

# THE PALESTINIAN DEPARTMENT OF ANTIQUITIES & CULTURAL HERITAGE

*Hamdan Taha introduces 12 years of archaeological research in Palestine.*

**T**he Palestinian Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage (DACH) has been in existence now for more than 12 years since its re-establishment in August 1994. The inauguration of the DACH, under the Palestinian National Authority, was a momentous event and represents the revival of the Department of Antiquities established in 1920 under the British Mandate and terminated with the political events of 1948, when Israel was established. Subsequently, Jordan assumed those responsibilities for the West Bank, and Egypt for the Gaza strip.

When the DACH was established it possessed no archaeological records or finds from excavations undertaken previously. Moreover, because of inadequate opportunities for field training, the Department inherited a serious shortage of qualified personnel. The new situation gives Palestinians an independent role to explore the history of Palestine from its primary material sources, a task reserved until recently for foreign archaeologists. This situation had often led to the political and ideological use of this material and interpretation without objective scientific controls. The establishment of the DACH marks the beginning of the local field school of archaeology.

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

human culture, making archaeology in Palestine a scientific enterprise within the setting of international scientific endeavour. The old antiquities law of 1929 was grounded in the conventional concept of archaeology. The new laws being invoked move beyond narrow definitions and ancient periods to include many different categories of cultural resources, including archaeological sites, historical buildings and features, vernacular architecture, and cultural landscape, viewed comprehensively within physical and cultural contexts. At the same time the new Department is attending to its task of combatting the looting of archaeological sites. Hundreds of sites have been looted and plundered, and there has been an active illegal trade in cultural property.

Many abandoned sites have long been left unprotected. Most importantly, there has been a lack of awareness of the importance of cultural heritage among the public, due to difficult political circumstances. Since October 2000, great damage has been inflicted on cultural heritage in the Palestinian areas. These have suffered from military bombing and shelling, causing partial or total destruction. The new transformation in the role of archaeology and cultural heritage is evoking a chain of positive reactions within Palestinian society. In order to address the full range of its obligations imposed by this new mandate, the DACH has defined several primary tasks: institution building, formulating legislation, staff training, and most importantly, the protection of archaeo-



Fig 1. Map of sites within the Gaza Strip mentioned in the text.

Fig 3 (below right). Excavations on the Iron Age II period ramparts at Blakhiyah, Gaza, 7th-6th century BC.

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Fig 2 (below). General view of the 45m-high Tell Dothan, 22km north of Shechem. The site contains 15m of stratified remains, 21 continuous occupational levels dating from the end of the Chalcolithic period (4000-3500 BC) through to the Byzantine period (AD 325-650), followed by intermittent strata as late as the 14th century.



logical sites and conducting a programme of rescue excavations.

The DACH has jurisdiction over an area containing nearly 2000 archaeological sites, 10,000 features, and more than 60,000 historical buildings, ranging from the Palaeolithic period to modern times. These numbers reflect the cultural wealth and diversity of the region. Systematic archaeological excavations in Palestine began at the end of the 19th century. Since its re-establishment in 1994, DACH has managed to undertake a series of salvage and research excavations. More than 500 salvage operations have been carried out, especially in historical urban centres and in rural areas under pressure from development.

The first major salvage excavations and clearance work was conducted in three seasons from 1996-97 at the Khirbet Bal'ama water tunnel (Fig 5). The excavation explored 115m of the great Iron Age (1200-550 BC) water system at the eastern foot of the site, located near the southern entrance of the city of Jenin. A large number of tombs from different periods were rescued, including a Chalcolithic cave burial at Artas, an Early Bronze Age I tomb at Wadi Bal'ama near Jenin, Iron Age tombs at Beitunya, north of Jerusalem, Hellenistic tombs at Nablus, and a series of Roman and Byzantine tombs at Ta'annek, Attara, Yatta, Umm esh-Sahryaett, Khirbet Shuweika, Asira-esh Shamalieh, Rammun, Bethlehem, Bani Naim, Es-Samou'a, and elsewhere. Notable finds included a large collection of grave goods from the Atara tomb, and in 1999 a hoard of 420 silver coins from the early Ottoman period (c. AD 1532 and 1612) found in a rock

shelter near the village of Qabatiya, south of Jenin.

In Gaza, salvage operations have been carried out on a number of sites, including the cemetery and church of Jabalia, the site of Nuseirat, and elsewhere in the territory of Rafah, Deir el-Balah, and Khan Yunis. The objects uncovered from these excavations are presently exhibited in 'Gaza at the Crossroad of Civilizations' at the Museum of Art and History in Geneva (until 7 October).

