


PROVOCATION

# The Baptist Hospital in Gaza. Current ruins for future archaeologists?

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## Abstract

As a Palestinian archaeologist whose work is focused on the geopolitics of Palestinian archaeology practice and theory, I reflect in this provocation article on the current devastation of the Gaza Strip by Israel and how archaeology can be incorporated into Gaza's current situation. Pertinent questions include the following: How should archaeologists treat the ruins of the Baptist Hospital or any ruins in Gaza? What should be done with all these ruins? When does democide become genocide? Is an ex situ analysis possible? Is there such a thing as archaeology without a place? What kind of 'regime of truth' does it establish? What ethical implications does this form of analysis have? What kind of accountability does it possess? In what ways does it shape our memories of events?

**Keywords:** Baptist Hospital; ruins; future archaeology; Gaza; archaeo-politics; 3D visualization

## Introduction

In a desperate X (formerly Twitter) post (14 October 2023), my friend and colleague, the UK-based Palestinian academic Malaka Shwaikh, shared the tragic news of the killing of her cousin; her cousin's husband; their three children Ahmed, Yamin and Maryam; and her cousin's in-laws. In Malaka's words, 'the whole family was wiped out' (Shwaikh 2023). While I write these words, I cannot fathom the extent of the devastation, displacement and loss that the people of Gaza are enduring, even though I am a Palestinian myself (although not from Gaza). There is no doubt that humanitarian needs are the top priority, as hospitals and international organizations in Gaza need to provide their patients with basic necessities. To accomplish this, a permanent ceasefire or humanitarian truce with regional and international players is urgently needed. The Gaza Strip's problem, however, is not solely humanitarian; it is a political issue which must be resolved in accordance with UN charters related to the Palestine question.

In this article, I follow Slavoj Žižek (2008), debating the hypocrisy of the Israeli Army and its self-proclaimed status as the most ethical, pragmatic and moral force, despite the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies. However, I neither intend to discuss the double standards that Western politics applies to Palestine, nor do I question the complicit bias of the Western mainstream media and the ensuing irreparable damage. As a Palestinian scholar, I am not yet convinced that scholarship alone is enough, not just now but also for the future.

At the time of writing the article, we woke up to the news of the Israeli attack on the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, known as the Baptist Hospital, and Al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza. There have been differing accounts of what happened. Israel claimed that the Baptist Hospital was being used as a Hamas command centre, with underground tunnels beneath it being used to launch missiles, which Israel used to justify the attack. However, their evidence, consisting of a 7-minute video

showing only a few rifles in the magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) unit, appeared illogical and inconsistent. The video raises questions about using three-dimensional (3D) visualization to create evidence – and not just to reconstruct the past but also to hegemonize the narrative in the present and the future. Section 1 asks primarily how many ruins should be preserved and how long we should remember them. In section 2, I argue that, to gain a better understanding of the current ruins in Gaza, one must examine how the use of archaeo-political violence is a fundamental part of Israeli archaeological practice in the West Bank.

### **Ruins, memory and 3D modelling. How much should be preserved?**

Who would be concerned about a well-preserved cemetery and four preserved ancient skeletons from the Roman period (Al-Jazeera Network 2023) that were excavated in Gaza and belong to people who died naturally, as we know from burial rituals and forensic investigations, when Israel kills hundreds of Palestinians every day? Moreover, who would be concerned about a magnificent mosaic floor dating back to Byzantine times (Al-Jazeera Network 2022)? How should we react to the Israeli airstrike on the oldest church in Gaza, Saint Porphyrius (Almbaid 2015, 143), which dates back to the fourth century A.D.? Should archaeologists strictly adhere to the call for condemning attacks on civilians and map and carry out *ex situ* inventories of erased and damaged cultural heritage and archaeological sites in Gaza to replicate the efforts of archaeologists in addressing ISIS's deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq (Turku 2018; Harmanşah 2015; Cunliffe and Curini 2018)?

As for the current situation in Gaza, history and archaeology are being made, but archaeology is being produced under conditions utterly different from what prevails in terms of land/sediment removal from buried ruins and artefacts. Maybe, to worry about the state of archaeology in Gaza now is not exactly a priority until one realizes that what is being produced under Western eyes is the acceleration of chronicle into history and the latter's 'degradation' into archaeology.

The task of addressing the ruins of the Baptist Hospital, as well as other ruins in Gaza, is a complex matter that cannot be tackled by a single discipline. It spans across multiple fields, including urban archaeology (Matsuda 2016; Bohn 2022), the places of memory conceptualized by Pierre Nora (1989) and Maurice Halbwachs (2008), public discourse (Bonder 2009), ruins and urban planning (Loukaki 2008; López Galviz et al. 2017) among others. These concepts can converge on the following questions: What should we do with so many ruins? Where should the 'waste' materials be deposited? Moreover, how much should be preserved? Is there any such a thing as archaeology without a place? How much and how long should we remember?

