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Vignettes of Subterranean Palestine

In sectional illustrations, the earth's surface is drawn as a thin crust, a crisp wrapper containing the fiery guts within. These geological diagrams illustrate the crust's thinness, paradoxical to the immense meaning within it. The surface occupies less than one percent of the earth's volume, yet there are thousands of years of embedded memories of trauma and celebration in its layered soil. Hundreds of thousands of patches of terrain were excavated from the surface over the last century, digging deeper into the earth's underbelly to tease out past narratives of human existence.

One of the most excavated places in the world, the "Holy Land," has embedded within it some of the densest layers of historical narrative, with strata piling and intertwining over millennia. Disregarding the complex strata, contemporary Zionist efforts serving the state of Israel intend to disentangle those layers to extract a singular Zionist narrative. Extracting is an act of erasure rendering some layers relevant or irrelevant. Those defined as relevant are interested in cementing a Zionist narrative. Archaeological ground in Palestine is an urgent subject in the context of decolonization, as this space is currently weaponized for further settler-colonialism on the part of Israel. Archaeological sites in Palestine are active battlegrounds where Israeli bulldozers damage monuments, where artifacts are looted by the Israel Defense Force (IDF), and where the surrounding Palestinian agricultural land is confiscated by Israeli settler organizations for further settlement expansion. The fields that contain these sites are subject to ecological terrorism, such as settlers intentionally burning orchards and draining sewage water into Palestinian valleys. Meanwhile religious tourism is thriving, and millions of dollars are invested by the state and its accomplices in the development of archaeological theme parks promoting the Zionist narrative.[1]

Despite their perceived permanence, the archaeological sites in Palestine—or at least their narratives—are malleable, leaving them at risk of weaponization by powerful actors. This nationalist weaponization of archaeological sites across Palestine happens in four ways. First, the militarization of the Archaeological Department of the Civil Administration (ADCA) within the West Bank is itself a method and framework that allows for the control of archaeological sites.[2] The ADCA is a department of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the Israeli unit responsible for all coordination with the Palestinian Authority. COGAT, under the Ministry of Defense, heads the Civil Administration, the Israeli governing body operating

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[1] Oliver Holmes, "Leaks Show Chelsea Owner Abramovich Funded Israeli Settler Group," *Haaretz*, September 21, 2020, [link](#).

[2] COGAT, "Archaeology," [link](#).

within the West Bank. Within the Civil Administration is an entire unit dedicated to controlling and managing all archaeological sites—1,611 sites, to be exact—in Area C of the West Bank, as shown in a GIS map provided by COGAT. Not only is this under the authority of the Ministry of Defense, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) is also indirectly responsible for this unit, as seen in the IAA's organizational structure.[3] In addition, an advisory council is set to support the ADCA with members, including the deputy head of the Civil Administration, military commander Colonel Shai Karmona.[4]

Second, marking the archaeological site as an Israeli national park gives the state a financial loophole that absolves it from any financial responsibility toward the Palestinian landowners.[5] Designating Palestinian land part of an Israeli national park is an additional strategy for Israeli state authorities to gain control of archaeological sites within the West Bank. Although many of these sites have been formally designated Israeli national parks, including Herodium Park and Mount Gerizim, and named by the National Parks Authority (NPA), many are not listed publicly on the NPA website, including Sebastia National Park.

Third, it is very common for the IDF and/or armed security guards to be present at the archaeological site and surrounding areas to “protect” settlers. The relationship between the IDF and settlers is intimate. When Palestinians living in archaeological sites refer to “Israelis” they mean both the IDF and settlers as a single body. This is because both the state military and the Zionist settlers in areas that surround archaeological sites are working toward the same goal of furthering state occupation. There is overwhelming evidence that the settlement security guards answer to the IDF directly.[6] This can be seen in insurrections on Palestinian land during planned ecological terrorist activity as well as in the settler-organized tourism taking place with the guidance and protection of the IDF.

And finally, the religious tours organized by multiple right-wing settler groups, as well as the government tours run by the National Parks Authority both in the West Bank's Area C and in Jerusalem are conducted in direct coordination with the IDF, and advertised as such. On trips such as Birthright and tours organized on religious holidays, participants experience the archaeological sites through Zionist and biblical narratives. The guides, not archaeologists, perform the biblical narrative for the tourists, and help ingrain an emotional and psychological connection to the land using archaeology as a dramatic prop.

