

The Destruction of Memory

Lost Cultural Heritage in Gaza



By Akram Ijla

“Collective memory is not an inert and passive thing, but a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning.”
Edward Said

World heritage experts and the international community define interaction between humans and their cultural heritage and property based on both, the physical attributes we collectively employ to define value and the symbolic meanings a local community attaches to them. On the one hand, heritage sites and cultural property play an important role in sustainable national development, because they are used to contextualize contemporary national identities and to relate them to past achievements and earlier civilizations. On the other hand, objects and sites that are found in a contemporary nation yet related to ancient civilizations influence and connect with international audiences, as they form the basis of a shared past that frequently extends well beyond any single country. Thus, cultural property not only constitutes a tangible form of collective memory, as an important asset in a broader context (such as cultural and national identity), it may also serve as a tool that aids the formulation and protection of intangible

heritage. Thirdly, cultural property may be evidence of tolerance, openness, and acceptance of others.

In the year 2017, the Gaza Strip marks the tenth anniversary of Hamas' rule, the longest-ever siege, and a rising backlog of thousands who are waiting for a rare chance to exit the dire situation in Gaza. With no remedy in sight, Gaza's condition is becoming increasingly oppressive, and as there is no obvious path leading towards a change in the situation, for most of Gaza's two million people life is bound to get worse. The international isolation of Hamas will likely continue – and with it the blockade that has been imposed by Israel and Egypt since Hamas seized power over Gaza in June 2007.

The bleak political situation is among the main reasons why cultural heritage in Gaza has so far not received the measure of attention and protection it well deserves. However, the destruction

of cultural heritage also follows a deliberate and planned strategy in modern warfare that involves religious groups who do not accept any evidence of other civilizations. Even though most states worldwide have expressed their appreciation of cultural heritage by means of the 1954 Hague Convention which asserts the need to protect cultural property in advance of and during armed conflict, actual protection of cultural artefacts has proven weak. This weakness has been demonstrated (externally) during the Israeli wars against Gaza and (internally) most clearly by the policies and actions of the Hamas government, under which cultural heritage has thrived only with regards to the politicization of cultural identity and in connection with symbols tied to religious faith.

Cultural heritage in Gaza suffers from significant violations and neglect. Examples show destruction of cultural

Gaza City, Palestine. Photo by Shareef Sarhan.



heritage (internally) through the building of a police station on one of Gaza's most important archaeological sites, the ancient city of Al-Balakhia. Located north of today's Al-Shati refugee camp, Al-Balakhia thrived from 1200 BC to 324 AD. At this site, unique monuments were discovered – unmatched by any others in Palestine – yet it was destroyed because some believed that a unique fresco painting of women constitutes archaeological evidence of affiliations with an infidel civilization.

Part of Al-Balakhia's archaeological fabric is Anthedon, a city northwest of

Site by the State of Palestine. However, in April 2013, part of the harbour was damaged by construction, which caused the archaeological sites of Anthedon to be flooded with water.

Several other archaeological sites were damaged or destroyed as well over the past few years. For example, the site of Tell As-Sakan, located south of Gaza City and dating back to the Early Bronze Age (3300-2300 BC), was partially destroyed, and the majority of its archaeological features have been removed – while a multi-storey building has been erected on



A statue of Apollo, dating back to the Hellenistic period, was found in Gaza. © UNDP/PAPP image bank.

Gaza that served as a port linking the region with Europe. It was inhabited from the Mycenaean era to the early Byzantine age, but only during the Hellenistic period (323 BC – 31 BC) the port, populated by immigrants from Boeotia, Greece, became an independent city under the name Anthedon. As a Greek city, it had an agora and temples; the citizens' life was chiefly dedicated to fishing, exporting wine and olive oil, and shipbuilding. On 02 April 2012, the ancient city was listed tentatively as a World Heritage

the southern part of the site. The fate of the archaeological site historically known as Tell Batshan is similar: it has recently become well-known as Yasser Arafat's Heliport.

In 2013, a statue of Apollo dating back to the Hellenistic period was discovered but has since been neglected as well. Archaeologists and heritage experts were unable to examine the statue, but it is known that the sculpture is very clean as it was found inland and in a dry environment. Experts believe that this object could not have been created

in a vacuum and that the site where the statue was found must hold more artefacts, yet undiscovered, that could provide important archaeological and historical information.

In 2015, further archaeological remains were discovered during the reconstruction of Al-Rasheed Street in Gaza. These features reveal an extended fabric connected to a basilica-type church that is located to the west of Al-Rasheed Street and was discovered in 1965 by the Egyptian Department of Antiquities. The church features a mosaic floor that has been described as depicting a figure of a female saint playing the harp and charming wild animals. The structure of the basilica is almost square (approximately 26 m by 30 m) and probably consisted of a wide nave and two aisles on either side, separated by four rows of columns, two on either side of the nave.

In sum, an examination of the level of protection of cultural heritage in Gaza over the past ten years makes it clear that little sensible thought has been given to the value and future role of cultural heritage. Archaeological remains in Gaza show that its past was much more pluralistic and showed the very features of diversity that make cultural heritage so valuable. Unfortunately, the international response, or lack thereof, to this neglect appears to show that the protection of cultural heritage in Gaza is considered less of a priority by outside actors and observers as well. Very little effort has been invested into helping the local community in Gaza preserve their cultural identity, or into preventing violations to the 1954 Hague Convention that asserts the obligation to protect cultural property in advance of and during armed conflict.

Edward Said has claimed that public memory has long served as a political tool for the establishment of nations, and his argument should be interpreted as extending to cultural heritage and all that it represents.

The ongoing geo-political situation in Gaza pushes the regime and the local community towards treating cultural heritage as a luxury that cannot be afforded, neither by society nor by the regime, as Gazans are struggling to emerge from the devastation of three wars and a ten-year blockade.



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