

Sacred Geography, by Edward Fox

reviewed by [William G. Dever](#) in the [September 25, 2002](#) issue

Archaeology in the Holy Land--until recently often called "biblical archaeology"--has been involved in the region's political struggles since the late 19th century. In the formative phases of exploration and discovery, the colonialist European powers and, later, America, in their quest to "prove the Bible," engaged in a form of cultural imperialism. Both used archaeology not only to impose the values of the Christian West upon the indigenous peoples of the region but also to dispossess them of their own past.

More recently, both ardent Israeli Zionists and reawakening Palestinian nationalists have gotten into the game, which revolves around the question "Who owns the past?"

Today we finally recognize that archaeology, despite its scientific pretensions, is hardly a neutral enterprise. Yet instead of leading us to attempt greater objectivity, this recognition has resulted in numerous competing "revisionist" histories of biblical Israel and ancient Palestine, each loudly claiming its priority. The archaeologist Albert E. Glock became involved in Israeli-Palestinian politics in beleaguered Jerusalem and paid for it with his life. The story of his death is eloquently told in this real-life "murder mystery" by journalist Edward Fox.

A Missouri Synod Lutheran clergyman and biblical scholar, Glock became involved in archaeological fieldwork in the West Bank of Jordan in the 1960s; was briefly director of the famous American School of Oriental Research in the 1970s; then lived in Beit Hanina in the suburbs of Jerusalem in the 1980s to work on his excavated materials from biblical Ta'anach and to found and head the Institute of Archaeology at Bir Zeit University, a hotbed of Palestinian nationalism.

Glock, whom I knew well as my successor at the Jerusalem institute, was a dour, undiplomatic, single-minded man who became increasingly convinced that Western biblical scholarship and Israeli archaeology had collaborated in robbing the Palestinians of their history and rightful heritage. He became an outspoken advocate of Palestinian causes, yet his belligerence alienated him from many of his Palestinian

friends. He was ambushed, shot and killed by an unknown assailant in January 1992 outside the front door of an Arab house that he often visited, the home of the parents of his favorite graduate student.

Israeli police made only a cursory investigation, and the murder was never solved. Rumors still circulate among Palestinians that Glock was assassinated by an underground Zionist cell. Others believe that one of his own students or rivals at Bir Zeit University killed him for revenge.

There is even a hint of a tortured but unconsummated love affair with an Arab graduate student, whose family might have taken vengeance. Fox explores all these possibilities, along with the theory that a faction of the terrorist organization Hamas might have eliminated Glock; if so, the motive is unfathomable.

What can we learn from this sad tale of intrigue and violence, so compellingly told? One obvious lesson might be that archaeologists ought to stay out of politics-- especially in the incendiary Middle East. Unfortunately, despite Fox's cautionary tale, the current trend seems to be in the opposite direction, toward increasingly strident ideologies. As Fox reminds us, in the words of the inimitable Sir Mortimer Wheeler: "Archaeology is not a science, it's a vendetta."