

The Current State of Archaeology in Palestine

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الحالة الراهنة للآثار في فلسطين

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مدير دائرة فلسطين للآثار والتراث الثقافي

The Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH) has been in existence now for more than fifteen years since its re-establishment in 1994. The inauguration of this Department was a momentous event. It may be considered the revival of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine, which was established in 1920 under the British Mandate. The authority was then terminated due to the political events of 1948 when Israel was established, while Jordan assumed those responsibilities for the West Bank and Egypt for the Gaza strip. This report provides a historical background on the archaeology of Palestine, an overview of its vision, inception, objectives, development and activities during this formative period. It gives an account of the archaeological field work, current projects carried out in the Palestinian areas, including the joint excavations, restoration projects and the state of preservation of archaeological and cultural heritage sites. This is an updated version of the article (A Decade of Archaeology in Palestine) published in 2005.

تأسست دائرة الآثار والتراث الثقافي قبل خمس عشرة سنة، منذ تاريخ إعادة تأسيسها سنة 1994. وقد مثل انشاء هذه الادارة حدثا مهما، يمكن اعتباره اعادة بعث لدائرة الآثار الفلسطينية التي تأسست عام 1920 في عهد الانتداب البريطاني، والتي توقفت عن الوجود مع أحداث سنة 1948، حين اقيمت اسرائيل على الاراضي الفلسطينية واتبعت الضفة الغربية الى الاردن وغزة الى مصر. يقدم هذا العرض خلفية تاريخية حول اثار فلسطين، تشمل رؤيتها ومنطلقاتها وأهدافها وتطورها ونشاطاتها في فترة التكوين هذه. كما تقدم سجلا بالنشاط الاثري الميداني والمشاريع التي قامت بها في الاراضي الفلسطينية، بما في ذلك التنقيبات المشتركة ومشاريع الترميم وحالة الحفاظ على المواقع الاثرية. ان هذا التقرير هو تحديث لنسخة سابقة بعنوان (عقد من العمل الاثري في فلسطين)، نشر في العام 2005.

Introduction

The Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH) has been in existence now for more than fifteen years since its re-establishment in 1994. This report provides an historical background on the archaeology of Palestine, an overview of its vision, inception, objectives, development and activities during this formative period. It gives an account of the archaeological fieldwork and projects currently being carried out in the Palestinian areas, including joint excavations, restoration projects and the state of preservation of archaeological and cultural heritage sites. This is an updated version of the article (A Decade of Archaeology in Palestine) published in 2005.

The inauguration in August, 1994, of the Department of Antiquities of Palestine under the Palestinian National Authority was a momentous event (Taha, 1998a, 1999, 2002, 2005 and 2008). In one sense, however, it may be considered the revival of the Department of Antiqui-

ties that was established in 1920 under the British Mandate. The authority was then terminated due to the political events of 1948 when Israel was established, while Jordan assumed those responsibilities for the West Bank and Egypt for the Gaza strip.

The beginning of 1970 witnessed for the first time the introduction of archaeological courses at Birzeit University, which had developed into a teaching program in the newly established Department of Archaeology by 1980, which itself subsequently became the Institute of Archaeology at the end of 1980s. The Department of archaeology conducted a series of excavations at Tell Jenin and Tell Taannek (1976-1986). Other archaeological teaching programs were offered at Al-Najah University in Nablus and Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, some of the teaching programs at Birzeit University and Al-Najah University were not sustained, although some efforts have been made to revive them. A basic program of archaeology and an MA program for restoration is offered currently at Al-Quds University.

