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Archaeology, Heritage and the Limits of Discourse on Gaza

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Abstract

This brief paper offers a summary of a discussion held in Berlin in the fall of 2025 on archaeology, cultural heritage and international law in the Israel-Palestine context. We present three primary issues that were debated. The first involved the impact of adopting a specific definition of antisemitism and its role in fostering or restricting debate in archaeology and beyond. Second, the discussion revolved around archaeologists' responsibilities in the context of the ongoing conflict in the region and the place of international law in guiding archaeological and cultural heritage work. Finally, the politicized role of heritage in identity building, especially in a situation of stark power imbalance, was debated.

Keywords:
archaeology in wartime, Palestine, Israel, archaeology and international law

Archaeology and cultural heritage are frequently among the victims of war, and increasingly, it seems, they are also weaponized as part of war and other violent conflicts. Reports and debates on the misuse of archaeology and heritage in wartime have proliferated in the last decades (e.g., Pollock/Lutz 1994; Greenberg 2021). It is all the more striking that the discourse on this subject with reference to Israel and Palestine has been repressed in many contexts, most notably in Germany. It was a rare opportunity, thanks to a visit to Berlin by the first author of this piece, Raphael Greenberg, that enabled us to engage in an extended discussion about archaeology, cultural heritage and international law in the Israeli-Palestine context, together with a group of interested students and colleagues. The event consisted of a presentation by Greenberg followed by a discussion with the audience. Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck organized the event and took an active part in the discussion.

The presentation focused on archaeologists' responsibilities in the context of the violent conflict that has raged in the region since the Hamas-led massacre of 7 October 2023 and the violent reprisals by Israel beginning on 8 October 2023. We note at the outset that at the time when the event was planned, the Israeli assault on Gaza had been going on for nearly two years, with major losses of life as well as documented damage and destruction of archaeological and heritage sites. The contested 'ceasefire' that went into effect on 10 October 2025 was not yet in force, although it was by the time the discussion in Berlin took place.

Germany

Germany has become infamous in the last two and a half years for its increasingly intransigent attitude toward public discourse that is critical of the policies of the current Israeli government with respect to Gaza and the West Bank.

For those who wish to engage in meaningful dialogue on this subject, the possibilities have become ever more restricted, not only in public contexts but often in private communication as well.

We initially hoped to publish this piece as a brief report elsewhere, albeit also in a German forum. To our collective disappointment, our text was refused due to many of the same problems we were – and are – hoping to combat: an unwillingness to engage in a potentially controversial discussion of the role of archaeology and archaeologists in the ongoing violence in Gaza and the West Bank. Underpinning this is a widely shared stance in Germany that includes unquestioning adherence to the notion that Germans may not criticize Israel or the Israeli government, due to the crimes committed in Nazi Germany against European Jews. The suppression of open debate goes well beyond archaeology and cultural heritage matters. The silencing has been widely criticized (e.g., Association of Palestinian and Jewish Academics n.d.), but it continues to sharply restrict critical discourse in Germany on this issue.

Antisemitism and heritage in laws of war

The presentation on 31 October began with a short account of a dispute that occurred in the run-up to the 2025 annual meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA). The conference leadership had requested that Israeli participants appear on the programme as individuals, without listing their institutional affiliations, similar to the regulation applied to scholars from Russia and Belarus since 2022. This led to a backlash in which some members of the organization argued that targeting Israeli archaeologists and institutions in this way was antisemitic – and thus, in a strange hyperbole – supportive of Hamas. The pressure, accompanied by legal threats, led to the eventual reversal of the decision.

