

Heritage and Conflict in Gaza



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Abstract

During the initial 170 days of the 2023–2024 war on the Gaza Strip, a large number of cultural heritage resources of this particular region have been partially or completely destroyed. Throughout the time period of the ongoing war, numerous local and international institutions and organizations endeavored to evaluate the extent of the destruction to Gaza's cultural heritage. They relied on firsthand accounts, on-site observations, and satellite technology. Nevertheless, the ongoing Israeli bombardment on all areas of the Gaza Strip, including land, sea, and air attacks, has made it challenging to fully evaluate the extent of the damage to cultural heritage sites during the present war. Based on the existing information, numerous archaeological sites of both local and international renown, historical cities, churches,

mosques, religious shrines, museums, traditional commercial markets, libraries, manuscript centers, ancient cemeteries, cultural, administrative, and artistic centers, schools, and universities have suffered significant damage. The two objectives of this entry are to demonstrate the perils associated with armed conflicts on cultural heritage, as well as the consequences of such conflicts on the national identity.

Keywords

The Gaza Strip · Cultural heritage destruction · Genocide · Ethnocide · Armed conflicts · The Great Omari Mosque

Introduction

The “benevolent” view of cultural heritage is an invaluable and irreplaceable asset that plays a pivotal role in shaping the identity, values, and shared history of societies worldwide. It serves as a tangible link to the past, providing a framework for understanding the evolution of societies and the forces that have shaped them. This continuity helps communities develop a collective identity, reinforcing a shared sense of belonging and purpose (Smith 2006). Moreover, cultural heritage is a powerful tool for promoting cross-cultural understanding and dialogue (UNESCO 2011). By appreciating and respecting the

cultural diversity embodied in heritage, societies can transcend barriers and build bridges between different communities. This, in turn, fosters a climate of mutual respect and cooperation, contributing to global harmony and peaceful coexistence. Cultural heritage also plays a crucial role in the enrichment of human creativity and knowledge (Lowenthal 1998).

The deliberate targeting of cultural property in armed conflicts is not a new phenomenon. It is clear that numerous civilizations in the past deliberately destroyed cultures, resulting in long-lasting effects on the built environments and left their buildings in ruins. An infamous incident took place during the Roman conquest of Carthage in 146 BCE, when the Roman commander Scipio Aemilianus commanded the deliberate destruction of Carthage, including its temples, libraries, and monuments, resulting in the eradication of a substantial portion of Punic cultural heritage (Polybius, "The Histories"). The Library of Alexandria suffered from several instances of conflagration and devastation during ancient times. These instances were attributed to Julius Caesar in 48 BC, Emperor Aurelian in 272 CE, and Theodosius in 391 CE. Consequently, a substantial quantity of books and manuscripts that held vital knowledge from diverse civilizations and time periods were permanently lost (Yasmin 2018).

From the First World War onward, psychological genocide emerged as a novel method for annihilating a specific group of individuals (for more information about psychological genocide, see Button et al. 2004). Given that cultural legacy plays a significant role in fostering a nation's sense of belonging and acknowledgment, it becomes susceptible to being eradicated and erasing the nation's identity. Each single nation is rooted in both tangible and intangible aspects of culture, which are transmitted over generations by its members through their archaeological and historical sites and features, practices, folklore, thoughts, tradition, and customs. When a nation's heritage resources, such as historical buildings, archaeological sites, and features or sacred places, are targeted, it undermines the nation's identity as well. Peoples of a nation

or a community are heavily depending on their identity to establish their self-concept, way of life, and position in society (Neihardt 2017: 2). Individuals of many nations feel united with their legacy. The Italian architectural historian N. Adam expressed this conviction by saying: "the great monuments of Italy represent, for many of us, a kind of cultural patria [patrimony] and so it is understandable that we feel damage to them as damage to us" (Adams 1993: 389).

During the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, followed by the establishment of the "State of Israel," the Zionist military forces attacked a large number of Palestinian cities, towns, and villages and partially or completely destroyed 418 villages, killed approximately 13,000 Palestinians, and displaced more than 750,000 from their homes making them refugees (Khalidi 1992: xxxvii–xl). Furthermore, approximately 23,000 archaeological and historical sites and features of the Palestinian patrimony were confiscated and annexed to Israel (Al-Houdalieh 2010: 32).

Impact of Armed Conflict on Heritage in the Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip, renowned for its extensive cultural legacy that has endured for thousands of years, is currently confronted with a severe and pressing dilemma caused by persistent threats and assaults that jeopardize its archeological sites, historic structures, museums, natural and cultural landscape, and material culture. The historical importance of the region as a meeting point for ancient civilizations is currently at risk due to military conflicts. The persistent violent conflicts in this specific region have resulted in intentional assaults on cultural heritage sites, causing irreparable harm to the majority of its cultural assets. The Israeli military's attacks pose a significant threat to the cultural heritage of the Gaza Strip, requiring immediate attention and strategic interventions to minimize the continuous destruction and protect its irreplaceable asset for future generations.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other militant groups carried out attacks on Israeli settlers and

soldiers around Gaza borders. From a Palestinian perspective, these actions are seen within the context of ongoing resistance against Israeli occupation of Palestine. This very recent wave of armed conflict in and around the Gaza Strip, known as Toufan al-Aqsa (Al-Aqsa Flood) by the Palestinians and as Iron Swords by the Israelis, has resulted in over 107,000 deaths and wounded (Cicurel et al. 2024: 6), and more than 1.9 million people have been displaced from their homes within the Gaza Strip (United Nations, January 12, 2024). Furthermore, this aggression has resulted in the destruction, either partially or totally, of a large number of archaeological and historical sites and features and also erased the historical fabric of the Strip's social landscape and threatened the identity of its population.

