

BOOK PROPOSAL FOR

Submerged: Rescue Archaeology and Historical Erasure in Eastern Turkey

Overview

The construction in the 1960s of the Keban Dam on the Upper Euphrates in Eastern Turkey threatened to destroy the region's cultural and archaeological heritage. A multidisciplinary and international rescue project, similar to the one undertaken a few years earlier in Egypt before the Aswan High Dam, was quickly initiated in an effort to document and study the past of a region about to be submerged. The Keban Dam Rescue Project constitutes a turning point for the discipline of Turkish archaeology. It set in motion more archaeological surveys and excavations in the next decades before the construction of other large dams on the Tigris and Euphrates.

Keban serves here as a starting point to scrutinize the way archaeologists "discover" the past. Through a careful historical study of its surveys and excavations, I explain how certain (arti)facts concerning Eastern Turkey's history and archaeology were selected and rendered visible, while others were placed on the margins when not completely ignored. The past, in this case, was not "discovered" by archaeologists as much as it was "recovered," that is both retrieved (*recovered*) and covered again (*re-covered*). More broadly, I argue that the past can be both buried and unearthed, destroyed and created, remembered and forgotten, lost and found sometimes almost simultaneously.

The past, in other words, is what I call "submerged." A past submerged is a past that does not pass. It is a portion of history still retrievable, washed away but only temporarily so, concealed but not destroyed, suffocating but breathing. Under water the past takes a life of its

own as waves and currents carry it far away. It is reified in a new object, embodied in a new person. It borrows a different voice, speaks a different tongue, tells a slightly different story than when initially drowned. A past submerged is rarely fixed in writing, displayed in a national museum, or illustrated in a schoolbook. It is instead a personal memory left untold within a family, a forgotten tale remembered by all, a story silenced that remains on everyone's lips.

Once drowned, the past can return with a vengeance. It surfaces accompanied by an unbridled backlash. Associated to a struggle for recognition, it then becomes a political battle. It will be greeted with skepticism or anger at first, contested if not outright rejected, warned not to make any waves. In Turkey, the country's submerged past is often associated to its ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities. Subaltern stories abolished over the last hundred years that emanate from the country's longer history of military violence, authoritarian regimes, masculine domination, forced assimilation, and state-led modernization. It is a past erased from Turkey's official state archives, silenced by its dominant historical narratives, and opposed to its particular form of ethno-nationalism. It is made up of silenced voices, displaced villagers, buried memories, hidden tales, and deliberate genocides not yet forgotten.

Submerged, however, does not apply to the past of others only. I do not equate here submerged to suppressed. I also do not want to create a hierarchy from least to most submerged. Instead I claim in the book that all histories--dominating or dominated--can be drowned and occasionally come back. All pasts, I argue, are produced through this dialectic of erasure and foregrounding, concealment and release, submersion and emersion, continuously flowing between two states, hidden and exposed at the same time. History as a perpetual flux between annihilation and recovery.

Submerged serves in this book as a metaphor to think about historical erasure differently. Rather than being erased, I argue, the past is submerged. It is its main attribute and its central paradox. It is, in the end, at its most present when absent, at its most vibrant when perceived as submerged, on the verge of disappearing but far from being entirely lost. I trace my own move in this book from studying Eastern Turkey's submerged past first as an archaeologist and later as an ethnographer. This personal shift allowed me to broaden my archive from archaeological site reports to a wider ethnographic field including newly-built museums, architectural renovation projects, city centers recently gentrified, as well as the locals and foreigners I met in Eastern Turkey who were behind this entire rescue enterprise.

The book is bracketed within several time periods. First, my years in Eastern Turkey during a relatively peaceful window between 2001 and 2015. Second, the succession of rescue projects from the 1960s before the Keban Dam to the 2010s before the Ilisu Dam. Third, a longer history of genocides beginning in 1915, followed by events in 1938, the 1990s, and 2015, perpetrated by the state in the region. Within these time frames, I observed a cultural heritage destroyed, ancient ruins under threat, historic landscapes no longer visible, urban centers quickly disintegrating. I saw a past threatened by economic development as well as literally inundated by the construction of dams. I also witnessed this same submerged past being vigorously rescued at an unprecedented scale: archaeology salvaged to fill up newly inaugurated museums; architecture refurbished into hotels and restaurants; cities gentrified for the wealthiest only; and heritage preserved in the hope of attracting tourism money. A past, in other words, both submerged and rescued at the same time.

Contents

Submerged: Historical Erasure and Salvage Archaeology in Eastern Turkey comprises 25 short chapters divided into 5 parts. In **Part I** (A Submerged Past) I explain the role played by rescue archaeology along the Tigris and Euphrates over the last 50 years in the professionalization of the discipline in Turkey. I observe how the past was first threatened by dams, then rescued by archaeologists, but lost again in their site reports. By carefully reading this gray literature, however, I found the past emerging once again, not entirely erased, on the margins of science instead. Rather than being "discovered" by archaeologists, I explain, in the end, how the past is instead "submerged," that is continuously flowing back and forth between erasure and display.

Once built the Keban Dam divided the Upper Euphrates landscape into two. To the south, Elazığ (modern, Turkish, Sunni), and to its north, Dersim (mountainous, Kurdish, Alevi). **Part II** (Historical Erasure) takes readers around the reservoir some forty years after the rescue project. It visits the memories of the 1938 ethnocide committed by the Turkish army in Dersim. The traumas associated with this military suppression have materialized as *lieux de mémoire* scattered in the landscape. In the 1990s the region was again affected by armed clashes between Turkish security forces and Kurdish guerrilla groups. This more recent past has also been appropriated by local municipalities as Dersim's own heritage. In the end, I draw parallels, but also bring out discontinuities, in the remembrance of 1938 and the 1990s.

The Armenian past has never entirely disappeared from the landscape in Eastern Turkey. It remains, however, a taboo for some and a burden for others in the country. Rather than a complete history of Armenia, **Part III** (Concealment and Exposure) is an ethnographic inquiry into questions of approval and denial of the Armenian past in present-day Turkey. It describes the

manner in which the government hesitates to include this contested past within its broader tourism strategy. The chapters travel to a refurbished cemetery, a sunken monastery, an abandoned church, a restored fountain, and a lost village, which had all been Armenian once, to then discuss this particular heritage on the shores of the Tigris and Euphrates as both included and excluded, remembered and forgotten, exposed and erased today.

After Keban, a wide range of public and private actors in Turkey, outside archaeology, became concerned with "rescuing," that is preserving, displaying, managing, legislating, commodifying, and selling the past. **Part IV** (A Past Worth Rescuing) establishes links emerging in the 1980s between, on the one hand, the implementation of neoliberal and developmental policies and, on the other, the growth of the tourism industry, the burgeoning of monumental heritage museums, the gentrification of old urban centers, and the architectural renovation of ancient homes in Eastern Turkey. I describe, in other words, how the past suddenly became worth rescuing, that is how archaeological, historical, and architectural heritage today has been transformed into an asset in order to attract tourism money to the region.

The next part asks, Why rescue the past in the first place if it is to destroy it immediately after? **Part V** (Heritage Destruction) returns to the medieval city of Hasankeyf where activists are contesting its drowning by the construction of the Ilisu Dam. The book ends in the Kurdish city of Diyarbakır, where a violent take-over of its city center was launched by the Turkish army in July 2015. The later expropriation by the state of private properties in its historic center eventually led to its gentrification into a *bibloket* or souvenir city. I critique this recent turn to violence in Eastern Turkey and restrictions on freedom of speech across the country by asking, in the end, Who has the right to speak about the past in Turkey today?