Transcript: Aerial Archaeology in the Middle East - Mehiyar Kathem interviews Oxford University based archaeologist Dr Robert Bewley, Project Director and Co-founder of the EAMENA project

Mehiyar Kathem 0:00 Welcome to the Nahrein Network podcast series. Today we're with Dr. Robert Bewley, Director of EAMENA - Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa. Hello, Robert, how are you?

Robert Bewley 0:09 I'm fine. Thank you.

Mehiyar 0:11 It's good to have you here. You work in archaeology in Middle East you're the co founder of EAMENA, which looks at endangered archaeology and documentation of that archaeology

Robert Bewley 0:19 The project really grew out of the crisis that was happening in the Middle East, particularly from 2011 onwards, especially in 2014. And a colleague in the University of Oxford Professor Andrew Wilson was approached by the funders the Arcadia Fund, and asked whether myself and professor David Kennedy, as we base the Aerial Archaeology in Jordan project in Oxford, whether we might put in a proposal to run a project to document as rapidly as possible the archaeology that was under threat, particularly in those countries where there was conflict. And so throughout 2014, when I was working in London for the Heritage Lottery Fund something completely different, we put in the proposal, and then this was approved. And then it was sort of agreed that I might give up my as it were a proper job and become an archaeologist again, which was very exciting for me. So we started literally in January 2015. In the school of archaeology, we also arranged a partnership with the University of Leicester, and then eventually the University of Durham came on board. And the main focus was really to find sites using publicly available satellite imagery, create a record of them using a database. So that was digital, it was a completely digital project. But the most important difference to a lot of other survey projects was that we were also assessing the condition of the sites and assessing the likely threats to them. And that way that the local professional archaeologists could take our information, and then hopefully do something to improve the protection of the sites.

Mehiyar 1:44 And this is the first open access digital archaeology record for Middle Eastern North Africa,

Robert Bewley 1:48 As far as we believe yes.

Mehiyar Kathem 1:50 And you've recorded 150,000 sites.

Robert Bewley 1:52 Well, now it's actually 253. We were just looking yesterday, and we've done 253. The project is is at the moment due to finish in June 2020, by which time we will have done 300 archaeological records, but we are in close discussion with our funders. And we're hopeful that we may get an extension, which will be very exciting.

Mehiyar 2:11 And the type of documentation. This is aerial photography, and images.

Robert Bewley 2:17 It's using historical air photographs, where we can obviously using air photographs we've taken in Jordan, that we've done in the past. But predominantly, it's looking at Google Earth imagery, Bing Maps, any other satellite imagery, we can get our hands on, we do purchase some or commission some satellite imagery, whether it's a particular site, so for example, Dura-Europos, we did, and other places in Libya as well, we've looked at, because we want to be able

to see what the change is; it's about monitoring change. So if we can look at the historic air photographs, and even look at the old CORONA imagery, we can get an understanding of how sites have changed. And although the stimulus for the project was conflict, in fact, of course, what we've discovered is that it's agriculture, the day to day changes of people building farms, orchards, plowing fields for corn and wheat, and why not, and also the expansion of towns, villages and cities. And what we've said as archaeologists is we know, we can't preserve everything, but what we should try and do is record as much as possible so that those who can make a decision about the future of the cultural heritage, in the broadest sense, can do so in an informed way, and make a decision and say, Well, okay, for that particular site, we'll excavate it, or we will even let it go without much of a record, but at least we will have known it was there so that as archaeologists in the future, or archaeologists in the future, I should say, they can get a better understanding of what the distribution was, whether it's prehistoric burial mounds, or Roman forts, or Islamic mosques, or whatever it might be. But the pace of change in the Middle East and North Africa, we cover 20 countries from Mauritania to Iran, the pace of change in the last 10 years has accelerated and it will only keep on accelerating, the population is increasing. So more people need places to live, more food needs to be produced. So the pressure on the land is now if we don't do this now, I think this is the last opportunity.

Mehiyar Kathem 4:09 And how can anyone access the database? I mean, and also the type of images that you have, how detailed are the images that you have?

Robert Bewley 4:15 The images are getting better and better, and people can access the database through our website, just Google EAMENA. And it'll come up. We won't allow anybody to drill right down into the detail because we've got to be aware of the fact that there are people who might want to either destroy the site or loot the site or whatever it might be. So we aren't we make it available to anybody who is a bonafide archaeologist, whatever their interests might be, whether it's an undergraduate doing a BA thesis or a professional archaeologist saying, Well, I want to study this particular type of site in this area, can I have access to the data? We can we can check their credentials, then they'd have access to it. And the imagery, we don't store the images, but we do a link to the satellite image so they can get it otherwise the database will be just crammed full of images. The most important thing is the archaeological record. And perhaps two things have emerged in the project that I wouldn't necessarily have expected at the beginning. One was that a number of countries have said, we actually like the record, can we can we adapt it and build it as our national heritage inventory. And we're working with Yemen, in particular, Jordan and Palestine as well to try and get their national inventory based on our database as their national inventory, which I think is a really useful thing to have done. Because it's not about archaeologists in the United Kingdom, looking at this, it's actually for the professionals in each of those countries to have access. So we give them that access. Mehiyar Kathem 5:39 And does the work involve damage assessments, particularly regarding conflict, looting, and so on, and so forth?