Ongoing Research

As the conflict in Gaza remains ongoing, this entry draws upon the following sources:

1. Academic articles that present experiences of countries worldwide whose cultural heritage was damaged due to military attacks, such as Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Mali, Sarajevo, Bosnia, and Ukraine.
2. Statistics available to the Government Media Office in the Gaza Strip, which state that more than 200 archaeological and historical sites were destroyed out of 354 archaeological and historical sites (Iran Daily, January 18, 2024), consisting approximately 60% of the cultural property of the Gaza Strip.
3. Daily analysis of television news and social media texts and videos on to create a database of the targeted archaeological and historical sites and features and the levels of damage sustained.
4. Review of the existing literature related to the historical and archaeological development of Gaza.
5. Telephone interviews with colleagues and contacts on the ground in Gaza.

The Gaza Strip: Archaeology and History Overview

The Gaza Strip is situated in the southwest part of Palestine, namely, at the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The administrative area of the Gaza Strip underwent several changes in size over time. In 1931, it covered 1196 km², but by 1945, it had decreased to 1111 square kilometers due to administrative reform during the British mandate (Messerschmid 2011: 137). In 1948, the area dramatically decreased to approximately 555 km² and then further reduced to 365 km² in 1950 as a result of the Modus Vivendi agreement between Egypt and Israel signed on February 26, 1950 (Golan 2023: 9). The Gaza Strip stretches over a maximum length of 40 km along the coastline and has a width ranging from 6 to 12 km (Andreou et al. 2024: 4). Gaza Strip is currently divided into five governorates (known by the Palestinians as the southern governorates), which are North Gaza, Gaza, Deir al-Balah, Khan Younis, and Rafah (Palestinian Central Bureau 2020: 69). The establishment and development of settlements in the Gaza Strip in antiquity were significantly influenced by four main prominent elements, namely, the ancient route (known as “the Horus-way,” “the way to the land of the Philistines,” “via maris,” and “ad-darb as-sultani”), that connected Egypt with the regions of Levant, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and southern Europe, its access to the sea, the presence of fresh surface water (mostly valleys, such as Wadi Gazza), and fertile soil (Sadeq 2012: 75). According to the inventory prepared in 2019 by Palestinian archaeologists in collaboration with UNESCO, there are 86 documented archaeological sites and 268 listed historical buildings in the Gaza Strip (Andreou et al. 2024: 15).

The Gaza Strip, like other Palestinian regions, has been the focus of extensive archaeological investigations conducted by Western “Biblical” archaeologists since the nineteenth century. These findings from these endeavors have subsequently been mobilized to support Jewish associations to the land of Palestine, thereby providing

justification for the Israeli-Zionist settler-colonial project (Glock 1994). Prominent scholars, like Pythian-Adams and Sir Flinders Petrie, displayed a distinct scholarly fascination with the region of Gaza. However, following Petrie's final excavation season in Gaza in 1938, no authorized archaeological endeavors were undertaken until the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967. Between the years 1967 and 1993, the Israeli Army's Staff Officer for Archaeology (SOFA) conducted excavations at designated archaeological sites. The ratification of the Oslo Accords and the subsequent formation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 enabled for the first time a significant surge in Palestinian-led archaeological excavations (Taha 2010: 17). However, these endeavors were abruptly interrupted by the Second Intifada in 2001 and the Israeli siege and wars against Gaza Strip since 2007 (Abou Jalal 2013). Presently, archaeological excavations are notably limited despite their at times urgent need when materials have been uncovered by shelling. Excavations that were underway in October 2023 have been disrupted due to the prevailing inaccessibility of Gaza. These challenging circumstances have resulted in severe restrictions on the mobility of individuals, including archaeologists, inside the region (Morhange et al. 2005: 76; Al-Khoudary 2019: 92).

The results of various fieldwork over the past two centuries indicate that the first beginning of permanent settlement in this particular region was during the Late Neolithic period (5500–4500 BCE), especially at Tell Qatifa (Qattif) in Wadi Gazza (Andreou et al. 2024: 4, 16–17), and Tell Ridan located west of Khan Younis (Sadeq 2012: 76). Traces of Chalcolithic period (4500–3600 BC) were attested at Tel Qatifa in Wadi Gazza (Taha 2017: 76) and Taur Ikhbeineh (Morhange et al. 2005: 77; Andreou et al. 2024: 15). With the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (3600 BC), the number of the settlements in this particular Strip increased significantly, most of them located along Wadi Gazza, extending between what is today Gaza City in the north and Deir al-Balah in the south (Sadeq 2005: 76). During this period, the Levant witnessed the emergence and flourishing of the city-state system. Each city-state was governed by a ruler who managed the affairs of

the city in isolation from other cities. Among the notable city-states of this strip from the Early Bronze Age is Tell es-Sakan, which located approximately 5 km to the south of Gaza City. The excavations conducted at this site have yielded significant evidence of the presence of both local Levantine and Egyptian goods. This suggests that the Egyptians had established a presence in Gaza with the aim of exerting control over trade in the southern Levant (Fischer 2012; Sadeq 2005: 77).