Following the Palestinian-Israeli agreement in 1993, Jericho and Gaza were handed over to Palestinian control. Subsequently in Autumn 1994 and December 1995 the Palestinian National Authority was given control throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip of several spheres of responsibility, including archaeology in areas A and B. In some parts within area C powers and responsibilities over archaeology were to be transferred gradually to Palestinian jurisdiction. Under the terms of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangement for Palestinians, (Oslo Accords, 1993: article 1) these negotiations had to be completed by May 1999. Eventually, this was to include the entirety of Palestinian territory in the West Bank and Gaza. But unfortunately, the mutually agreed timetable for this transfer in the transitional period has been delayed and never implemented by the government of Israel. In the absence of a final peace agreement, Israel remains a military occupant in the occupied Palestinian territories, and therefore remains bound by provisions dealing with cultural property (Oyediran, 1997: 9-18) in the Hague Convention and Regulations of 1907, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, the Hague Convention and Protocol of 1954, the UNESCO Recommendation On International Principles Applicable to Archaeological Excavations which was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in its ninth session in New Delhi on 5 December 1956, and many other resolutions and recommendations concerning cultural property in the Palestinian occupied territories.

The DACH was established at a time and in circumstances of complex difficulties. It possessed neither archaeological records, nor any of the finds from archaeology previously undertaken on its soil. Neither did it have sufficient space, logistical support and equipment nor an archaeological library or maps. And because of inadequate opportunities for field training under occupation, the department has inherited a serious shortage in qualified personnel.

The new situation gives the Palestinians who won autonomy at the end of the last century an independent role to explore the history of Palestine from its primary sources, a task reserved until recently for foreign and Israeli archaeologists. This situation had often led to the political and ideological use of data and their interpretation without objective scientific controls. The establishment of a national management body for antiquities and cultural heritage (involving the Department of Antiquities, other academic programs, and non-governmental organizations) marks the beginnings of a local field school of archaeology.

The department is basing its efforts in research, education, preservation, and legislation on contemporary, internationally accepted standards. It is the modern humanistic understanding that views the integral role of Palestinian culture within human culture, making

archaeology in Palestine a scientific enterprise within the setting of international scientific endeavour. A new participatory approach has been developed in Palestine, fostering the roles of official bodies, academics, non-governmental organizations and the community in safeguarding cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage represents the history and at the same time the identity of the Palestinian people. It is acknowledged as a resource that can initiate a chain of actions capable of creating jobs and income. At the same time cultural heritage is recognized as a means of attaining social integrity, and of creating a multicultural character of Palestinian society based on values of respect, tolerance, democracy and freedom.

Cultural heritage legislation

The old antiquities law was grounded in a conventional concept of archaeology, which effectively excludes the cultural heritage of the last three centuries (Taha, 2005). The new laws being invoked move beyond narrow definitions and ancient periods to include many different categories of cultural resources including archaeological sites, historical buildings and features, and significant vernacular architecture (Taha and Jaradat, 2009), viewed comprehensively within both physical and cultural contexts.

At its inception, the DACH inherited differing sets of archaeological legislation. In 1929, under the British Mandate, a common legislation Law of Antiquities (no. 51) was issued which replaced the existing Ottoman law. After the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, the Israel military government issued a series of Military Orders many of which directly impacted on archaeology and the archaeological resources of the land. The most important of these was Military Order No. 119/1967, which revoked many of the principles of the old Antiquities Law No. 51 and placed all of the responsibilities of the Department of Antiquities under the military governor and his appointees. All permits and licenses issued before the June War of 1967 were thereby cancelled.

These various earlier laws are generally out of date and sometimes even contradict one another. Therefore, the DACH has worked in cooperation with governmental, non-governmental institutions, academics, to produce a new draft for an updated Law of Cultural Heritage that takes into consideration the scientific, legal and conceptual development of archaeology up to the present time. The new legislation emphasizes the integrity of different components of cultural heritage, and protects historical centers as well as cultural and natural landscapes.

This resituates the archaeology of Palestine within the universe of the international discipline, and will facilitate international archaeological research based on mutual interests. At the same time the new department has attended to its task of combating the looting of archaeological sites. Hundreds of archaeological sites have been looted and plundered (Ilan, Dahari and Avni, 1989) during the years of occupation, and there has been an active illegal trade in cultural property.