Although archaeological sites are generally understood as architectures of the past, as ruins and abandoned structures, they are never frozen in time. They are living, breathing urban spaces, a public right that is not commonly found in Palestine. With the Oslo II Accords of 1995, Israel partitioned the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C and assumed total control of Area C, comprising 63 percent of the West bank, and partial control of Area B. This means that if Palestinians desire to build on private or public land, and create or develop public space in Area C, they must do so with permission of the Israeli authorities. In Area B, the Palestinian Authority has majority control but in cases pertaining to “security,” cooperation between the Israeli and Palestinian authorities is expected. As public space is difficult to carve out within Palestine, archaeological sites provide rare pockets of breathing room for Palestinian children to play soccer, for teenagers to walk through tree groves in privacy,

[3] Israel Antiquities Authority Organisational Structure, [link](#).

[4] Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, *Occupation Remains: A Legal Analysis of the Israeli Archaeology Policies in the West Bank, An International Law Perspective* (Stockholm: Diakonia, 2015).

[5] Diakonia International Humanitarian Law Centre, *Occupation Remains*.

[6] Dima Srouji, *Sebastia*, short film (repr., Palestine: E-Flux and Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2020).

and for the residents to build pop-up souvenir shops for tourists. In other cases, the archaeological ruins are part of the landscape, a continuous ground that is not understood by its residents as separate from the village but as a critical part of present reality as well as oral history.

The following vignettes, which focus on Sebastia, Silwan, and Taquu, only scratch the surface of the ongoing, systemic settler violence enacted against Palestinian people—and together they are an invitation for more in-depth research. These sites were chosen because they require urgent attention: at Sebastia, settler violence has been at an all-time high; in Silwan, the residents are rapidly being dispossessed from their homes; and the looting captured by Palestinian residents in Taquu offers evidence of the extractive violence occurring, more broadly, elsewhere.

Sebastia

Archaeology is a settler colonial national project. In *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*, Nadia Abu El-Haj begins by highlighting the importance of not isolating the weaponization of archaeology within a nation-building framework, but rather of connecting it to the colonial dimension of Zionism. Archaeology is a settler colonial national project. One clear example of this connection in Palestine is Sebastia.[7]

The military presence in archaeological sites is not new or separate from the colonial history of archaeology in Palestine. It is a continuation of the militarized mapmaking of the British army, beginning in 1871, and of the later excavations of the archaeological sites in Palestine for the benefit of national agendas and religious interests.[8] The effects of these events are aggressively felt in the Palestinian community in Sebastia, in the intergenerational trauma carried by the community today after the forced labor endured during excavations decades ago, and by the constant oppression and dispossession of the residents and their land, which continues through the present.

[7] Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

[8] Haim Goren, Jutta Faehndrich, and Bruno Schellhaas, *Mapping the Holy Land: The Foundation of a Scientific Cartography of Palestine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).



Hundreds of Palestinians, including women and children, excavate Sebastia for Harvard University. Photograph courtesy of the Matson Collection at the Library of Congress.

Sebastia was excavated by Harvard University in 1908. The expedition was well funded and executed by the Harvard Semitic Museum, directed by Jacob Henry Schiff at the time. Schiff, an early Zionist, was vocal about his interests in proving the accuracy of the Bible through the excavations and was quite unsatisfied when the excavators returned to Harvard empty-handed at the end of the season. The excavators' relationship with Sebastia and its residents was secondary to their primary objective, to find proof of the Old Testament and its biblical kings in Sebastia, then part of ancient Samaria.[9] Diaries and photographs from the museum shed light on these interests:

[9] Ron Tappy, "The Harvard Expedition to Samaria," *Buried History* 52 (2016): 3–30.

IT HAS LONG BEEN RECOGNIZED THAT A SITE SHOULD BE EXCAVATED AS A WHOLE. THE IDEAL THING AT SAMARIA WOULD HAVE BEEN TO STRIP OFF THE AGRICULTURAL SOIL OVER THE WHOLE HILL, AND TO HAVE RECORDED THE RESULT BY PHOTOGRAPHS AND PLANS. THEN ONE WOULD HAVE CLEARED AWAY THE ARABIC BUILDINGS WHEREVER THEY COULD BE IDENTIFIED, REMOVED ALL DEBRIS MADE BY ARABIC OPERATIONS, AND MADE A SECOND RECORD, AND SO ON WITH EACH PERIOD OF DEBRIS AND OF BUILDINGS, PARI PASSU OVER THE WHOLE SITE UNTIL AT LAST THE REMAINS OF THE ISRAELITE OCCUPATION LAY REVEALED OVER THE WHOLE HILL. BUT AT PRESENT THIS IS AN ABSOLUTE IMPOSSIBILITY. THE GREAT AREA, THE VALUE OF THE LAND AND THE EXPENSE OF THE OPERATION ARE ABSOLUTELY PROHIBITIVE.