Monuments and memory have the same root in Latin. A monument is a caution, and a warning of memory does not answer any of these questions yet. Is ruin a warning from the past? Is memory already consigned to the past? Can we do whatever we want with it? Or is it a work in progress, as we know it is, in electro-chemical terms – not a store but a therapy session? Moreover, what should public authorities do with them? Who will these authorities be in what will be left in and of Gaza – as anywhere else?

The scholarship related to the educational 'value' of monuments is broad and contested across disciplines and is fundamentally epistemological. Do people keep noticing monuments after, say, one generation? Do they become part of the landscape? Does this mean monuments are noticed more when they are removed? That is, the shock shapes the perception of the amputation, and the trauma, if it is felt, first is the absence of what was there and only subsequently is about meaning. Think about the violent and unauthorized removal of statues of imperialists and slave traders that occurred in the United Kingdom during the summer of 2020 or, in the United States, the Confederate monuments debate from 2015 to 2017 and onwards and elsewhere. How many truly cared about the statue of Cecil Rhodes? Is there any real difference between the educational and the ideological value of ruins? One may argue that the latter asserts the same vision of the world,

falsified, to an extent, to serve the powers that be again and again, while the other, being educational, is a tool designed to purposely ask certain questions and not others. At best, or at worst, this shows off how conversant with the recent theorization whatever department in charge of erecting statues is.

The dubious video footage that Isreal used to justify their attack on the hospitals raises inquiries about the utilization of 3D visualization to generate evidence and reconstruct the past, present and future. To gain a better comprehension of the situation, it is critical to scrutinize the application of 3D visualization in archaeology.

Before I reflect on the above questions, let us first examine how 3D visualization in Biblical archaeology serves Israeli settler colonialism. I recall briefly in this section, before I comprehensively return to it in the following section, how the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR) deployed a similar visualization and 3D reconstruction technique to reimagine the fortification of the proclaimed Canaanite city of Ai, which was destroyed and invaded by Joshua, to legitimize the Old Testament divine violence that the Canaanites had to suffer (Porteous and Smith 2001: 1). To connect the past with the present, a visual representation of the biblical city of Ai during the Second Temple era was created through a 3D model. It was necessary to reconstruct the fortification system that had been destroyed by Joshua (biblical archaeology 2018, npn). Dr Scott Stripling, currently the director of excavations in the Israeli settlement of Shiloh in the West Bank, mentioned that a significant portion of the tower had already been excavated, and the remainder had been traced. The tower's massive size of  $30 \times 16$  meters was twice as large as the one at Caesarea and other sites in Israel, allowing for a more vivid imagining of what it may have looked like during that era (biblical archaeology 2018, npn). The immediate question to be raised is what goes wrong in 3D modelling in archaeological visualization. What should be questioned here: the technique, the context or both? In a more specific archaeological tone, how do we 'evaluate the accuracy of a volumetric modelling strategy when contexts are destroyed in the process of excavation' (Gavryushkina 2021, 2)? What regimes of truth does 3D visualization produce in archaeological scholarship?

I am preparing a separate article to address these questions. In the meantime, should we follow the steps of Channel 4 News's audio, photographic and locational (GIS) cyber-analysis? Is such an *ex situ* analysis even possible? Is there such a thing as archaeology without a place? What kind of 'regime of truth' does it establish? What ethical implications does this form of analysis have? What kind of accountability does it possess? In what ways does it shape our memories of the events? How are we expected to treat the ruins of the Baptist Hospital? When does democide become genocide?

Should we treat the ruins of the Baptist Hospital as we would any other ancient ruins? If so, should they become *monuments* – warnings and mementos – of the mass killing of children and women? How long should we wait until the ruins are determined, paradoxically and academically, to be archaeological ruins (past) to be uncovered or studied? Should an archaeologist – any archaeologist – refrain from their humanity and adhere to forensic objectivity when it comes to human remains? Should the rubble be removed as soon as possible to maintain the Baptist Hospital's capacity, or that of any hospital, to treat those continuously affected by Israeli aggression? What are the ethical considerations that we must take into account when addressing this issue?

However, neither theoretically nor ideologically is the intention a call for the ruination of Baptist Hospital. In such a place as a hospital, in response to an emergency call, functionality to serve people will always be prioritized over museumization and/or ruination. Yet, we do not know how this attack on Gaza will end, how many ruins will be produced and how many ruins, in the aftermath of the attack, will be removed/preserved. Argyro Loukaki (2016, 1) reminds us that, 'as bearers of memory, ruins represent certain "truth regimes" constituted out of a combination of communal memories and spatiotemporal representations'. These truth regimes are often created through cultural, political and violent means and are used to support certain narratives and power

structures. Ruins can also serve as places of defiance, challenging traditional orders and oppressive systems while providing alternative spaces for knowledge creation and expression. However, it remains unclear whether the facts surrounding past events will ever be fully exposed or whether victims and their families will ever receive justice, in whatever form it may come.