During the Middle Bronze Age, the Gaza Strip flourished and new settlements were established, such as Tell al-A'jjul, Bethaglain, and Tell Nekeiz, and previously abandoned sites such as Tell es-Sakan were reinhabited (Andreou et al. 2024: 13–16). One of the most important of these sites is Tell al-A'jjul, which is located approximately 1.8 km from the Mediterranean coast and 6 km southwest of the center of modern Gaza City. The excavations carried out at this site indicated that it was fortified and had trade connection with Egypt, the Jordan valley, northern Levant, and Cyprus. It was destroyed in about 1570 BCE by the Egyptian Pharaoh Ahmose's army after the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt and the pursuit of their remnants in Canaan (Sadeq 2005: 78). During the Late Bronze Age, however, the southern Levant fall under the domination of the Egyptian New Kingdom (eighteenth to nineteenth dynasties), and to ensure this domination, most of the Pharaohs of this kingdom headed punitive military campaigns against the rebellious city-states of this region. Furthermore, the Egyptians established garrison stations at several different Canaanite city-states, such as Deir el-Balah, Gaza, Lachish, Aphek, Tel Mor, Jaffa, and Beth-Shan (Panitz-Cohen 2013). Gaza became the primary seat of southwestern Canaan (Redford 1984: 177).

During the final sub-phase of the Late Bronze Age and the Early Iron Age (1200 BCE), Canaan exhibited a variety of destruction levels of major sites due to different factors, of which was the invasion of the Sea Peoples, mainly the Philistines (Mumford 2018). During the Iron Age southwestern Canaan witnessed the establishment of the Philistine Pentapolis, with Gaza serving as home to its principal city. During this time period, Gaza experienced a notable growth in economic well-

being, which was demonstrated through the founding of a contemporary settlement in the present-day Gaza City. Additionally, two sea ports were established in Blakhiyya, located 2 km west of present-day Gaza City, and Tell Ruqeish, situated 18 km southwest of present-day Gaza City (Sadeq 2005). It is widely believed that the present-day location of the old city of Gaza corresponds to the ancient city of Gaza constructed by the Philistines (Sadeq 2005, 2014). During the Iron Age II period (1000–586 BC), Gaza underwent a significant event when it was conquered by Tiglath-Pileser III, the ruler of the Assyrian Empire, in the year 734 BCE. This military campaign resulted in the Gaza City being plundered and its king, Hanun, being subjected to vassalage under the Assyrian king. Consequently, Gaza was granted a degree of autonomy but remained a subordinate city within the Assyrian Empire. The primary motivation behind Assyria's interest in Gaza was from its significance as a pivotal commercial center along the incense route (Radner and Zamazalova 2012). According to the historical narrative provided by Herodotus, Gaza was identified as a significant urban center within the region of Syria during the period of the Assyrian Empire's decline (Ameling et al. 2014). The decline of the Assyrian Empire in its normal geopolitical boundaries in Mesopotamian and in all occupied territories, including Canaan, led a new conqueror to the lands of Philistia. The Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies in 605 BC, and then in 601/2, Gaza became a Babylonian garrison town. In 539 BCE, the Persian Empire invaded Canaan, and then Gaza became a logistic base for the Persian troops (Betlyon 2005: 7). During the two next centuries, Gaza was one of the largest commercial centers in southern Canaan, and its administration minted three types of silver coins (Zlotnik 2012).

The year 332 BCE marked a significant turning point in the historical trajectory of Gaza Strip and the broader region, as it witnessed the conquest of the whole Persian Empire by Alexander the Great. According to textual sources that provide accounts of Alexander's life, it is argued that Gaza City was the sole city in Palestine that

resisted Alexander's invasion subsequent to the fall of Tyre. Upon the successful incursion of the city by his military forces, Alexander proceeded to carry out a series of actions that included the execution of all adult males, the enslavement of women and children, and the demise of Persian governor of Gaza (Batis) (see Arrian 1971). Subsequently, Alexander proceeded to repopulate the city of Gaza by relocating individuals from the vicinity of the city while strategically utilizing its citadel to bolster his military campaigns in Egypt (Al-Khoudary 2019: 94).

In the year 64 BCE, the military forces led by Pompey achieved the conquest of Gaza Strip, which formed an integral part of the Levant. Subsequently, under Roman governance, the region witnessed a period of prosperity, particularly in its port cities, lasting for several centuries. Gaza experienced destruction once more during the Jewish revolt in 66 AD., inflicted by rebel forces (Al-Khoudary 2019: 95). In the year 130 AD, Emperor Hadrian made a visit to the city of Gaza. During his journey, he participated in the ceremonial opening of the temple dedicated to Marnas, the patron deity of Gaza. The practice of Paganism in Gaza was officially prohibited in the year 401 AD (Glucker 1987), and the temples within the city were completely demolished, and subsequently, a newly constructed basilica named "Eudoxina" was erected by St. Porphyry of Gaza (Freedman 2007). During the Graeco-Roman period, Gaza City maintained its prominence as the primary port in the region. It played a significant role in facilitating trade in spices and perfumes with Arabia. The significance of Gaza City in the Byzantine era can be inferred from depictions of the city on the Madaba map (Clarke et al. 2004: 33), as the second largest city of Palestine. This assertion is corroborated by other archaeological sites in the surrounding area of Gaza City, such as Tell Umm A'mer (which encompasses the monastery of St. Hilarion, which was constructed in 291 AD), Beit Lahya (Bethetelea), Tell ad-Dahab, Asalea, Thabatha, Kh. al-A'dar, Deir al-Balah, Kh. al-Sheikh Hamumuda, Kh. Ma'in, Kh. Sheihan, and Kh. Rafah (Sadeq 2015: 47–53).