Many sites have been abandoned and left without any protection. Most importantly, there is a lack of awareness of the importance of cultural heritage among the public, due to the heavy impact of the political and ideological claims placed on archaeology by the occupiers and by the Israeli settlement policy. Archaeology is viewed by the average Palestinian as part of the occupation system. The new transformation of the role of archaeology and cultural heritage is evoking a chain of positive reactions in the Palestinian society.

Management structure of cultural heritage

The Department of Antiquities was established in 1994 and has sought ways to redress the above-mentioned inherited defects and to find their solutions, promoting a modern understanding of Palestinian cultural heritage. The department was restructured in 2002 following an agreement between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, according to which the Department of Cultural Heritage in the Ministry of Culture merged with the DACH within the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

In order to address the full range of obligations imposed by this new mandate, the DACH has defined for itself the following primary task areas, of institution building of the Department, formulating legislation to ensure protection of cultural resources, staff training to develop the necessary special capabilities within the departmental team, protection, management, conservation and restoration of archaeological sites and cultural heritage sites, expanding the museum sector and conducting a program of salvage excavations. The structure of the organization has been designed to facilitate performing these duties, consisting of the following divisions: excavations and survey, site management, inspection and licensing, national register, conservation and museums.

The Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage is working in cooperation with governmental and non-governmental bodies to preserve cultural heritage in Palestine. The main actors are the Palestinian universities and the non-governmental organizations working in the area of cultural heritage, including the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, the Center for Cultural Preservation in Bethlehem, and Riwaq Center in Ramallah and the Welfare Association in Jerusalem. These institutions along with some other community initiatives are participating actively in the restoration, conservation and rehabilitation of historic centers.



Fig. 1: Israeli destruction of the historic centre of Hebron

Joint and salvage excavations

Excellent examples of the efficiency of international collaborations with the department have already been demonstrated in development projects and in the joint Palestinian-Dutch excavations at Kh. Bal'ama, the joint Palestinian-Italian excavation at Tell es-Sultan in Jericho (Marchetti, Nigro and Taha, 1999; Nigro and Taha, 2006), the Palestinian-Swedish excavation at Tell el-Ajjul and the Palestinian-French excavation at Anthedon, Tell es-Sakan (Miroshedji and Sadeq, 2001 and 2002). Other examples of joint cooperation have been the Joint Palestinian-Norwegian excavation at Tell el-Mafjer in Jericho and Palestinian-Swedish cooperation at Tell el-Ajjul (Fischer and Sadeq, 2001).

These joint projects have contributed to building a new postcolonial model of cooperation in archaeology based on mutual respect and interest. In 1999 a special volume of the French journal *Dossiers di Archeologie* (vol. 240) was dedicated to the new Palestinian experience. Preliminary and final reports on the results of these excavations have been published in a range of archaeological journals. Within this collaborative context, the project for the rehabilitation of Hisham's Palace in Jericho (Piccirillo, 1989) was also established, in cooperation with UNESCO and with the financial support of the Italian government.



Fig. 2: Hisham's palace in Jericho, mosaic floor

The Department of Antiquities has managed to undertake a series of salvage projects in the last twelve years. More than 500 salvage operations have been carried out in the Palestinian areas, especially in historical urban centers and in areas under high pressure (cf. Taha, 1997). A large number of tombs from different periods have been rescued, and a hoard of 420 silver coins from the early Ottoman period was uncovered in a rock shelter near the village of Qabatiya, south of Jenin (Taha, Pol and van der Kooij, 2006). In Gaza, salvage operations have been carried out at a number of sites, including the cemetery and the church of Jabalia, the site of Nuseirat and in different other locations in Gaza and Rafah, Deir el-Balah and Khan Yunis (Sadeq, 1999 and 2005; Humbert, 2000).