The ruins of the Baptist Hospital either are in oblivion or are a plea to what – to remain ruins? To go back to a past inevitably falling into becoming ruins? To the normalcy of living under siege? How much and how long should we remember? Furthermore, how much pain must simply be forgotten? Or how much pain must be suspended? How much memory are we expected to live with? How many ruins should we leave untouched? If we wish to treat the ruins as archaeologically significant, how long do we have to wait? How should we deal with the binary of the aesthetics of ruins versus the ongoing and active value of destruction, victims and trauma experienced by survivors of these ruins?

All of these questions are relevant to both ancient and modern ruins. However, my question specifically pertains to the ruins of the Baptist Hospital and whether they should serve as a reminder of Israel's attack on the hospital. The past is not something that is gone and forgotten; it is still a part of us and will continue to shape our future.

There might be some questions here about the opportunity of considering ruins to be a tool, having a purpose, but we cannot hide the passing of time. I am trying to be dispassionate here – to reason as though I were writing some preliminary remarks for a white paper in the year 2074, the fiftieth anniversary of the Third Gaza War – and not counting. Is the difference between the educational and ideological value of ruins as 'monumenta' the distinction between an open society, which allows and even encourages doubts, questions and scepticism, and a dictatorship of pathology, trauma and memories too harsh for the population to move on, and thus they become a part of their psyche?

Urban ruins, then, however much they are treated and reduced to a 'manageable quantity', are the mirror of this cognitive behavioural public ethics. Here, the commendable *dictum* 'never forget' has become hostile to what the ruins should give: light to a new life – not necessarily a better but a new one, a different one – not the warped junction of Nietzsche's eternal return, and Freud's re-emergence of the repressed memories.

Along with so many others that cannot be introduced here, these questions challenge the core definition of archaeological ruins and the 'value' they produce. The spatio-temporality of the ruins of the Baptist Hospital is obviously urban and under ongoing military attack by Israel. This raises the question of whether these ruins are artefacts and under what conditions such a designation qualifies, as they are actively being created in the present. Thus, ruins are more of a process than an end. As a result, it challenges the idea that archaeological ruins remain static and unchanged forever. It also throws into question the notion that ruins have an inherent value or purpose since the Baptist Hospital's ruins result from an ongoing destruction process. The question concerns how archaeologists should recognize the ever-changing nature of ruins and realize that they are not only products of the past but also products of active and ongoing processes.

### **Archaeo-politics. How to make the dead speak**

Wars and conflicts produce dichotomies, fractions, polarizations and irrationalities among ordinary citizens and their highly distinguished academics. However, when is that moment in conflict when the calming of the nerves occurs, positions shift and dichotomies fade away?

A scholar's task is to engage with these or other provocative questions, neither striving for polarization nor debating the notion of academic freedom. The intention, however, is to provoke an inconclusive debate to move away from the dichotomy of conflict and war. Archaeology should neither remain neutral, thereby shielding itself from politicization, nor question 'the tactics of fieldwork, its interventions and ramifications' (Meskell 2003, 280) as a politicized process.

One should resonate with Yannis Hamilakis (2016, 228) in conceptualizing archaeo-politics. A great example of such conceptualization is Hamilakis's discussion of the annual festival organized by the Municipality of Salamis (Greece) to commemorate the ancient battle of Salamina in 480 B.C. with the presence of delegations from friendly and allied countries (Hamilakis 2016, 228).

I argue that archaeo-politics is circular, never ceases to exist, and occurs repeatedly. In Israel, archaeo-politics is not a mere ceremony or an ongoing set of archaeological excavations in the heart of the occupied West Bank. It is a ritualization to make the dead speak. The following example is, in my opinion, quite evident in this ritualization of archaeo-political violence. In 2017, *The Times of Israel* published an online article titled 'A 2,000-year-old murder leads to an illicit burial in the heart of the West Bank'. The newspaper reported how the settlers from the Israeli Ofra settlement secretly stepped in illegally to pay their final respect. According to the newspaper, a Jewish Temple Mount activist group, which decades ago sat in jail for planning to blow up the Dome of the Rock, planned and carried out the secret reburial of eight bodies discovered in Khirbet el-Maqatir near Ramallah by the ABR in the settlement of Ofra on 6 February 2017. The newspaper added that Dr Scott Stripling, the excavation director at the time, intended to rebury the bones at the site. Then, some 'old friends' from the nearby settlement of Ofra stepped in with a 'proposal' to give them a proper burial. Stripling added, 'These people were eyewitnesses of the Second Temple, and it gives me great joy to know how they have finally been properly laid to rest' (Borschel-Dan 2017). "Proper", however, it may not be exactly the word used to describe their illegal burial at Ofra' (Borschel-Dan 2017).

