Gaza's Phoenix:

Real or Legend?

By Yasmeen Elkhoudary

n history class, we were taught that Gaza has been a battleground over the centuries for many kings and conquerors from various civilizations; that again and again Gaza has been destroyed and then rebuilt.

Unlike in most Palestinian cities, little archaeological evidence remains in Gaza to attest to its ancient past. The rapidly increasing rates of urbanization and population growth are not the only reasons that Gaza has been largely inaccessible to archaeologists in modern times. Located at possibly the most important point along the Via Maris, an ancient route that connected Africa with the Levant, powers on either side of the route fought over control of Gaza for both military and economic purposes. Thus, the fact that Gaza was destroyed and rebuilt so many times over the span of its long history means that we are left with few remains (and more perhaps yet to be discovered); conquerors in antiquity were seldom thinking about preserving monuments for posterity.

Outside the municipality building of Gaza, a black statue of a Phoenix bird stands in the middle of *al-saha*, the city's main square. The statue resonates well with the coat of arms (COA) of Gaza's Municipality: a Phoenix bird. Unlike any other Palestinian municipality, Gaza is the only city with a COA that features something other than a historic monument or tree, let alone a legendary bird. After learning from a friend that the artist who designed the COA is the famous Laila Shawa, who happens to reside in London like me, I reached out to her hoping to learn more about the inspiration behind the design. "One day in 1980/1, I went to my father (the late Rashad Shawa, twice mayor

Byzantine palm-tree engraving, found in Gaza City, circa sixth century. Photo from Gaza: from Sand and Sea*. (Jawdat Khoudary collection.)*

of Gaza City) and told him that Gaza needed to have a COA. The Phoenix bird was our first and most obvious choice, and he asked me immediately to design it. It's pretty straightforward – the city is like a Phoenix bird."

Madame Shawa brought my attention to an important detail in the COA, "If you inspect its colors carefully, you will notice that it is red, green, black, and white. This was probably the biggest challenge I faced while designing the COA because back then, the Israeli army prohibited the use of the colors of the Palestinian flag in any way. I tried and succeeded in incorporating the colors despite their ban and my potential imprisonment."

Indeed, it is. Prior to meeting Madame Shawa, I had started to conduct research for my master's dissertation, motivated by a desire to find an alternative future for my city. Refusing to believe that our future, much like our present so far, is doomed and unlivable (as foreseen by the United Nations), I decided to look for other options in our history. My father always tells me: "Had

Like the legendary Phoenix bird, Gaza has been rising from its ashes since the dawn of time despite every attempt to destroy it. Will the ashes that we have been living in for centuries clear away and give rise to Gaza's Phoenix once again?

The legendary mythical phoenix. Image courtesy of phoenixarises.com.

Gaza not been an ancient, 5,000-year-old city, it would not have been able to survive until today." Thus, I knew there was an answer to our ongoing misery: it lies in our history.

The cyclical nature of history is not a new revelation; "history repeats itself" is probably the best-known history lesson in the world. A closer look at the history of Gaza presents us with the most accurate depiction of the lesson. For the purpose of my research, I drew a timeline of the history of Gaza from the Early Bronze Age (3500 BC) to the present, and was able to trace a fluctuating pattern of highs and lows – prosperity and disaster – across the timeline. During the Bronze Age, for example, Tell Ajjul, just south of today's Gaza City and one of the most important archaeological sites in the region, was arguably one of the biggest trade centers in the Mediterranean, with a monopoly over trade routes that connected the Levant to Egypt and Cyprus. Hoards of gold were discovered at the site and are displayed in museums around the world. After a few centuries of prosperity, the city was destroyed by an Egyptian army led by Ahmose, who destroyed the city to punish the Hyksos who had fled to Tell Ajjul. Tell Ajjul was abandoned and never re-inhabited. But in the thirteenth century, the Muslims officially defeated the Sixth Crusade in a treaty that was signed near Tell Ajjul (the second part of the treaty was signed in Yafa).