In 2000 and 2001, two seasons of excavations were carried out at the site of Tawaheen es-Sukkar in Jericho. A salvage excavation was conducted at the Monastery of Bir el-Hammam on Mount Gerzim. In 2003 and 2004, a series of excavations were carried out in the sites of Samoua village, Haram er-Rameh, Deir Ghannam, Tell Jenin, and Kh. el-Burj. In 2003 work was restarted in Gaza in the sites of Tell um Amer and Blakhiyeh under the framework of the Palestinian-French cooperation in Gaza (Humbert and Abu Hassuna, 1999). In 2006 a small-scale excavation was carried out at Kh. el-Mafjer to determine the stratigraphic history of the site. A series of salvage excavations were carried out in 2008 and 2009 in Nablus, Sabastia, Samou'a, Bethlehem, Hebron, Jericho, Taybeh and Khirbet Beit Bassa. Palestinian academic institutions participated actively in these efforts. Research and training excavations have been carried out by Birzeit University at Khirbet Birziet in 1998-2008, by the University of Al-Najah at Tell Sofar from 1996 to 2002, and by Al-Quds University at Khirbet Shuweika.

Preservation and conservation of cultural heritage

The other main task has been the conservation of the most endangered archaeological sites and historic buildings, and major projects have been carried out throughout the country. This has included, the Emergency Clearance Campaign of one Hundred Sites, 1996-1998 (Taha, 1998) and a project for the protection of cultural and historical landscape between 1998 and 2001, funded by the Dutch government to a value of 1.5 million USD. These two projects included major archaeological sites and historical buildings, as well as historic mosques, churches, monasteries, sanctuaries, and traditional buildings. They involved clearance work, documentation, consolidation, and conservation and salvage excavations of more than one hundred endangered archaeological and cultural heritage sites.

These sites have included the ancient churches of Burqin and Abud, both dating to the Byzantine period, and the Crusader churches of Sebastyah and el-Bireh. Historic mosques likewise being preserved include es-Sabeen and Burham from the Mamluke period, the Omari mosques at Dura and Birzeit, as well as the sanctuaries of El-Qatrawani and Maqam en-Nubani (Taha, 1998 and 2005).

Illustrative of the diversity of structures and sites that have been preserved are an 18th century castle in Ras-Karkar, the Crusader Kahn in el-Bireh, Mamluke bath in the old town of Hebron, the Ottoman Qaem-Maqam house in Tulkarem and Beit ez-Zarru villa in Ramallah (Taha, 1998). Maqam el-Qatrawani near Attara has also been conserved, together with the small natural forest and terraced landscape surrounding it. Similarly, the site of Dura el-Qarei possesses a combination of ecology and historical technology, displaying ancient and traditional hydrological features in its natural and cultural landscapes. Some historical buildings have also been restored to house ethnographic and archaeological museums or other types of cultural centers. Larger complexes with multiple dimensions are also being stabilized and developed, such as the villages of Deir Istyia and Artas.

Among well-known previously excavated sites in the West Bank and Gaza such as Tell Ta'annek, Tell el-Fara, Tell Dothan, Tell Balata, Tell en-Nasbeh, Tell et-Tell, Kh. Radana, and Tell el-Ajjul, some of these were left without protection during the thirty years of occupation. Clearance of some of these sites is being undertaken according to a plan to develop them into archaeological parks such as Tell Balata and the Crusader church of el-Bierh.

Within the framework of the Bethlehem 2000 projects (Abu Jidi and Diab, 1999; el-Hasan, 1999), a large project for the restoration and rehabilitation of archaeological sites and historical buildings in the Bethlehem area was carried out in cooperation with the UNDP and funded by the Japanese government by an amount of 2 million USD. As part of this project an ethnographic museum displaying the history of oil production was established in the old city of Bethlehem. In Gaza a comprehensive restoration and rehabilitation work was carried out in the historic palace of Qaser el-Basha. Another project was carried in 2004 and 2005 at seven locations in the northern districts in Palestine with funding from USAID of ca. 2.5 million USD (Taha, 2004), including the sites of Kh. Bal'ama, Burqin, Arraba, Deir Istyia, Barqawi Castle, and the villages of Irtah and Kur.