Gaza was incorporated into the Islamic Empire throughout both the Umayyad period and the

subsequent Abbasid period (660–1099 AD). Subsequently, Gaza came under the control of the Crusaders. The Crusaders strategically employed the defenses of Deir al-Balah (ad-Darum), located south of Gaza, as a means to obstruct the coastal road and impede the transportation of supplies and reinforcements from Egypt to Ashkelon. During the Mamluk era, which spanned from 1250 to 1516, Gaza was under the jurisdiction of the province of Damascus, although it occasionally enjoyed periods of autonomy (Sadeq 2005: 74–75). During this period, Gaza City was a regional capital, and the Mamluks included it with the coastal military and trade route (*darb as-Sultan*), connecting Damascus with Cairo. The Mamluk architectural heritage in Gaza is numerous and varied, including Caravanserais (*khan*), shrines, public paths, hospitals, schools, mosques, administrative constructions (such as Qasr al-Basha), and traditional residential buildings. From 1516 to 1917, Gaza fell under the control of the Ottoman Empire, and Gaza City became the capital of the province of Palestine (Taha 2017: 79–80). Some buildings from this period remain in use, such as Al-Shawa house, Al-Nadeem house, Ra'fat Abu Sha'ban house, Mamiq Al-Alami house, and Wafa Al-Saigh house (Almughany 2000: 162).

Palestine was under British control from 1917 to 1948 (military administration, followed by a League of Nations Mandate). Then in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Israelis occupied the large part of it, and from 1948 to 1967, the Gaza Strip was governed by Egypt, while the West Bank was subject to Jordanian control. In 1967, the Israelis occupied the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza, and the Golan Heights during the Six-Day War, later granting the West Bank limited autonomy (within the Areas A-B-C protocol) with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority per the Oslo agreements (1994). In 2007, a political separation occurred between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; therefore, Gaza came under the control of the Hamas movement, while the West Bank (excluding East-Jerusalem) continued under the control of the Palestinian National Authority (Al-Houdalieh 2010: 32; Al-Houdalieh and Jamal 2020: 84–86).

The Consequences of 2023–2024 War on the Gaza Strip's Cultural Property

Over the past 17 years, since the full withdraw of the Israel's settlers and military from the Gaza Strip after nearly 40 years of occupation, the Israeli military forces have attacked the Gaza Strip five times: in 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2023–2024 (Zanotti et al. 2023). Throughout Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip in 2014, some 181 mosques were partially or fully demolished, along with partial damage of one church. In a similar vein, the 2021 Israeli military onslaught resulted in the deliberate or inadvertent targeting and destruction or damage of archeological sites and historical features due to their close proximity to targeted locations. Palestinian human rights organizations have documented the destruction of public and private buildings, including 124 places of worship, of which 7 were entirely demolished and 117 were partially destroyed (Guillaume 2022). Additionally, 1 market was largely destroyed, and 37 tourism facilities were damaged, with 6 being completely destroyed and 31 being partially destroyed (*ibid*).

Although the present-day Gaza Strip covers a small area—1.33% of the Mandate Era Palestine—it has an incredibly rich assemblage of cultural heritage properties. As stated above, the corpus of properties in the Gaza Strip consists of approximately 354 archaeological sites and historical features, including the prominent archaeological sites of Tell al-A'jjul, Tell es-Sakan, Tell Ruqeish, Tell Umm A'mer, Tell ad-Dahab, Deir al-Balah, Tel al-Mintar, and the historic cemetery in Jabaliya, Dayr al-Balah cemetery. The vast majority of the Gaza Strip's properties enjoy aesthetic, artistic, scientific, and historical values and significances; therefore, they were a subject of investigation, conservation, and restoration over the past two centuries. During the 2023–2024 war on the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military forces have targeted approximately 60% of the Gaza Strip's heritage properties by air, land, and sea causing the destruction of a vital part of human beings' patrimony (ICOMOS Palestine 2024).

The list of damaged/destroyed heritage properties in the Gaza Strip during the 2023–2024 war

is too long to repeat here, but it includes archaeological sites and listed traditional commercial and residential buildings, churches, mosques, museums, schools, historical trade routes, and public baths. Notable sites and monuments such as Tell al-Sakan, Tel al-Mintar, Tell A'jjul, the Anthedon, the historic cemetery in Jabaliya, the Byzantine church in Jabaliya, the church of St. Porphyrius, the historic al-Omari great mosque in Gaza, the historic al-Omari mosque in Jabalya, Katib Wilaya mosque, the historic mosque of al-Sayyid Hashim, the historic mosque of Qashar mosque, the historic Zafardamri mosque, the shrine of sheikh A'li al-Mintar, the shrine of sheikh Ridwan, the shrine of al-Khidr, the shrine of prophet Yusof, al-Kamiliyya madrasa, Qasr al-Basha, Dar al-Saqqa, Hamam al-Samra, the Ottoman archive, museums, and the historic castle of Barquq, among others. Since an official damage assessment has not been conducted yet, this entry relies on official data that is currently available and the most recent data provided by various sources up to the date of the written work; therefore, this entry will present a few examples of the best documented targeted heritage properties: the great mosque of al-Omari at Gaza, al-Pasha palace, al-Saqqa palace, Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church, the Roman cemetery, Balakhiyyal/Anthedon harbor, Al-Rimal neighborhood (Fig. 1). The selected examples also testify to the absence of any kind of on-the-ground protection from the international community that further jeopardizes the heritage of the Gaza Strip.