In the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the nearby city of Gaza became a main stop on the Incense Route with its own port and its own coins (Gaza was the first city in Palestine to mint its own coins). In 332 BC, Alexander the Great faced an unexpected obstacle in Gaza as he was marching to Egypt. With fortified walls, Gaza stood on a hill of soft yellow sand, which meant that the wheels of Alexander's catapults sank deep into the sands as he tried to attack the walls. Thus, he decided to build towers around the city's wall in order to attack from the air, a process that took nine weeks. However, the besieged people of Gaza attacked Alexander's towers with fire and burnt them down, injuring Alexander himself in the process. Alexander's third attempt at defeating the city was by building tunnels, a technique that, ironically, worked after three months of failure. Alexander was so furious at Gaza's resistance that he executed the city's king Batis and all the men, selling its women and children to slavery. He looted massive amounts of incense and myrrh, and shipped them back to Macedonia as gifts to his mother and his teacher Leonidas. Without much explanation, this event in history has strong resonance with the present – and was actually followed by a period of great prosperity during the times when Gaza was under Ptolemaic rule.

The sequence of historical events, including the ones mentioned above and others, show that Gaza's life cycle has consisted of ups and downs, or, in other terms, of falling to ashes and rising again. It is said that the legendary Phoenix bird that cyclically regenerates and is reborn from its ashes originated in India or Persia with the tales of Sindibad (in the stories of *Alf Leila wa Leila*) and was adopted by the Chinese, Arabs, Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians. The legend describes the Phoenix bird as a massive bird with golden red feathers that, after centuries of flying around Earth, starts to get old and sings a song to the Sun asking it to make it young again. The Sun ignored the bird's request. Then the bird started to collect cinnamon sticks, incense, and other fragrant herbs and plants from around the world (meaning the Incense Route), and built itself a nest on top of a palm tree on the Phoenician coast that extended to the southern Levant. The bird also collected myrrh and used it to make an egg. Then the Phoenix sat down in its nest and asked the Sun to make it young again. The Sun responded by setting the bird on fire and reducing it to ashes, from which a tiny, young Phoenix was reborn from the myrrh egg.

Beyond the metaphorical resemblance of the bird's legendary resurrection and rebirth to that of Gaza's timeline, a number of other symbols are also relevant to Gaza. Incense and myrrh were plentiful, and the palm tree, called *Phoenix* in Greek, is one of the most abundant trees in Gaza, to the extent that there is a town called *Deir al-Balah*, famous for its rows of palm trees. This draws another very interesting comparison to the city: the holy tree, which represents life, fertility, and victory, and inherently is a symbol of resurrection and rebirth, is another symbol of the city.

Can we find hope in the abstract, imaginary metaphor of a legendary bird? While the idea might seem too intangible for some, I believe that it is not much more abstract than the level of absurdity that marks the reality in which

The statue of the Phoenix bird in Gaza City was crafted from fiberglass by Iyad Sabbah. Photo by Motaz Alaaraj.

we currently live. During my preliminary dissertation viva, one professor asked me the following question: “This all seems good and hopeful, but what are you proposing to do about it? Are you saying that you all should just sit there and wait for the Phoenix to rise?”

The professor’s remark struck me. I had been too busy analyzing the past to think about what needs to be done in order to build a better future. In a way, I was committing the mistake of those who give too much focus to the present/future and forget the past. Creating the balance between the past and the future is where our challenge lies. But most importantly we must remember that whatever actions we take will be insignificant unless we genuinely believe that there is hope in the future. After all, the Sun did not grant the Phoenix’s wish until it had built itself a nest.

Yasmeen Elkhoudary is a master’s student at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. She is a researcher in Gaza’s history and archaeology and an associate fellow in the Centre for Palestine Studies - SOAS. She currently volunteers in the ancient Levant galleries in the British Museum and in the Palestine Exploration Fund. While in Gaza, Yasmeen worked at Almathaf Museum. She publishes a blog at yelkhoudary.blogspot.com.