THE LOCAL WORKPEOPLE WERE DRAWN MAINLY FROM SEBASTE. WE WERE DEPENDENT ON THEIR GOODWILL IN BUYING LAND AND IN OTHER WAYS; AND WE FELT THEY, AS RESIDENTS, HAD A CERTAIN MORAL CLAIM ON THE EXPEDITION. THEREFORE WE GAVE THEM THE PREFERENCE. THEY SHOWED A CERTAIN TENDENCY TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEIR POSITION AS LAND OWNERS; BUT A FEW CASES OF SHARP PUNISHMENT—A SERIES OF FINES AND DISMISSALS—BROUGHT THEM TO THEIR SENSES. [10]

[10] Records of the Harvard Excavations at Samaria, 1908–1910. Semitic Museum at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

Not only did the Harvard archaeologists want to systemically remove Palestinian history from the site, but by excavating their land, they diminished the Palestinian agricultural landscape and much cultural tradition with it. For example, the Roman forum was historically used as a threshing ground and community gathering space where families would sing songs as they threshed wheat during the harvest season. These traditions stopped when the sites were excavated.

The earth and its artifacts were actively filtered by the excavation team. As records indicate, artifacts of "sufficient importance" were the ones to be taken and categorized while the rest, less important, were reburied on the site.[11] The use of "sufficient importance" begs a series of questions. Who decides which artifacts to record and which to discard? On what grounds are these decisions made?

[11] "In addition to the card catalogue of numbered objects, a card catalogue was kept of a large number of broken potsherds and other fragments which were not of sufficient importance to bring away. These cards contained the same sort of information as the regular cards, but they bore numbers prefaced by 0. The objects themselves were reburied on the site" (page 15 of the *Records*).

Today, the violence, erasure, and dispossession of Palestinians from their land continue in Sebastia. The presence of the military in the village is very common, according to the mayor. Palestinian residents have seen an increase in violent activity in recent years. Looters are often seen digging in the fields at night. Israeli bulldozers prepare dig sites for Israeli settlers and state-sanctioned tourism under the protection of the IDF. Popular archaeological monuments such as the Roman amphitheater and Herod's Temple, and the biblical King Omri's and King Ahab's palace, are threatened by the settlers from Shavei Shomron, where intentional fires are set to burn the Palestinian-owned agricultural fields around the monuments.[12]

[12] Srouji, *Sebastia*.



Active bulldozer working on the Roman amphitheater at Sebastia. Photograph courtesy of Ahmad al Kayed.

During a recent visit, active bulldozers were observed near the Roman amphitheater carving around the site as armed Israeli soldiers stood protecting the archaeologists and, ironically, the archaeology. This practice is considered unacceptable by any standard measure. In *Facts on the Ground*, Abu El-Haj clearly identifies unacceptable processes that are deemed reasonable within Israeli archaeology. For example, when excavating the archaeological site at Jezreel, Tel Aviv University's archaeological team defined the priorities of the excavation, focusing on a single stratum, the Israelite layer, with clear national implications.[13]

[13] Abu El Haj, *Facts on the Ground*, 148.

Some of the monuments, such as the amphitheater, are used for biblical tour performances by the settlers as well as the Palestinian residents, who also use them for wedding ceremonies, musical concerts, and school performances. While these are places of contested use, other sites facilitate Palestinian direct action. The Roman forum is commonly used as a site of protest and community gathering to prepare resistance against the IDF, who frequently infiltrate the site and the village. This use of the archaeological monument as a site of resistance is further seen in Sebastia's flag battles, where Palestinian youth raise flags on the colonnades as a form of protest

against the land dispossession and cultural heritage hijacking. The flags are consistently taken down by the IDF, and Sebastia residents are often arrested for this act of resistance. The monuments become active battlegrounds where Palestinian youth resist settler violence. The Sebastia youth movement has recently regrouped for the first time in two years in an emergency community meeting in reaction to the rise in settler attacks on the village. A group of IDF soldiers violently entered the forum as a reaction to a young boy playing with green laser pointers and pointing them at the settlement across the valley. In a disproportionate response, the IDF indiscriminately shot rubber bullets around the site during an *iqtiham* of Sebastia that evening, causing a Palestinian man in the village cafe to lose his eye.[14] Acts of resistance such as raising flags, gathering in public spaces, and organizing protests are always met with disproportionate and often deadly force in the village.

