

Looting and 'Salvaging' the Heritage of Palestine

سلب ونهب و "انقاذ" تراث فلسطين.

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This paper describes the how illegal digging and the antiquities trade are ravaging Palestinian cultural heritage.

تصف هذه المقالة كيفية تساهم الحفريات غير القانونية وتجارة الآثار في تخريب التراث الفلسطيني.

Palestine's archaeological heritage is, as elsewhere, a non-renewable cultural resource. Although the land is probably the most intensively excavated in the world, much remains to be done in the protection and management of its heritage, which has been harmed by decades of political instability and conflict. Since 1967, the occupied Palestinian territories have remained comparatively ignored by archaeologists, while neighbouring countries like Jordan, Egypt, and Israel have continued to be extensively excavated. Threats and challenges to Palestinian cultural heritage are diverse, serious and hard to solve. Some of them, such as illegal digging, inefficient Palestinian antiquity laws and law enforcement, and the lack of sustained national interest in this issue are internal. Others, including the antiquities trade, Israeli antiquity laws, and the series of walls, fences and guard towers that Israel is constructing throughout the West Bank, are external threats. These threats combined have devastated the country's heritage, with nothing yet done to confront them. A pre-requisite to confronting these challenges, and thereby devising a comprehensive plan to protect Palestine's cultural heritage, lies in a detailed analysis of the situation. This paper focuses on one of the main threats to the cultural heritage of Palestine, that of illegal digging and trading in antiquities.

Background

Illicit digging and the trading of antiquities is probably as old as history itself, especially in countries where human habitation stretches back into the Stone Age, as it does in Palestine. This problem has been intensified in Palestine by decades of political instability and foreign rule. According to a 1930s British Mandate survey, historic Palestine (Israel, the West Bank & Gaza Strip) has a total of more than 35,000 large and small archaeological sites and features (caves, ruins, tells, sanctuaries, quarries, towers, churches, mosques, etc.) from all historic and prehistoric periods. The West Bank alone contains about a third of these sites and features (12,217) (see table 1). Many of these sites have been destroyed, particularly since the occupation of the West Bank by Israel in 1967. The exact number of sites robbed in the occupied territories since then is unknown, but it is estimated to be in the thousands (Ilan *et al.*,

1989). Grave robbers have not even refrained from vandalizing Moslem tombs like Maqam Hasan al-Rai' near Nabi Musa, although such tombs are known not to include burial goods of any kind.

No. of District	Name of District	Size of District in (km2)	No. of villages	No. of main sites	No. of features	Total No.
1	Bethlehem	581	71	136	1228	1364
2	Gaza	371	42	44	140	184
3	Hebron	1068	156	357	1859	2216
4	Jenin	586	96	212	537	749
5	Jericho	649	16	76	451	527
6	Jerusalem	332	51	181	1386	1567
7	Nablus	569	73	266	1015	1281
8	Qalqilya	151	35	53	418	471
9	Ramallah	782	80	347	1788	2135
10	Salfit	201	23	86	662	748
11	Tubas	415	23	130	359	489
12	Tulkarm	263	42	100	385	485
Total	12	5968	708	1988	10228	12216

Table 1: West Bank archaeological sites and features identified as of the 1930s.

How illegal diggers work

Illegal Palestinian diggers usually work in crews of four to ten people. They excavate at night in order to evade land owners and the police. They dress in dark clothes and are usually armed with sophisticated equipment such as metal detectors and tractors to dig deep into the ground, but also use shovels, picks, axes, knives and sifters. One or more members of the group act as observers to keep an eye out for any intruders, while the rest dig. They usually do not search randomly, but take their time looking for suspected antiquities sites, searching for clues such as fig trees that flourish near underground caves, broken ceramics on the surface and signs of hewn stones. They are in many cases more efficient than archaeologists in terms of reading the terrain and knowing where to look and what to look for. They have some idea of stratigraphical digging and often use archaeological terms to describe their finds, identifying them, for example, according to the Bronze Age, Early Iron Age, Israelite and Roman periods. Some of them can actually date finds with a certain degree of certainty. Most of them can distinguish between Bronze Age, Byzantine and Islamic period materials and their dating is usually accepted by antiquities dealers and buyers.

Why do they loot?

Palestinian illegal excavators are mostly 'subsistence looters' who dig as a way of surviving poverty. They sell finds to middlemen, who resell the goods to licensed dealers in major

cities like Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa at a healthy mark-up. It is usually the middlemen and dealers who retain the lion's share of the profits (Kersel, 2005). Grave robbers do not receive more than one percent of the retail value of their finds, according to most estimates (Borodkin, 1995). This is further illustrated by the fact that looting grows at the same rate as unemployment. The phenomenon surged dramatically after the outbreak of the al-Aqsa Intifada in October 2000 as a consequence of the closure of the Palestinian areas by Israel, which prevented Palestinians from travelling to jobs in Israel. The World Bank's 2005 economic monitoring report showed unemployment in the Palestinian Areas at 23 percent, with 43 percent of Palestinians living under the poverty line. Some of those unemployed have turned to pillaging in their own backyards, especially in areas rich with material culture, such as Sebastia near Nablus, Gibeon (al-Jib) near Jerusalem, and the Hebron area. In 2001, Palestinian and Israeli antiquities authorities reported a 300 percent rise in incidents of grave robbing (Ephron, 2001).