In my interpretation, the stealing of these bodies and the ceremonial reburial, which concluded under a layer of concrete, was just that: an act of stealing – thievery. Although correct, this interpretation did not satisfy me: it was a stealing, a ceremony and also a desecration of those bodies.

We might never know where they would have liked to be buried, and yet, the act of pouring cement on their graves was certainly, for what is recognizably human and common between us, not what *they* would wished, only the deeper and troubled intentions of their diggers.

In Freudian terms, the return, the re-emergence of the repressed, was aimed at burying what otherwise would have been an open and empty grave, as the mourning had not been elaborated. Again, in psychological terms, this is the very description of depression: the wound that remains meaningful and hurting as long as it remains bleeding and unhealed. Julia Kristeva's (1989) work on depression suggests that depression is caused by repressed emotions that have not been dealt with and have not been mourned. Nevertheless, what was there to heal? Why do eight bodies from 2,000 years ago matter so much?

Then, it dawned on me that they were what matters, the elaboration of the cycle of violence needs healing, the thaumaturgy of the State for the State and keeping it sacred and not a secular object of study. A contemporary reburial would reinitiate a past that should have been untroubled – the past that needed to have been – and by enacting the healing that way, it happened: with performativity, reburying the body and not putting it into a showcase for a museum. The goal was to retro-ject, if I may say so, the foundation of the Israelite Kingdom in an uncontested past, that is, a past *made* uncontested by those bodies being reburied, one where acts of violence did not raise any eyebrow, or any predictable, contemporary, Western-based guilt.

Such a retrojection would once *and for all* find and link that State to the present one, breaking the cycle of violence and, *eo, ipso*, secure the settlement, and so everyone would just move on. History could eventually progress. Instead of the compulsive and permanent non-evolutionary temporality of foundation–resistance–foundation–resistance, that reburial should be interpreted as a paradoxical older stratum of the foundation of the State of Israel, a sort of alternative line of history, correcting the present and its cycle of violence – a linear, progressive temporality that only needs to be re-discovered. The paradox, of course, lies in how this rediscovery and shortcut from the cycle of violence is, in itself, a backward movement to liberate oneself from a traumatic present, with healing enacted not by confronting pain but by replacing it with *ad hoc* memories. In blunt terms, whose history is progressing here?

What we witness is how structural violence is embedded within the various bodies of the Israeli colonial regime in the West Bank and how archaeology is at the heart of it. Such an act of violence, even though it was recognized as counterproductive in the greater scheme of things by an official at an Israeli museum, would still need to be enacted because the narrative, the mechanism and the script of violence require everyone to play their part.

## Conclusion?

The narrative of the Israeli bombing of Gaza started to shift in the media as we started to observe an international recognition that the horrific number of civilians being killed by Israelis is on the rise, and the numbers might continue going up if the international community does not push for a ceasefire. Yet, politicians such as US President Biden do not just give Israel *carte blanche* but also question the Palestinian civilian death toll, claiming Hamas controls even the official toll. International human rights organizations, in contrast, acknowledge that civilian deaths are high; however, the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, for example, established a threshold for recognizing the genocide. According to the organization, the Srebrenica genocide of 1995 resulted in 8,372 Muslim victims. Based on the organization's parameters, what is happening in Gaza so far serves as a reminder of the genocide in Srebrenica. This raises serious questions about the impartiality of international organizations in classifying genocide. It also highlights the need for stricter criteria to determine when an act of violence constitutes genocide. In other words, how many must die for a genocide to qualify? Borrowing Slavoj Žižek (2008), we are doomed if we quantify violence.

As Freud defined the pathological state of memories and the repressed emotions that accompany them, the tomb that is not filled, and that remains open, is an untreated wound, a jail with the door open, a series of metaphors for depression and, literally, a subsidence of the soil. As for my second question, how many of those ruins should be treated as monumenta, and without the risk of engendering such depression, or such pathology of memory, and without the risk of building a bridge between never again and always the same way? The answer can be proposed by experts, not just archaeologists, urban planners or Western or Arabic funders, in an entirely predictable repetition of Saudi money for Beirut and Euro-American money for Iraq, but the population at large will have to agree because, as we know, official places of memory become a part of the landscape which is noticed as a shock only in their absence.

This is, of course, if the whole place – Gaza or Ukraine or Yemen or Syria or the next one – does not become a huge absence – a depression, or a crater of what used to be the future: the graveyard of the future.

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