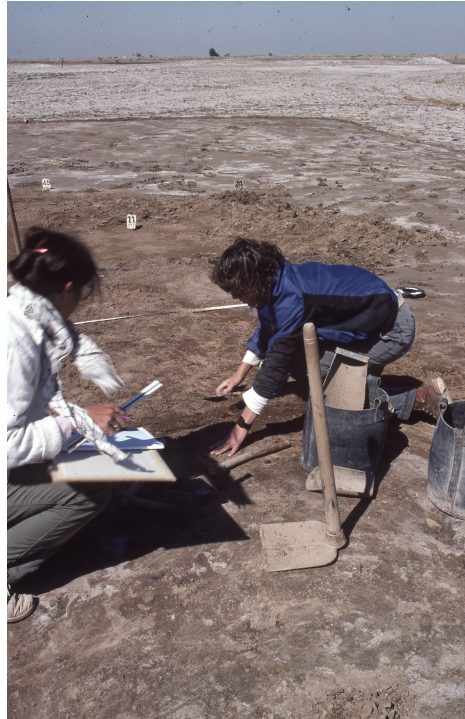


Susan Pollock and Paul Welch, excavating a large ceramic vessel, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Susan Pollock, Paul Welch, and Daniel Hernandez, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

One of the sounding excavations came down on a very large, complete, upright vessel. I had kitchen duty on this particular day, but I remember it was quite an exciting afternoon!



Susan and Melody mapping features after scraping the surface with a short-handled hoe. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Caroline Steele.



Susan excavating with a pick used to detect mudbrick, with Daniel Hernandez. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

Having worked previously in North America, short-handled hoes and picks were new excavating tools to me, but I caught on pretty quickly. We scraped the surface of 10 m x 10 m squares to reveal architecture and other features.



Iraqi fieldworker excavating, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Iraqi fieldworkers using long-handled shovels and wheel barrows to remove the soil before surface scraping. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

Iraqi fieldworkers came from nearby villages to work with us. The bottom photograph was taken probably sometime in March when the weather could be windy and cool.



Caroline Steele and Paul Welch working in the sherd yard. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Susan Pollock, Mike Charles and Caroline Steele peering into the flotation tank, love those big red gloves Susan is wearing! Photo: Melody Pope.



Young girls along the canal attending to a small flock of sheep in the background, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Iraqi girls from the village would often play on the outskirts of our camp. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Sheep and goats grazing nearby, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.



Caroline Steele getting to visit the local fauna. Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Melody Pope.

Small herds of sheep and goat were often seen grazing in the fields surrounding the site. Our excavations on the Uruk Mound

recovered bones of sheep and goat that would have grazed the same fields in the 4th millennium.



Me and Iraqi field assistant, Abu Salabikh, 1987. Photo: Caroline Steele.



*Having some fun out in the field, Abu Salabikh, 1987.
Photo: Caroline Steele.*

Thanks Susan, I learned so much and it was a blast!