The charge of antisemitism that looms so large in this and similar disputes emerges from the widespread adoption – across a broad spectrum of political, governmental and educational institutions in Western Europe and North America – of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) 'working definition of antisemitism,' composed of a brief definition of the term and a number of examples. Despite its quasi-legal status in Germany (and elsewhere), the working definition was labelled by IHRA itself as 'non-binding.' The examples presented in the working definition have come under considerable criticism for their broad scope, particularly the one stating that 'applying double standards by requiring of [Israel] a behavio[u]r not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation [is antisemitic]' (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance n.d.). Greenberg suggested that this wording has allowed Israel and other international actors to weaponize the IHRA definition so as to stifle criticism of Israel, especially in the context of the destruction of Gaza – a weaponization not envisaged by many of the original framers of the definition itself (e.g., the lead drafter of the text, Kenneth Stern (2020)). The political instrumentalization of the IHRA definition was amplified by a special addition approved by the German parliament: 'Furthermore, the state of Israel, being perceived as a Jewish collective, may be the target of such attacks' (Federal Ministry of the Interior n.d.). A prominent alternative to the IHRA, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, was framed and signed by hundreds of prominent Holocaust historians, Jewish studies and Middle East scholars (Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism n.d.; see also Zechlin 2020). It clearly sets out the boundaries between antisemitism and various forms of political criticism, e.g., of the Israeli government, that, the drafters and signatories argue, should not be considered racist or antisemitic.

International law plays a significant role in discussions of archaeology and heritage in wartime. Its relevance extends from human rights to the actions of archaeologists – and of militaries – in situations of war and occupation. In the early years after the Second World War and informed by their experiences as minorities in unstable nation-states in Europe, Jewish legal scholars played a decisive role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the laws of war. These documents were designed to prevent a repetition of the atrocities perpetrated by Nazi Germany as well as other international actors in the first half of the 20th century. It is ironic that Israel itself has sought to avoid compliance with international humanitarian law since 1967.[1] The principal international legal instrument concerning archaeology and cultural heritage is the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (UNESCO 1954), which, for example, places severe limits on excavations in occupied territories and bars removal of antiquities from them. Israeli institutions have systematically avoided compliance with the convention, through collaboration with the archaeological unit in the Israeli

1 The fundamental facts of the broad range of violations have been set out in the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion of July, 2024 (International Court of Justice 2024).

Civil Administration (a body under Israeli military authority) in the West Bank (Emek Shaveh 2017). In response to questions on this topic at the event in Berlin, Greenberg suggested that archaeologists should express their disquiet when observing actions that flout international conventions, and colleagues who participate in such activities should be called out for contravening international law. Silence is tantamount to complicity.

Antiquities, monuments and 'ethnic' identity in Gaza

Another area of silence on the part of the archaeological community, in Israel as well as internationally, is the destruction of material cultural heritage in Gaza. It is the latest chapter in the larger project of Israeli destruction of Palestinian heritage since 1948, the goal of which is the de-territorialization of Palestinian collective memory (e.g., as argued and documented by Falah 1996; Abu el-Haj 2001; Leshem 2013; Kadman 2015; Weizman 2023; Da'adli 2024; The Qadas Project 2025–2026). A recent compendium on antiquities in Gaza by Wolfgang Zwickel (2025) and a report by the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation in Palestine (2025) are currently the most comprehensive sources available with which to gauge the degree of devastation. The UNESCO list of destroyed cultural sites and information from PEN America on the website 'All That is Lost' are also important resources documenting ongoing threats to and destruction of material heritage (PEN America 2025; see also Everyday Orientalism 2025). The Hague Convention of 1954 defines these erasures of material heritage as a war crime. It is not only the damage and destruction themselves that are worrying, however: Greenberg warned that if the reconstruction touted by the Trump administration proceeds as did, for example, that of Beirut, one can expect that entrepreneurs will leave behind enormous archaeological destruction (Battah 2022). Removal of all traces of recent and ancient occupation – turning the Gaza Strip into a sandbox for real-estate developers in which all evidence of history has been wiped clean – will add to the list of war crimes perpetrated on Palestinians in Gaza by eradicating all connections to the Palestinian past.