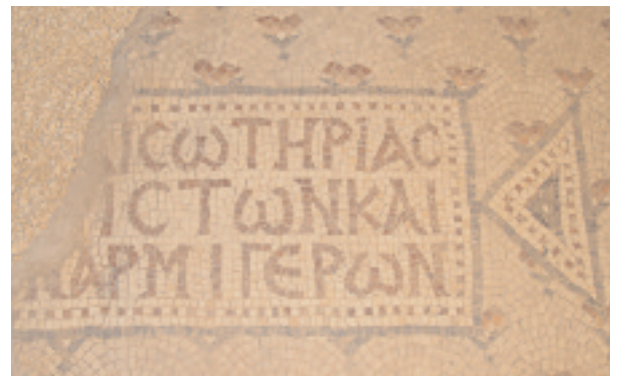
In 2000 and 2001 excavations and restorations were pursued at Tawaheen es-Sukkar in Jericho, revealing a complete system of sugar production from the Early Medieval period (8th and 9th centuries). The site of Tawaheen es-Sukkar is located 2 km north-west of the city centre of Jericho. The site was mentioned in several medieval Arab and Crusader texts (12-14th centuries AD) which refer to the plantation of sugar cane and its production in the Jordan Valley. Interestingly, the extant remains feature a relatively well preserved industrial site for manufacturing sugar, including an aqueduct, sugar press, mill house, refinery, cistern, and storage facilities for sugar containers.

In 2002, a salvage excavation focussed on the 5th-century monastery of Bir el-Hammam on Mount Gerizim. In 2003 and 2004 a series of excavations took place in Samoua village, Haram er-Rameh in Hebron, Deir Ghannam in Jericho, Tell Jenin and Khirbet el-Burj in Ramallah.

In 2003 work was renewed in Gaza at Tell um Amer and Blakhiyeh

**Fig 4 (below left).** A 115m-long rock-cut water channel at Khirbet Bal'ama, Iron Age (1200-550 BC)

**Fig 5 (left, second from top).** A coastal Roman villa at Blakhiyah, ancient Anthedon excavated by the joint mission of the Gaza Department of Antiquities and the Ecole Biblique of Jerusalem. Photo: © Jean-Baptiste Humbert.



**Fig 6 (below right).** Oil lamps found in the water tunnel at Khirbet Bal'ama date from the Late Hellenistic to the Ottoman periods (200 BC - AD 1400) indicate that it functioned for over 1.5 millennia.

**Fig 7 (middle right).** A fragmentary 6th-century inscription in a mosaic floor tabula ansata referring to the salvation of two donors and the armigeri (soldiers); the monastery of Bir el-Hammam, 6th century AD.

**Fig 8 (bottom right).** A mosaic pavement depicting a kantharos encircled by a laurel wreath and decorated with leaves; church at Umm Amer, Gaza, 6th century AD.



within the framework of a Palestinian-French venture. In 2006, a small-scale excavation was carried out at the Umayyad Khirbet el-Mafjer (Hisham's Palace), Jericho (Figs 11-13),



**Fig 9 (top left).** A gold earring from a tomb at Khirbet Shuweika, 4th century AD.

**Fig 10 (above left).** Chandeliers for glass oil lamps from a secular or religious building. Bir el-Hamam, 6th century AD.



to ascertain the stratigraphic history of the site. The result of the excavations shows that the site was occupied after the earthquake of AD 746.

Excellent examples of the efficiency of such international collaborations with the Department have already been demonstrated in development projects and in a series of joint excavations. A joint Palestinian-Italian team excavated at Tell es-Sultan in Jericho between 1997 and 2000. The excavation shed light on the urban settlement and fortification system and contributed significantly to the development of a management plan. Palestinian-Dutch excavations at Khirbet Bal'ama were carried out between 1998 and 1998 on the site and nearby necropolis. Other joint ventures include the Palestinian-Norwegian excavation of Chalcolithic Tell el-Mafjer in Jericho and the Palestinian-Swedish project at Tell el-Ajjul in Gaza.