Robert Bewley 5:46 Once you've found a site, then you assess it for all those things. And you can say what you think the damage is, and what the likely damage is in the future. So if it's near a road, if it's a new road, there must be a reason why that road has been built, and often things happen alongside roads. So it's very important and people, again, a new road means greater access to the archaeological sites that wouldn't have been there in the past. So it's making an assessment of what's likely to be damaged and what's not.

Mehiyar Kathem 6:13 And this is, obviously this is an important part of the sustainability of heritage in some of these countries, you've just spoken about how some of these countries are the process of integrating this database into the national systems. Can you tell us a bit more about that go into more depth? How can it benefit a country, say like Iraq, or Syria or Yemen?

Robert Bewley 6:30 Yeah, and this was the second aspect, that change that we didn't expect, which was that the British Council created a thing called the Cultural Protection Fund. And through that, we were then able to set up training courses in initially Lebanon and Iraq, Jordan and Palestine, Egypt, Libya, and Tunis, but also in Yemen as well. Because what you need are the local archaeologists to be trained in, first of all, yeah, photo interpretation, the satellite image interpretation, then how our database works, and the record creation and damage assessment, and then how you would use that information. And it's only once you got the information, you can't preserve something if you don't know it's there. So it's finding it in the first place. And the people who need to know are the archaeologists on the ground. Every country has a department of Antiquities, the staff there are usually pretty well educated in what they want to do. And it's fair to say that throughout the world, the archaeological fraternity is under-resourced. In Historic England, in England, it's the same even though it's been around for a long time. It's under-resourced. If you asked anybody that would say, yes, we could do with more money and more people. It's the same throughout the Middle East and North Africa as well. So any help we can give through the training courses, we give them a laptop, so they can carry on the work either in their spare time, or with the permission of their boss, they can sit there and do it. And so we've got a network now of 170 people who are doing this work right across the region been trained, they've been trained to do it. And we're hoping that throughout the coming years that the Cultural Protection Fund might get more money come 2020 once the British government has got through the little tricky difficulty of Brexit. And then we might be able to move forward because it's so important now I think is you know, we've called it a crisis in culture. It's now we've got to do something, because in 5, 10 years time, these sites just won't exist, they will have gone. Mehiyar Kathem 8:17 And what happens if EAMENA isn't funded by the Cultural Protection Fund? Are there other avenues in which you can continue with the work you've...? Robert Bewley 8:24 Well, we are talking with the Arcada Fund. So we're hoping that that will continue. And we're just in detailed discussions now. And there's been an offer in principles been made, we're coming up with the details. So we're very hopeful. But the other thing we've also said is that the database with the 300,000 records will be available for a very long time anyway. So there's, there's an awful lot of records there. The next phase has to be the continuation of the documentation, but also then the assessments on the ground. And your question was about how will it make a difference? And the difference is saying, well, if we analyze 5000 burial tombs, you can't preserve everything, every one to the same degree, but which are the ones that are either in the best condition and safe? So we need to safeguard those. But which are the other ones which are under greatest threat? So we do, you would then say, well, focus your surveys on those. Excavate. And it doesn't have to be total excavation could be trial excavation, because quite often, we don't know what date they are. Sometimes they're designated as a cairn. There is a classic case in Jordan, where a number of these very small clusters of stones, and the archaeologists in the field and ourselves as aerial archaeology said, Well, they probably cairns. So probably some sort of burial. Turned out to be early Neolithic houses. So it's only when you begin to take the top off and have a look, you can find out what they are. And then if you're lucky, you can date them and then you can find out what they were used for. And if you do that, then you've got an area to to say well, we now know what this is. Yes, your road has to go through there, so it can be that sadly those sites might be destroyed. But at least you will then know when you find something else of a similar nature. You can say well, we know these are actually very important and they may not look important, but they are so we're going to preserve them.

Mehiyar Kathem 10:02 Just going back to the quality of the images and photography, the project that you work on doesn't replace on site documentation?

Robert Bewley 10:09 It complements it, yes, yeah. And I would say that what we're doing is the first step in the archaeological record in terms of putting a dot on a map saying there's an archaeological site here. This is what we think it is. And sometimes what we think it is, might be not sure what might be prehistoric, not sure it might be medieval, not sure might be 20th century. And we're very broad in our interpretation, it doesn't matter whether it's, you know, as early in the Neolithic, or even earlier, or 20th century, because there's fantastic 20th century archaeology in the Middle East, and we're working on, for example, the Hejaz railway. That's a fascinating story, both from a religious point of view in terms of why it was built, but also from a military point of view, you know, the the beginnings of the First World War, and then the whole great Arab Revolt afterwards, as well. So fantastic story to be told, for the historical record, and a very important part of the record, yeah.