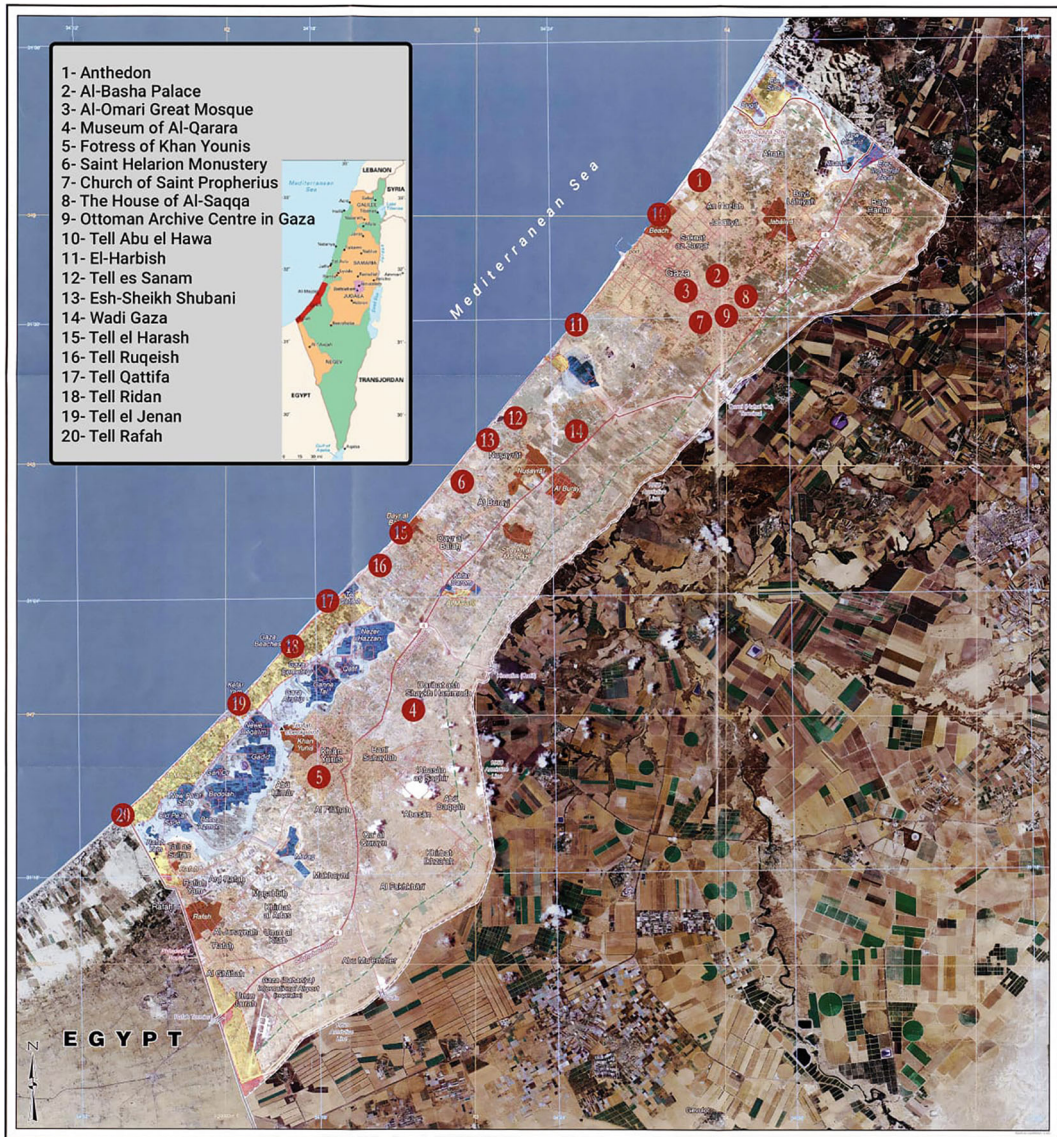
The Great Mosque of Al-Omari in Gaza

The “Great Omari Mosque” or “the Grand Omari Mosque” is located in the historic core of the Gaza City and covers an area of approximately 4100 m² and a building area of 1800 m² (Shehada 2020: 154). This area enjoyed sanctity throughout the second and first millennium BCE, and the sacredness of this particular area has continued without interruption until today. Therefore, it serves as both a religious sanctuary for Muslims and a tangible testament to the extensive and varied past of the Gaza Strip and its inhabitants. According to tradition, the mosque is located on the exact spot where the Philistine temple devoted

to Dagon, the God of fertility, and during the Roman period, a new temple was erected and dedicated to Marans, the God of rain and grain (Al-Khoudary 2019: 95; Shehada 2020). In the early fifth century CE, the Christian community in Gaza constructed a church on the area of the former temples, which they named Porphyrius church. Following the Islamic takeover, the church underwent partial conversion into a mosque in response to the request of the local inhabitants (Mahrok 1999: 5). In the year 1033, Gaza experienced a severe earthquake that resulted in significant damage to the mosque. Later, in 1149, Baldwin III, the King of Jerusalem, constructed a new church called Saint John the Baptist on the remains of the Grand Omari Mosque.

Directly after Salah al-Din won the battle of Hittin in AD 1187, he/the Muslim community of Gaza renovated the church and converted it back into the Grand Omari Mosque; however, the Great battle of Gaza occurred in AD 1244 near the Omari Mosque between the Ayyubids and Crusaders and resulted in significant destruction to the mosque. During the last quarter of the thirteenth century, the Mamluks enlarged the mosque and built its first minaret; however, the earthquake of AD 1294 that struck Gaza resulted in severe damage on the mosque. In 1917, the British army bombarded Gaza with gunboats during the First World War, resulting in significant damage to the mosque (Shehada 2020: 150). However, in 1926, the High Islamic Council of Jerusalem reconstructed and repaired the damaged sections of it (Mahrok 1999: 7; Shehada 2020: 149–150).

On December 8, 2023, the Israeli military forces attacked the Great Omari Mosque and reduced it to rubble (Fig. 2), with only its ancient minaret still partially standing (Al-Jazeera 2023). The destruction of the mosque was a shock for all Palestinian archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, and cultural heritage professionals (both Muslims and Christians); therefore, they issued several statements condemning this action (ICOMOS Palestine 2024). One week after the bombardment of the mosque (N. J., 60 years old, personal correspondence), an archaeologist who was born and lived close to the site, stated “For



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 1 The distribution of the most effected archaeological sites, historical buildings, and museums in Gaza Strip during the war

2023–2024. (This image has been reproduced with permission from the owner. (www.mapsland.com, adapted and modified by A. Jawabreh and L. Abu Alsaud))

me, as an archaeologist and also as a Gazan as well, the Great Omari Mosque with its long history is the most important landmark of Gaza. The destruction of the mosque is a genocide and wiping place and time memories.”