In the Gaza area, a series of joint excavations have focussed on the ancient port of Gaza (subsequently identified as ancient Anthedon), and Tell es-Sakan (the Palestinian-French venture) and in 1999 at Tell el-Ajjul (Palestinian-Swedish venture). These projects have contributed to the building of a new post-colonial model of cooperation in archaeology based on mutual respect and interest. In 1999, a special volume of the French journal *Dossiers di Archieologie* (vol. 240) was dedicated to the new Palestinian experience. Preliminary and final reports on the results of excavations have also been published in different archaeological journals. Within this context of cooperation, the project for the rehabilitation of Hisham's Palace in Jericho was established in conjunction with UNESCO and financial support from the Italian government.

The other major task facing DACH is the conservation of the most endangered archaeological sites and historical buildings. This has led to the undertaking of major projects throughout the Palestinian Territories, including the Emergency Clearance Campaign of 100

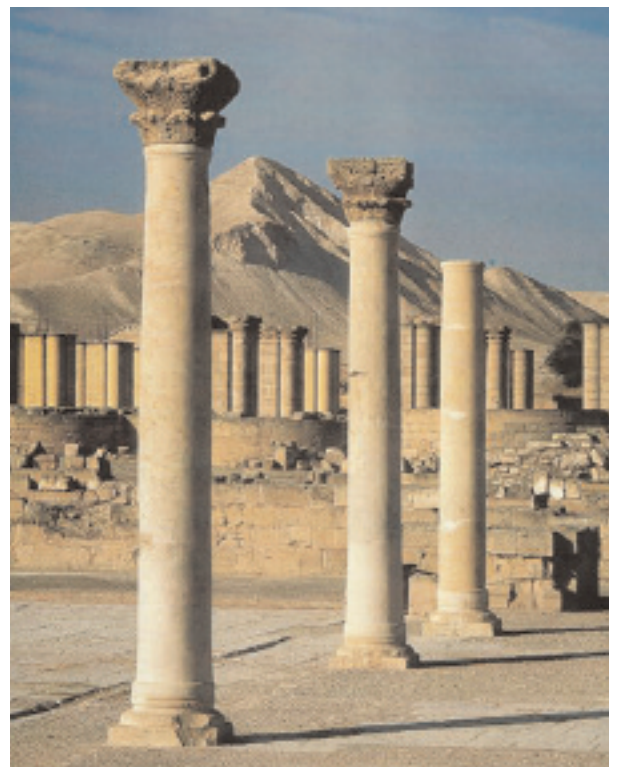


**Fig 11 (above right).** Vertical view of a floor mosaic in the caliph Hisham's winter palace at Jericho, built in AD 724, depicting the Tree of Life flanked by two deer.

**Fig 12 (bottom right).** Architectural reconstruction of the caliph Hisham's palace, built in Jericho in AD 724.

**Fig 13 (below right).** General view of the winter palace of the Umayyad caliph Hisham, built at Jericho in AD 724.

sites (1996-98) and a project for the protection of cultural and historical landscapes (1998-2001), funded by the Dutch government with a \$1.5 million grant. These two projects encompassed major archaeological sites and historical buildings, including mosques, churches, monasteries, sanctuaries, and other structures. The project also incorporated clearance work, documentation, consolidation, and conservation, and salvage excavations of more than 100 endangered archaeological and cultural heritage sites. The work encompassed the Byzantine churches of Burqin and Abud and the Crusader churches of Sebastyah and el-Bireh. Historical Mamluk mosques preserved include es-Sabeen and Burham, the Omari mosques of the Dura, Birzeit, as well as the sanctuaries



