

## NSF Funding for Archaeology: It's "Dirt" Cheap

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A week ago, I was standing on a wooden walkway at Kalavassos-Tenta, Cyprus, peering down into the remains of a eight-thousand year old village nestled in the ground below. The settlement's ancient inhabitants – estimated to number around 150 – lived in small round buildings made of stone and sun-dried mudbrick. They cultivated emmer wheat, einkorn, and barley; they also ate the meat of fallow deer, sheep, goats, and pigs. They positioned the bodies of their dead in a tightly crouched position and carefully buried them under the floors of their houses or in the narrow open spaces between buildings.

These remains at Kalavassos-Tenta were uncovered by an American archaeological team (the American Mission of the University of Brandeis, under the direction of Professor Ian Todd) between 1976-1984. The team's efforts were supported, in part, by funding from the United States' National Science Foundation (NSF). Now, however, the US House of Representatives Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, which has oversight of the NSF, and especially its chair, Congressman Lamar Smith (R, Texas), has threatened to reduce dramatically – if not cut altogether – the NSF funding available for archaeological projects. More specifically, Smith and his allies (including the House Majority Leader, Eric Cantor) have proposed slashing the budget of the Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences Directorate of the NSF, where the limited funding (\$7 million or so) available for archaeology is housed. Instead, they

propose to allocate the money, in Smith's words, to "research in fields like engineering, mathematics, computer science and biology."

Smith's quote comes from a May 22 Committee on Science, Space, and Technology press release entitled "Future to NSF: Stop Wasting Taxpayer Money" (<http://science.house.gov/press-release/future-nsf-stop-wasting-taxpayer-money>); a week later, he issued a follow-up: "Don't Reward NSF's Frivolous Use of Taxpayer Money with More Money" (<http://science.house.gov/press-release/smith-don-t-reward-nsf-s-frivolous-use-taxpayer-money-more-money>). But are archaeological excavations, like those at Kalavassos-Tenta, really a "waste" and "frivolous"? The inhabitants of Kalavassos-Tenta were part of the Neolithic peoples of the greater ancient Near Eastern world – and these Neolithic peoples were the first in human history to domesticate plants and animals. Their experiments in different areas, and against changing climate, established the technologies that almost every one of us in the world today uses to get our food. With our every bite, at our every meal, we reap the benefits of what they did for us millennia ago; do we really not want to know all we can about these ancient ancestors? And don't they still have things to teach us? Doesn't seeing, for example, the caring and intimate means by which these forbears of ours buried their dead call forth our feelings of a shared humanity – and so evoke an empathy that we might extend not only to the peoples of the past, but to our fellow human beings in this age? And as climate and population put pressure on food production today, some of the now forgotten crops (for examples several different cereal crops, different types of rice) that our ancestors experimented with in tough conditions may become relevant to our future.

The ancients have other pragmatic lessons to teach us as well. Archaeological work at a site just around the corner from Kalavassos-Tenta, called Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios, is designed to study urbanism on Cyprus during the Late Bronze Age (c. 1650-1100 BC) and, more generally, to understand what factors enable certain types of urban settlements to thrive while others fail. Surely such information is of benefit to, say, the residents of Los Angeles or New York (two very different types of urban settlements), and the NSF seems to agree: its funds help support the Kalavassos-Ayios Dhimitrios project. Yet “a 3-year, \$200,000 study of the Bronze Age on the island of Cyprus and elsewhere around the Mediterranean” is one of the ten or so NSF grants whose validity Congressman Smith has explicitly questioned (<http://science.house.gov/press-release/president-s-science-advisor-agrees-nsf-should-justify-taxpayer-funded-research-grants>).

Smith, incidentally, has also questioned the validity of modern scientific findings regarding climate change (<http://science.house.gov/press-release/witnesses-all-agree-climate-science-not-settled>). But as Eric H. Cline noted in the *New York Times* opinion pages on May 27, archaeological discoveries from the Near Eastern world can help teach us that climate change is real – and what it portends. About forty-two hundred years ago, the great pyramid-building culture of Egypt came to an abrupt end as a horrific drought and its aftermath – famine and wildfires that raged across a desiccated land – brought down the Egyptian Old Kingdom’s once great pharaohs. Another devastating drought, this one about 5000 years ago, may similarly have caused the demise of the Uruk culture of southern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). And drought, famine, and the civic unrest and undermining of local authority that resulted has also has been implicated in the wide-

scale cultural collapse that occurred across the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean in about 1200 BC.

Archaeology, in short, gives us the means for examining the long-term relationship between people and their environment – and for understanding the consequences of widespread environmental change. Certainly that’s something today’s drought-stricken Californians – or even Congressman Smith’s drought-stricken constituents in Texas – would want to know. And what archaeology can show us about other long-term social, political, and economic trends is equally valuable to us, as we address the social, political, and economic problems of our society – and of our planet.

Finally, we should not neglect the work that American archaeologists – and the American government funding that supports them – can do on behalf of United States diplomacy in today’s troubled world. Take Syria, for example. Someday, the factionalization that is tearing that country apart will end, and somehow the Syrian people will come back together. As recently reported on National Public Radio (<http://www.wbur.org/npr/316329859/smugglers-thrive-on-syrias-chaos-looting-cultural-treasures>), Syria’s cultural heritage – which represents so richly the country’s multi-faceted past – can play an important unifying role. But in a war-ravaged land, who will be able to secure and preserve this heritage? Initially, as Syria strives to rebuild, this will be work that others, like archaeologists from the United States, will be called upon to do. Is this frivolous, an extravagance, as Congressman Smith might opine? Not if US archaeologists can help in stabilizing Syria – which is a goal that is clearly in America’s self-interests.

And the cost? In this case, as any trowel-wielding archaeologist would tell you, one of those three-year, \$200,000 NSF grants would be dirt cheap.

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