

Book Review

MIKKEL BILLE, *Being Bedouin Around Petra: Life at a World Heritage Site in the Twenty-First Century*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2019, 210 pp. (hb £99.00).

While UNESCO recognition is often presented as the celebration and safeguarding of cultural diversity, the consequences of inscription for those living on or near designated sites are rarely taken into account. In 1985 Petra, Jordan, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and in 2007 it was added to the list of the New Seven Wonders of the World. For the semi-nomadic Bedouin communities who lived there, the most immediate effect of UNESCO recognition was their forced relocation to permanent settlements in an effort to protect the site and make way for tourism development. In 2005, the Bedouin themselves were recognised as Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage by UNESCO, despite the fact that many of their former practices were intimately tied to the land on which they no longer live.

In *Being Bedouin Around Petra*, Mikkel Bille focuses on the changes brought about by these inscriptions for the Bedouin of Petra and Wadi Rum and the consequences of the universalising claims of world heritage and conservation agendas. At the same time, he questions how parallel universalising claims also affect the ways in which the material

presence of the past is negotiated and contested in the present. In taking a multi-scalar approach, shifting between local events and international agendas, Bille critically explores the politics of preservation in Jordan and their ramifications at Petra in six detailed chapters.

In the first two chapters, based largely on archival sources, he traces the relationships between modernisation projects, heritage conservation, and the construction of national identity in Jordan. He shows how Jordanian national identity is mediated through the material world and rests on claims to a common heritage centred on the figure of the Bedouin. In addition, Bille argues that the universalising claim of world heritage and UNESCO-backed legislation at Petra has simultaneously led to the construction and deployment of new identities amongst the Bedouin themselves. By focusing on both the local and national construction of identity, Bille aims to make clear that the processes involved in determining the intangible heritage of the Bedouin of Petra and Wadi Rum are not entirely the result of decisions stemming from government or UNESCO committees. Rather, interpretations are also constructed at the local level and offered as 'authentic' practices to tourists and heritage organisations. At the same time, what is claimed as authentic is contentious, and the process of making heritage leads to what he terms 'cultural freezing,' rendering static what is fluid and transforming (63), and leading to disputes concerning what constitutes the performance of Bedouinity. In this vein, Bille defines 'heritage' as a 'practice of assembly [...], rather than an object per se, even if an intangible one' (56).

In addition, he focuses on the processes involved in creating Petra as a cultural heritage site and the multiple parties involved, including archaeologists, the Jordanian royal family, and private organisations and companies and their various stakes in conservation and development projects. He shows that the preservation of heritage is not simply about protecting remnants of the past, but is also a vehicle for development, although the benefits of such development remain unequally distributed, with those with the strongest ties to sites often receiving the smallest share. While showing how heritage is a vehicle

for both identity formation and state development in Jordan, Bille similarly attends to the central role of the state in operationalising heritage sites to further political agendas, through using heritage as a means for economic growth and legitimation. In this vein, he illustrates how heritage as a social construct is intimately bound up with identity-making processes, power dynamics, and the many ways in which the production of heritage always entails the exclusion of other pasts. To this extent, he seeks to demonstrate that the processes through which heritage is defined are less about the objective recording and preserving of human history and much more about the politically motivated selection of one narrative of the past from many.

The following four chapters rely on qualitative ethnographic research and focus on exploring the tensions between intangible and tangible heritage, formal and informal practices, and purist and 'folk' Islam. His analysis here focuses on conflicting claims to the past in order to paint a picture of how intersecting universalisms impact heritage discourses and material practices. Bille thinks through the implications of these competing claims to history, namely the universalising discourses of the Islamic revival movement, heritage preservation, and the construction of identity, and he shows how they overlap in their deployment of the past. He also highlights how claims to authenticity come into conflict with each other, such as when the universal claims of UNESCO clash with the universalising claims of the Islamic religious movement. For instance, saint veneration, while recognised as intangible heritage by UNESCO, is seen as un-Islamic by many and is contested amongst the Bedouin of Petra and Wadi Rum, some of whom believe that practices which are perceived to be un-Islamic should be abolished in order to return to an original Islamic way of life. At the same time, some align themselves with UNESCO aims in seeking to preserve the 'authentic' Bedouin past, one that includes magic and saint veneration. Bille's ethnographic chapters reveal that Bedouin practices are not static cultural traditions, but are framed and contested in various ways in response to change.

In focusing on what heritage does, rather than what it is, the book provides an account of how strategic narratives about the past produced in the present have much broader implications for those living near Petra. As a way of critiquing the universalising discourse produced by the processes involved in heritage preservation, the author brings to light the contradictions and tensions between UNESCO's stated agenda and the lived reality of conservation practices. One drawback of this approach is that his focus does not appear to stem from the concerns and experiences of the local communities themselves, but from UNESCO discourse, as the main themes of his study were selected from a list of cultural attributes recognised by UNESCO as Bedouin intangible heritage (22-23). While his comparison of particular aspects of Bedouin culture that have been recognised by UNESCO to the lived realities reveals the problematic nature of inscribing intangible heritage, readers are left wondering about the concerns, projects, and aspirations of those who live and work at Petra. While his project is an attempt to approach 'heritage from below' (Robertson 2012), his preference for attending to national and supranational processes rather than the socio-political and economic changes on the ground leaves much room for further investigation. These remain urgent questions, as the consequences of heritage preservation Bille observes are not unique to Petra; around the world, local communities are displaced in favour of preserving what are framed as pristine and uninhabited sites, and yet these communities are rarely incorporated into decision-making processes. At the same time, despite the increased scholarly attention to cultural heritage, few studies have focused on those who live and work on what has come to be designated as heritage or archaeological sites in the Middle East. Thus, despite its drawbacks, Bille's ethnography of rural communities around Petra comes as a welcomed contribution to this emerging area of study.

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Reference

Robertson, Ian. 2012. 'Introduction: Heritage from Below', in Ian J.M. Robertson (ed.), *Heritage from Below*, pp. 1–28. Surrey: Ashworth.