Al-Pasha Palace

The Al-Pasha palace (Fig. 3), also known as the Palace of Al-Radwan, has Mamluk era elements

and is located in the Daraj quarter in the eastern area of Gaza City (Taha 2024: 13). The listed complex consists of two distinct structures that are separated by a courtyard, as well as a square in front of the two-storey historic structure. The building’s architectural features are characterized by geometric embellishments on the facades and entrances. The frames of the entrances are accentuated by a variety of shapes, primarily star



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 2 The Great Mosque of al-Omari in Gaza: (a) Before the destruction. (b) After the destruction. (Photo by Ali Kalij and Yasmin Safwan. These images have been used with permission

from the owners. https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=95f546f6867878db&q. and https://www.google.com/search?sca_esv=95f546f6867878db&q)



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 3 Al-Pasha palace: (a) Before the destruction. (b) After the destruction. (Photos by Alya Samih. These images have been used with permission from the owner. <https://madanews.ps/67084/>)

shapes and sharp curves. The front entrance of the palace is adorned with exquisite geometric patterns carved into stone, notably featuring a rectangular stone bearing the depiction of two lions on either side. This emblem represents the fourth Mamluk Sultan, Al-Zaher Baybars (1228–1277 AD). The second storey predominantly consists of Ottoman architecture. The Pashas of Gaza governed their territory from this palace after the swift Ottoman conquest of the Middle East in the early sixteenth century (Aldohdar 2020: 4–5).

Because of its strategic location and impressive architecture, the Palace played a significant role in various governmental functions. During the Mamluk period (1250–1516 AD), it served as the residence for the Pashas, the central location for the Gaza Prosecution Office, and the military headquarters. The Al-Pasha Palace functioned as the residence house for the governor from 1517 to

1923 AD, during the Ottoman-Turkish Empire (Aldohdar 2020: 5). In 1799 AD, the Pasha's Palace was briefly seized by the French expedition and called Napoleon Castle. During the British Mandate of Palestine (1918–1948 AD), it functioned as a police station known as Deboya. Under Egyptian rule of the Gaza Strip (1948–1967), it served as a school administrative building. During the Israeli military occupation of the Gaza Strip (1967–2005), the palace was abandoned but frequently targeted during conflicts. From 2005 to 2009, under the authority of the Palestine government, the site remained unused. However, since 2010, it has been repurposed as an archaeological museum (Aldohdar 2020: 5; Municipality of Gaza 2023: 45).

The museum holds a large collection of artifacts uncovered during several excavations conducted in Gaza, dating from the Neolithic to the Late Islamic period (Saber 2024), and includes

hundreds of coins, pottery vessels, glass vessels, stone tools and vessels, statues, ornaments, and weapons, such as daggers, swords, spears, helmets, and shields (Isleem 2022). The Palace was hit by Israeli airstrikes on December 11, 2023, damaging its walls, gardens, and courtyards (Fig. 3) and leaving the fate of its collection uncertain.

Al-Saqqa Palace

Al-Saqqa Palace is located in Shaja'iyah neighborhood and is an exemplary representation of the luxurious residences owned by affluent inhabitants of the city (Gaza Municipality of 2023: 41). The house was approximately 700 m², constructed in 1661 AD (Taha 2024: 15), and consisted of a courtyard with marble tiles, a main door 2 m in height that takes the form of a right angle and is darkened to preserve the privacy of the people of the house, an Iwan for receiving guests, and several living rooms in addition to a kitchen and a bathroom. The Palace contained exhibition and events spaces and a café. This particular palace was a subject for partial destruction during the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, and in 2013 it was restored and rehabilitated by "Iwan" Heritage Architecture Center, affiliated with the Islamic

University, and Riwaq Centre (Badi'a 2023). Subsequently, the El-Saqqa family bestowed it as a central location for fostering and safeguarding Palestinian history, by providing assistance to artists, organizations, and their artistic endeavors through many cultural initiatives and exhibitions. Consequently, it has emerged as a highly significant cultural establishment in Gaza City. On November 10, 2023, during an airstrike carried out by the Israeli Air Force on the Al-Shaja'iyah neighborhood in Gaza City, the Palace was completely destroyed (Fig. 4) (ICOMOS Palestine 2024).

In the address he gave on November 10, 2023, A. Al-Saqqa, a sociology professor and one of the proprietors of this palace, elucidated that the neglect of this palace persisted for several decades following the demise of its constructor. The heirs of the builder, upon recognizing the economic and social deterioration of the Shaja'iyah neighborhood, which had transformed into a bustling marketplace, allowed the palace to fall into disrepair. Over time, the successors of the individuals who received the inheritance gave it to the Iwan Center, which collaborated with the Riwaq Center to restore it. Over time, the center gained significance as a cultural hub, revitalizing the cultural



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 4 Al-Saqqa Palace: (a) Before the destruction. (b) After the destruction. (Photos by Hani Abu Riziq. These images have been

used with permission from the owner. <https://gate.ahram.org.eg/News/4621082.aspx>)



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 5 Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church: (a) Before the destruction. (b) After the destruction. (Photos by Ali Jadallah. These images have

been used with permission from the owner. <https://www.businessinsider.com/israel-gaza-war-church-airstrikes-damage-2023-10>)

landscape of the Shaja'iyah neighborhood. Therefore, "its destruction represents a significant loss to Gaza's architectural, cultural, social, economic, and civilizational history" (Badi'a 2023).

Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church

In the late fourth century AD, an armed conflict arose in the city between pagans and Christians, leading to periodic involvement of imperial forces and the demolition of the city's eight pagan temples in 401 AD (Diaconus 1913). On Easter Day of 407, Porphyry, the Bishop of Gaza, consecrated a large central church with the assistance of the Byzantine emperor Arcadius and his wife, Empress Eudoxia, and this church was named after Eudoxia (Sadeq 2015: 47). Subsequently, the church underwent a name change to the "Church of Saint Porphyrius," and the saint's tomb is still reportedly located in the nave of the church (Shehada 2020: 148). During the seventh century, the church was converted into a mosque, and then during the twelfth century, it was reconstructed as a church, dedicated to Porphyrius. Records from the fifteenth century show that a dedication of the church was also attested to the Virgin Mary (Morhange et al. 2005: 75–78). On October 19, 2023, four Israeli missiles struck a nearby compound where at least 400–500 Palestinians were taking shelter. The airstrike was confirmed by church officials to have struck two halls providing shelter to civilians, causing the collapse of at least one building (Fig. 5), and

16 Palestinians were killed (Al-Mughrabi October 20, 2023).

The Roman Cemetery

In fall 2023, an ancient Roman burial ground from the period spanning the first century BCE to the second century CE was discovered during an Egyptian construction project near the Jabaliya refugee camp. The site in question exhibits the first comprehensive Roman burial ground discovered in Gaza. Currently, 134 graves have been identified (Wafa September 23, 2023). The cemetery included tombs in the shape of pyramids. The discoveries included two lead sarcophagi, as well as a tomb containing the bones of a couple interred together. Additional discoveries encompass ceramics, coins, and metal artifacts employed in burial ceremonies (Adwan September 25, 2023). The site was impacted by Israel's extensive aerial bombardment and ground incursion into Gaza. Furthermore, aside from the close proximity airstrikes that inflicted significant damage on the Egyptian construction endeavor, Israeli tank and bulldozer operators proceeded to traverse the remains of the cemetery, resulting in the destruction of a portion of it. The Israeli Military Forces dismantled the temporary storehouse situated on the premises, which had been used to store a portion of the findings. The whereabouts of the artifacts that it contained are currently unknown (Everyday Orientalism 2024).

Balakhyyah/Anthedon Harbor

Anthedon, the historical port of Gaza, is situated on the northern edge of Al Shate' Refugee Camp, neighboring the Bader site. It flourished during the Greco-Roman period. Anthedon harbor served as a primary node on the maritime route between the Arabian Peninsula and several regions of the Ancient World, including Turkey, Greece, Italy, and the Carthaginian Empire. In the vicinity of Anthedon harbor, the city of Anthedon was established, complete with its own currency, religious structures, and military forces. The name "Anthedon" in Arabic translates literally to "City of Lillies," referring to the flowers that continue to thrive on the coastline of Gaza today (El-Khoudary 2014). An archaeological expedition, consisting of both Palestinian and French researchers, conducted excavations at the site for a period of 10 years, from 1995 to 2005 (Hawari 2024). This site is one of three locations in Gaza that have been included on UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List (UNESCO 2022). According to the Forensic Architecture Team (2023), recent Israeli airstrikes and military activity have caused significant damage to the site.

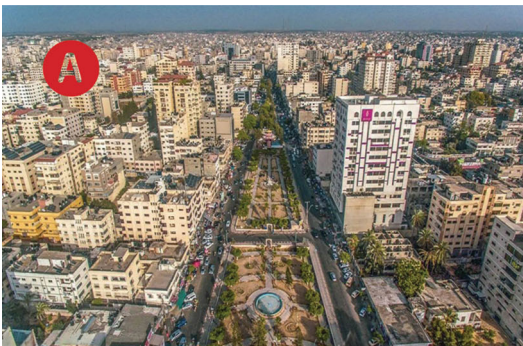
Al-Rimal Neighborhood

The Al-Rimal neighborhood is situated in the north-eastern region of Gaza City, centered along Omar Al-Mukhtar Street. This route functions as a conduit linking the eastern and western sectors of the city. This area was founded in 1920s, during the era of the British Mandate. The Al-Rimal neighborhood is

acknowledged as one of the oldest and most prosperous communities in Gaza City. The value of the place lies in the existence of educational and historical monuments such as the Square of the Unknown Soldier (1956 AD). Al-Rimal also accommodated the most distinguished universities, such as the Islamic University, founded in 1978 (the buildings of which experienced varying levels of damage), and Al-Azhar University (established in 1991), which was entirely destroyed (The Palestinian Ministry of Culture 2024) (Fig. 6). It has been argued that the repeated bombardment of educational institutions by the occupying military is a distinct manifestation of its objective to eliminate Palestinian culture and enforce a policy of de-development (Al-Haq 2023).