Looking to the future, Greenberg addressed broader questions concerning the role of archaeology and heritage in reconciling the existence of Israel, constituted as a settler colony, with justice for Palestinians. The way forward in a land that is now home to two hostile yet entangled groups of nearly equal size must be through the recognition that the tangible heritage in Palestine/Israel (that is, its 'archaeosphere': Edgeworth 2018) is fundamentally – if not by letter of the law – heritage of the *place*, rather than of a particular imagined national community. If heritage is what we choose to preserve from the past and the present for the future, then a resident of Gaza can view Pharaonic remains in Deir el-Balah, Roman remains in Anthedon, the synagogue at Nirim and the Islamic shrine of Nabi Rubin as equal components of their heritage, as can a resident of Tel Aviv. The role of the state and of local communities would be to protect those places and allow them to survive. This is not how heritage is currently viewed by the state of Israel and many of its citizens (as well as many others): through identitarian classification of heritage as fundamentally 'Jewish,' 'Islamic,' 'Christian,' etc. (and also backward in time – 'Israelite,' 'Philistine,' 'Phoenician,' etc.), it has been politically weaponized, encouraging the sense that the struggle over territory and history in Palestine/Israel is a zero-sum game that requires purified pasts (Greenberg/Hamilakis 2022; see also De Cesari 2014).

Archaeology's focus on the present and recent past can be one of its salient contributions to seeing and recording what the state wishes to unsee and destroy. The Qadas project in the Galilee/al-Jalil investigates a village violently depopulated in 1948 and razed to the ground in 1966, with the intention of eliminating the traces of this brutal expulsion – the Nakba – and with that a potential legitimate claim to return. Mechanical excavators were used to tear down walls, buildings were destroyed beyond recognition, and the remains left to be hidden by vegetation (The Qadas Project 2025–2026). The current project's aim is to make the village's ruins and the process of destruction visible, turning them into a part of current debates and discussions on destruction and domicide.

Identity was one of the main subjects of our discussion in Berlin. If cultural heritage and ethnic identity have no essential relation but are often used strategically in an exclusionary way (Spivak 1988), heritage becomes a tool in the hands of the state and dominant social groups to reinforce social and cultural divisions. At the same time, the politically disempowered Palestinians need to be able to postulate a cultural heritage policy of their own in order to counteract the Israeli one. At present, this can only be pursued by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah in the West Bank, an institution that has only nominal control over less than 40 per cent of the West Bank and none over

Gaza. Only in an imagined future where these extreme power differences have been overcome can we expect national communities to move past essentialist notions of collectivity. Ultimately, the aim must be to allow different ethnic or religious groups the option of regarding the same places as culturally significant. This is not a utopian ideal; there are many historical examples of shared religious and other landmarks in Palestine and in the broader region (Levy 2003).

In addition to the exclusionary power of ethnically understood identity, cultural heritage is defined very differently at a local level and by the state. Ethnicized heritage can be produced at will by the state, in this case by classifying sites locally understood to be Palestinian as 'Jewish.' A recent dispute of this kind concerns Sebaste, which the Israeli authorities simply extracted from Palestinian territory as the 'former capital of Israel' with the name 'Shomron,' cutting it off from the neighbouring village (Emek Shaveh 2025). Archaeology has increasingly been employed as a blunt tool of settler expansion. The current politically charged use of cultural heritage is, in Greenberg's words, 'a road to failure; we are at rock bottom.'[2] The last few years have led to a dead end, with relations seemingly beyond repair. Concerning Gaza's heritage, 'there is no way to unbomb.' What action, then, can be taken?

Change will begin with an understanding that the weaponization of the past is not something that *others* are doing *to* archaeology: rather, it happens through our own default – by ignoring the politics inherent in our work and refusing to adopt a moral compass – it is we as *archaeologists* who are undermining our own field and offering comfort to bad actors. Only when we recognize that archaeology is always a field of political contestation, will we find a way to practice it in a manner that conforms to what we value.

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