In 2005, a series of restorations and consolidation work were carried out in the Mamluke castle of Khan Yunis. In 2007 the exhibition "Gaza at the Crossroad of Civilizations", was organized in Geneva within a framework of Palestinian-Swiss cooperation, after seven years of the Paris exhibition and more than a century of archaeological research in Gaza. The exhibition consists of 229 artifacts uncovered in the major excavations at Tell Umm Amer, Blakhyieh, Jabalia, and Tell es-Sakan between 1995-2006, as well as private collection items.

Since 1967 thousand of archaeological artifacts have been uncovered and removed from various sites in Gaza city, Deir el-Balah, Tell er-Ruqeish, Tell Ridan, Tell Qatif and elsewhere. The exhibition has a dual significance; it shows the wealth and diverse history of Gaza and marks at the same time an initial step toward realization of a Gaza archaeological museum.

Destruction of cultural heritage

Since October 2000 great damage has been inflicted on cultural heritage sites in the Palestinian areas (Taha, 2005). These sites have suffered military bombing, with shelling causing partial or even total destruction. Attacks on cultural heritage sites have intensified since the last major incursions in April 2002 and January 2004, causing irreparable damage, especially in the historic towns and cities, including Bethlehem, Hebron, Gaza, Beit Jala, Tulkarem, Salfit, Jenin, Gaza, Rafah, Abud, and Nablus. Sieges, curfews, roadblocks and military closures imposed on the Palestinian cities and villages have prevented the DACH from attending to its tasks in the protection of cultural heritage. Many archaeological sites and historical buildings have been the target of Israeli military attacks, including during the last war on Gaza, when the ancient Gaza port Anthedon, the Ottoman building of Dar es-Sariai and the governor's house were damaged.

Another major threat has been caused by the separation wall constructed by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories, including in and around Jerusalem. It is a huge system composed of concrete walls, razor wire, trenches and fences, cutting into the West Bank and Gaza and separating people from their land and history. Besides its direct human, economic and social negative impact on Palestinian life, the separation wall has had a devastating impact on the rich archaeological remains, cultural heritage sites and most importantly the cultural landscape of Palestine.

The projected wall will encircle Palestinian population centers in a series of disconnected blocks. Through the 462 Israeli settlements inside the Palestinian areas Israel already controls more than 900 archaeological sites and features, and after building the wall this number will rise to 4,500, including ca. 500 major archaeological sites, which constitute ca. 50% of the cultural resources of the Palestinian areas.



Fig. 3: The Separation Wall, East Jerusalem

World Heritage projects in Palestine

Following the events of April and May 2002 in the Palestinian Territories, especially the prolonged siege of the Nativity Church and the destruction of the old center of the city of Nablus during the Israeli incursion, the World Heritage Committee expressed its concern over the possible destruction and damage of Palestinian Heritage at its 26th session in Budapest (June 2002). The committee recognized the outstanding universal values of Palestinian heritage and approved an amount of 150.000 USD for supporting Palestinian cultural and natural heritage in order to assist the Palestinian Authority in establishing an inventory of potential World Cultural and Natural Heritage places (DACH, 2005; Taha, 2009).

As part of this plan, a training workshop on the implementation of the World Heritage Convention was undertaken at ICCROM in Rome in September 2003, with the participation of 16 specialists in cultural and natural heritage from various Palestinian institutions. Most of the trainees were involved in the preparation of the tentative list and associated activities. The present list includes 20 cultural and natural heritage sites (16 cultural heritage sites, 3 natural sites and one mixed site). The list reflects the cultural and natural diversity of Palestine and its importance nationally and internationally.

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