Destruction of Museum and Storehouses

Out of approximately 12 museums in Gaza that have experienced destruction in 2023–2024, the most remarkable one is the Qasr al-Basha museum, which is located in a building dating to the Mamluk-Ottoman era. In 1998, this museum was restored and renovated specifically for use as an archaeological museum. The exhibition showcased highly significant archeological artifacts that were discovered during scientific excavations conducted over the past 20 years. The Israeli bombardment resulted in the burial and permanent loss of tens of thousands of archaeological objects (Taha 2024: 17). The destruction also impacted the Dayr al-Balah Museum,



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 6 Al-Rimal neighborhood: (a) Before the destruction. (b) After the destruction. (These images have been used with permission from

the owner. <https://www.emaraty.com/politics/news/2023-10-20-1.1792791>)



Heritage and Conflict in Gaza, Fig. 7 Al-Qarrara museum: (a) Before the destruction. (b) After the destruction. (Photos by Muhammad Abu Lahiya. These images

have been used with permission from the owner. <http://www.dalia.ps/ar/news/>)

which included a vast assortment of archeological and heritage artifacts, as well as the al-Qarrara Museum (Fig. 7), which showcased a diverse collection of antiquities from different eras. Additionally, private collections, such as the Jawdat al-Khudary collection in Gaza and the al-A'qqad collection, were also destroyed (Taha 2024). The Israeli army unlawfully entered many storage facilities belonging to Gaza's Department of Antiquities, which are dispersed across various locations in the Gaza Strip. These storehouses contain a substantial number of archeological artifacts, totaling in the tens of thousands. These stores house a vast collection of ancient artifacts discovered during Palestinian and international excavations. The collection includes pottery ware, glass vessels, figurines, coins, and metal utensils (Taha 2024: 17–18). In addition, on January 18, 2024, the Israeli soldiers specifically attacked the museum of al-Israa University. They looted more than 3000 valuable ancient artifacts and then demolished the museum (Wafa, Palestine News & Info Agency 2024).

International Legal Framework

According to international law, the areas known as the occupied Palestinian territories, which include the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, are considered to be under occupation (United Nation General Assembly 2023). As the occupying power, the "State of Israel" is obligated

to follow the provisions of international law, which explicitly state that the occupying state must take all measures to safeguard and protect the cultural and natural heritage of the occupied territory. The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 and its protocols, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict of 1954, and the UNESCO recommendations on international principles applicable to archaeological excavations, New Delhi 1956, are regarded as crucial agreements for safeguarding tangible and natural cultural heritage during times of armed conflict, even if only in theory. According to Article 27, Paragraph 4, Annex 4 of the 1907 Hague Convention, during armed conflict, the occupying forces are required to make every effort to avoid causing damage to buildings that are used for worship, arts, sciences, charitable works, and historical monuments. Additionally, Article 27 of the 1954 Hague Convention prohibits the seizure or vandalism of religious facilities and other historic buildings. Furthermore, Article Five of the Hague Convention imposes an obligation on any party that occupies a territory or part of it to assist the government of the occupied party in taking necessary measures to protect cultural property. Actually, Article No. 53 of the first additional Protocol and Article No. 16 of the second additional Protocol to the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1977 introduced a ban on engaging in any aggressive

actions toward historical monuments, works of art, and places of worship that hold significant cultural and religious value to a particular group of people. There are multiple supplementary international agreements that pertain to occupied territories. These include the 1970 International Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, the 2001 International Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Heritage, and the 2003 UNESCO Declaration Concerning Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage (Al-Houdalieh 2024; Taha 2024: 5).

The military offensive against the Gaza Strip constitutes a blatant breach of international humanitarian law, particularly the 1948 International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The international community's efforts to address the conflict in the Gaza Strip have been unsuccessful, and there has been a lack of international response to the destruction of cultural heritage in the region. UNESCO's role in addressing these crimes and preserving the diverse cultural heritage in the Gaza Strip has been notably ineffective. Furthermore, the majority of European heritage institutions have remained passive observers, including the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), who even went as far as expressing solidarity with Israel (see Taha 2024: 6). This also applies to a widespread statement made by numerous German academics and intellectuals on the Academia platform, which failed to acknowledge the historical context and ongoing acts of cultural genocide in the Gaza Strip (see Taha 2024: 6). A number of Palestinian institutions and organizations, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, ICOMOS Palestine, and the Society for Palestinian Archaeological, have released multiple statements attributing the destruction of cultural heritage in the Gaza Strip to the "State of Israel." They have reached out to various official bodies and foreign institutions involved in heritage preservation, but unfortunately, the destruction of Palestinian heritage in Gaza has not been halted.

Summary

Although the current ongoing destruction of cultural heritage in Gaza is extraordinary, the deliberate targeting of Palestinian heritage sites and monuments is not recent in nature. Successive Israeli governments have consistently implemented strategies aimed at eradicating Palestinian cultural heritage and identity. Undoubtedly, like every other settler colonial endeavor, the objective is to eradicate the Palestinian population from Gaza, which requires the obliteration of their cultural heritage, identity, and history. Over the past 16 years, the Israeli military has launched five attacks on the Gaza Strip in the years 2008–2009, 2012, 2014, 2021, and 2023–2024. However, the current episode has been the longest and most devastating compared to any other war since the establishment of the "State of Israel" in 1948. The recent conflict has resulted in extensive damage to numerous cultural heritage sites and monuments within the Gaza Strip. In fact, no other military confrontation in the twenty-first century has caused such severe harm to a community and its cultural assets within such a brief period (ESCWA 2024). The war to date has resulted in a substantial loss of human life and caused tremendous misery, impacting both the individuals and the cultural heritage and identity of the people in Gaza. Approximately 60% of the archaeological sites and historical monuments in the Gaza Strip, which have been officially documented, have been deliberately damaged or destroyed. These sites span from prehistoric times to the Late Ottoman-Turkish Empire. The Israeli army significantly altered the cultural landscape of Gaza by demolishing key elements and appropriating its distinct features. This has resulted in the prevention of Palestinian people from engaging with and preserving their cultural heritage, thereby violating international conventions and treaties regarding cultural property during times of conflict and occupation. Those who have been observing the ongoing assault on Palestinian cultural heritage since the start of the current Israeli war on the Gaza Strip are well aware of the current state of turmoil. Without intervention from the local, regional, and global community, this

heritage is at risk of being destroyed. It is imperative that the international community fulfills its duty and takes responsibility for this humanitarian sector.

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