Mehiyar Kathem 10:12 Hypothetically, in 10 years time, given what you know, and what you've documented, if we look at the infrastructure of heritage, North Africa and Middle East, where do you think we will be in 10 years time?

Robert Bewley 11:10 What I would hope is that the digital revolution continues, and that, in as many countries as possible, I wouldn't be able to put a finger on it, but it could be in double figures, 10 dozen of those countries will have a digital record, that anybody who wishes to be either involved in the protection of heritage or understanding the heritage would have access to. I'm totally aware of, it's the same in England, certain counties won't want to share their data with the people next door. It's the same in nations too, that's fine, but where you've got similar cultural heritage spanning the borders, which happens all the time, and particularly I'm thinking of, say, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, where you've got Nabatean archeology stretching through, that you would hope that the two countries and the professionals there would share their information and a research thing could be done on what was an area 2000 years ago, that was important then, and the 20th century has drawn some lines in the sand to quote a famous book. And though all boundaries are relatively false, some of them may be his-, you know, have a long duration. But the great thing about archaeology is it can cross those boundaries. And a digital record can cross those boundaries, because what we're interested in is the distribution and nature of sites from whatever date they might be.

Mehiyar Kathem 12:27 And if we just go back to the area of training, I mean, how long does a training course that you have take and where does it happen? Does it happen in the country, or does it happen in Oxford, Durham, or Leicester?

Robert Bewley 12:38 For each of the countries that we were involved in, in terms of the training, there were two basic courses, and there were about 10, or 12 on each of those. And we're now in the phase of having the advanced training courses. So the best of the best go with on the advanced training course. And they, we hope will become the trainers to train other people in the country. And they always happen in the country wherever possible. It wasn't possible to train in Libya. So all the Libyans were trained in Tunis. That did work really well. The Cultural Protection Fund insisted that it wasn't just about the training, it was also about trying to develop the economy and help the economy locally. So we bought laptops, and GPS equipment and cameras. So they had the kit to carry on the work afterwards. And you mentioned visiting sites and taking photographs on site as being a very important part of the process. And it is because a lot of the sites that you see on the satellite imagery, sometimes you think I'm pretty sure there's something there, but I'm not sure. You go and visit and immediately you decide it's much more important than I thought it was or actually it was a pile of rocks and it's not very important. That is is what is going on now. And we hope that will continue. And that's why we hoped the British government through the British Council will say let's have a continuation of the Cultural Protection Fund. So the work that we built on, and there's no guarantee, but the work that we started can be built on and carry on for another five years. And then

your question was, was where would we be in 10 years time? And I think it would be that that there would be not 170, but perhaps 300 or 400, people who are trained and can do this work as part of their everyday job. Because the satellite imagery is becoming better and better. There's more and more of it available. And as long as you've got access to the internet, which is becoming more widespread. If the British government were to ask us what would be one of the things we would change and say, well, actually, why don't you as a government help the other governments in the Middle East, North Africa to increase their digital infrastructure, get 5G, get Wi Fi everywhere, which is a really important aspect of it. Also, as part of the project, trying to raise awareness amongst the younger generation, and also politicians. So we've created a series of exhibitions that, as we speak, are going round all the countries and there are 12 panels for each of the countries and they're going into schools and museums so that people can see that there is cultural heritage all around them. That if they're interested, then they can say that they are interested. It's a really odd question that I'm often asked, is why is the past important? Why do we care about the past? I can't answer that question. I can only answer it from my point of view, which is, I think it tells us something about our identity. We're interested in where we came from. That's why I say that the importance of having these exhibitions and having the local people understand what they've got, it's their future. And that way, if we can get the exhibitions, both online, and through physically, it doesn't have to be a big room, it can be a classroom, and they've been written in simple possible way in English and Arabic and French, so that everybody can understand it. I often when I'm giving a public talk, make a joke, which is, you know, they're designed for schoolchildren and politicians because they got a similar level of understanding. And that's not being rude to politicians, it's that politicians have to take in a huge amount of information. So if we can take tell a very simple story, they'll get it straightaway. And, and if as a politician, they are interested in that in their country in their past or whatever else. Some are some aren't. Then hopefully that they will say yes, we will welcome more people to come and more people will do training. And I think it's got to be the young people to get them interested because it's their future. And if they understand their past, hopefully they'll understand their future.

Mehiyar Kathem 16:17 On that note, Dr. Robert Bewley, thank you very much. If you would like to learn more about EAMENA you can type a EAMENA, E A M E N A in Google search, or the website is EAMENA.arch.ox.ac.uk. Thank you again,

Dr. Robert Bewley. Robert Bewley 16:36 Thank you. Pleasure.