Most Palestinian illegal diggers seem to have learned the skills of excavating and tomb robbing from foreign archaeologists working in the country, passing this knowledge to their children and friends later on. A well-known gravedigger from the village of al-Jib (ancient Gibeon) named Muhamad told the author that "The people of the village learned the nature of digging, and learned stratigraphy and layers from Pritchard who excavated the village in the 1950s." This does not mean, however, that looting is a profitable business, or that local looters are getting huge financial pay-offs from their work. On the contrary, it is a tedious job that doesn't compensate the accompanying effort and risks. Besides the danger of being caught by police, gravediggers face poisonous snakes and scorpions, as well as deadly insects. A digger from the Hebron area in the southern West Bank named Munther told Reuters:

The most frightening of all are the Jin [the ghosts]. I am not afraid of the soldiers or the snakes. I am only afraid of the Jin. Sometimes people become sick or go mad from the ghosts... We sometimes bring Muslim sheikhs – holy men – to recite incantations to drive away the evil spirits from the tombs. (Goldin, 2005)

Who are the customers?

Besides the suppliers, consumers are the main contributors to this destructive phenomenon. They encourage looting by creating a market demand for antiquities, and are therefore as guilty, if not more so, as the looters themselves. The main consumers of Holy Land antiquities are usually foreign collectors who come to the country as pilgrims and tourists. They make up more than 90 percent of the market share, while Israeli and international museums that lack specific policies prohibiting the purchase of unprovenanced artefacts consume the rest. Antiquities thieves are looking mostly for gold, coins, glassware and ceramic pieces like oil lamps, clay stamps and items bearing written inscriptions. These objects can sell for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of dollars if they are found intact (Schulman, 2001). As a result for example, if they come across a skeleton wearing gold or silver jewellery, they will break the skeleton to get the bracelets or necklaces, and in the process destroy significant historical data.

Clearly, if there is going to be a solution or even an easing of the problem of looting, changing the public's attitude towards cultural heritage must come first. This means changing the attitude of illegal excavators and collectors themselves, but more importantly changing the

general public's tolerance towards those people and their activities. We should stand firm against activities such as illicit digging, grave robbing and above all trading in antiquities, and reject any excuses presented by the diggers and dealers to justify their actions. Such justifications usually vary from the need and lack of job opportunities, to reaching treasures before foreigners reach them. In fact this later excuse is often cited by diggers to justify their illegal actions, and it is sometimes accepted by the general public in the local communities. An excavator from al-Jib accused the famous American archaeologist James Pritchard, the excavator of Gibeon in the 1950s, of encouraging illegal digging:

This man excavated the village at the end of the 50s, he came three or five years, not the whole year, he would come in June or July and stay until October, and then he would disappear together with his group. In the winter, when the weather gets cold, the local people who worked with him would start digging, but not in daylight, just at night. The people of the village would object to that because diggers were destroying the land. But Pritchard would encourage those people and give them money for their finds. Later on those people started working for themselves. Pritchard was buying their finds through a middleman from the area of southern Hebron. This man would store all the finds in his home until Pritchard came back, and Pritchard would take all the objects and pay him any money he asked for, no questions asked. Other people were also selling him objects, and when he was not around they were selling them to souvenir shops in Jerusalem. (pers. comm.)

Today's archaeology is not about collecting objects but rather about collecting contextual data, which these practices are destroying at an alarming rate. The problem is not confined to the West Bank, but in fact spills over into Israel proper. As sites in the West Bank are being emptied, some Palestinian diggers are crossing the Green Line that separates Israel from the West Bank in search of more promising places to dig. In 2001, the IAA's anti-theft unit even caught a Palestinian Authority policeman digging within Israel (Schulman, 2001).

Conclusion

Clearly measures must immediately be taken by the Palestinian authority and concerned Palestinian institutions to prevent looting and the loss of irreplaceable and valuable cultural heritage. But this cannot be done effectively with the policy of isolating sites from their natural surroundings for political and security reasons. The Israeli engagement in the management of Palestinian heritage is not helping protect this heritage. It is in fact harming it by creating enmity between the people and the country's heritage. Excavating endangered sites for what ever reason in a hasty manner does not follow acceptable archaeological preservation and protection methods. The Israeli Separation Wall and settlements in the West Bank are damaging archaeological sites and at the same time alienating Palestinians from their cultural heritage. This has got to stop in order to bring peace between the people of the country and their cultural heritage, the relevance of which extends far beyond political borders.

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