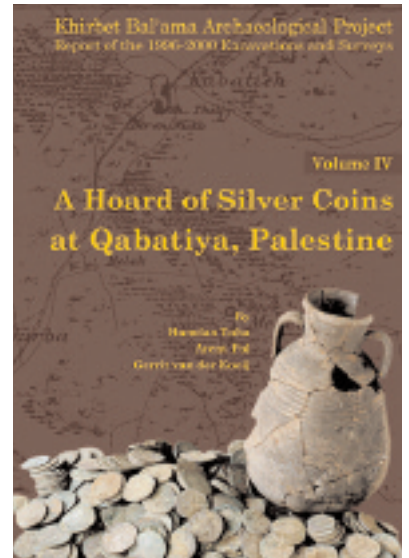


**Fig 14 (above left).** A bag-shaped local amphora from a secular or religious building; Bir el-Hamam, 6th century AD.



**Fig 15 (above centre).** Glazed Crusader bowl from the Abud Church, 12th century AD.

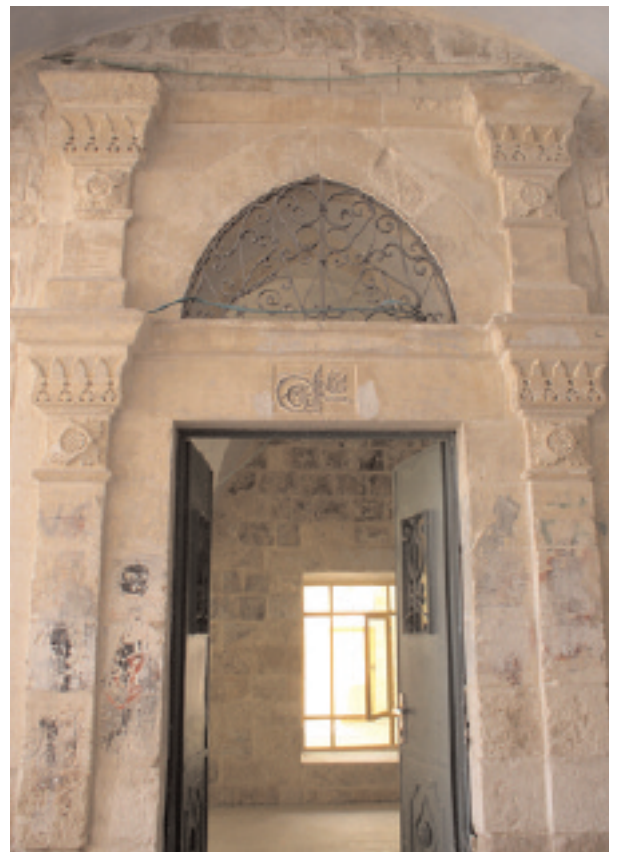
**Fig 16 (above, far right).** A recent publication of a hoard of silver coins found at Qabatiya.



**Fig 17 (middle right).** The Maqam of Banat Jacop, the Shrine of Jacob's daughters, constructed in the 15th century AD on an existing Roman site in the village of Irtah.



**Fig 18 (below right).** An elaborately decorated doorway in the Araba Palace, 19th century.



of El-Qatrawani and Maqam en-Nubani in the Ramallah area.

The diversity of structures and sites in Palestine are well illustrated by an 18th-century castle at Ras-Karkar, the Crusader Khan in el-Bireh, a Mamluk bath-house in the old town of Hebron, the Ottoman Qaem-Maqam house in Tulkarem, and Beit ez-Zarru Roman villa in Ramallah. Maqam el-Qatrawani, an Early Islamic sanctuary near Attara, has been conserved together with the small natural forest and terraced landscape surrounding it. Similarly, the site of Dura el-Qaref focuses on the combination of ecology and historical technology, displaying ancient and traditional hydrological features in their natural and cultural landscape. Some historical buildings have also been restored to house ethnographic and archaeological museums or other types of cultural centres.

Larger scale sites are also being conserved and developed, such as Deir Istyia and Artas. Several previously excavated sites in the West Bank and Gaza, such as Tell Ta'annek, Tell el-Fara, Tell Dothan (Fig 2), and elsewhere were hitherto left without protection because of difficult political circumstances over the past few decades. Clearance of some of these sites is ongoing as part of an overall plan to develop them into archaeological parks.

Within the framework of the Bethlehem 2000 projects, a large scheme for the restoration and rehabilitation of archaeological sites and historical buildings in the area was undertaken in cooperation with the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by the Japanese government with a \$2 million grant. An ethnographic museum displaying the history of oil production has also been established in the old city of Bethlehem within the framework of this project.

In Gaza, a comprehensive restoration and rehabilitation programme was carried out in the historic palace of Qaser el-Basha. Another major project in 2004-2005 encompassed seven sites in the northern districts of Palestine, funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with a grant of around \$2.5 million. This includes Khirbet Bal'ama, Burqin, Arraba, Deir Istyia, Barqawi Castle, and the villages of Irtah and Kur. In 2005, a series of restorations and consolidation works were also undertaken in the Mamluk castle of Khan Yunis.

Within the framework of international efforts to safeguard cultural heritage in Palestine at a time of political crisis, a preliminary list of 20 cultural and natural heritage sites was prepared in 2005 with the support of the World Heritage Committee. This would not have been possible without the collective efforts of the international community, especially Japan, Holland, Italy, USA, Norway, Sweden, in addition to several Arab countries and international organisations, such as UNESCO, the World Heritage Committee, UNDP, ALECSO, ISESCO and other organisations. All of these parties have played a role in the international efforts to preserve the endangered archaeological resources in Palestine.