According to the mayor of Sebastia, the Israeli settlers and the IDF are incredibly violent with the Palestinian residents.[15] In the past, they have evicted residents from their properties, forbidden shop owners around the Roman forum to open their shops, and have even kept residents from entering their own homes. Tear gas and sound bombs are used frequently to terrorize the residents, and residents as young as sixteen have been arrested for protesting the IDF's violent presence.

Silwan

The archaeological site in Silwan, known by the Israeli state, its settlers, and Zionist tourists as the "City of David," is used as a scenographic stage set to perform a nationalist narrative. Here the archaeological site is a backdrop and stage set to the performance. As tourists arrive to the attraction, they enter the site from higher ground and go through the ticket office, part of a new addition developed on top of the archaeological site. The office was funded by Elad, a right-wing settler and Zionist organization that in 2020 received a \$100 million donation from Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich.[16]

After tourists purchase their tickets they are guided toward the edge of the cliff overlooking Silwan and the Hilweh valley. Religious tour guides perform a particular narrative on a raised stage to an audience that is physically oriented toward the archaeological site and away from the Palestinian village. Meanwhile surveillance cameras watch the Palestinians rather than the archaeological site and the tourists.

[14] The word *iqtiham* is best translated as "to storm." However, the idea of a storming suggests finality as the storm passes, whereas an *iqtiham* is the act of forced entry of a targeted location. This word does not have a closer match in the English language.

[15] Srouji, *Sebastia*.

[16] Holmes, "Leaks Show Chelsea Owner Abramovich Funded Israeli Settler Group."



City of David tourist stage sets facing toward the archaeological site and away from the village of Silwan. Photograph taken by author in August 2018.

The use of the archaeological site as a backdrop to a state narrative is not exclusive to Silwan. The Roman amphitheater in Sebastia is also used as a stage to perform the Zionist narrative. Theatrical performances seek to attach the right wing's future generation with the physical terrain and the archaeology itself— for example, actors dressed in biblical costumes narrate the stories of ancient Israel as part of religious tours to the site.

Lower in the valley below the stages is a subterranean tunnel connected to an ancient spring. A documentary on the archaeology of Silwan uploaded to YouTube in 2008 addresses this part of the site. It features Rafael Greenberg, an archaeology professor at Tel Aviv University. The image is grainy, and the narrator begins with ominous words: “These days, Dr. Greenberg is a worried man.”[17]

Greenberg began excavations in the City of David in 1972 and worked on them for a decade. He explains in the documentary that he has a personal connection with this place—he met his wife during the excavations. He recounts his shock when he came back with students as a lecturer at Tel Aviv University in 2002. Silwan was no longer a Palestinian village, an “Arab

[17] Journeymen Pictures, “Digging for Trouble” (Youtube, uploaded January 14, 2008), [link](#).

village,” as he calls it. It had turned into a place with armed Israeli guards, ready to fire their weapons at any moment. The city was covered with Israeli nationalist symbols, flags, military watchtowers, and surveillance cameras filming twenty-four hours a day. That dark reality twelve years ago was not a shock to the Palestinians. Indeed, seven years earlier, Abu El-Haj had described such conditions in *Facts on the Ground*.

However, Greenberg’s witness account is powerful today given the recent events in Silwan.[18] Filmed twelve years ago, the film is somewhat prophetic—it not only anticipates the current dispossession of Palestinians from their homes in Silwan, but also records a pattern and methodology used by the Israeli state across sites like Sheikh Jarrah, Gibeon, Hebron, Sebastia, Jericho, Artas, and others.

The methods used and justified in Sebastia are here expanded and furthered in the more aggressive dispossession of Palestinian families from their homes, which increased as a result of the events of May 2021, when a new generation rose to resist apartheid and the fragmentation of the Palestinian community. This was a result of an energetic young people loudly opposing another intense bombing of Gaza and settler violence supported by the IDF in Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah, Beita, and other villages. The process of dispossession in Silwan began in 1998, when Elad funded the City of David project. Given Silwan’s proximity to the Old City of Jerusalem, as well as its large size, it has seen greater militarization than other archaeological sites. Sebastia seems only a few years behind Silwan. As military presence and guided settler tours are increase at the site as a result of an increase in funding, it is likely that Sebastia will follow the same pattern as Silwan.

[18] “‘No longer afraid’: Palestinians Vow to Fight Jerusalem Evictions,” *Al Jazeera*, May 29, 2021, [link](#).

Taquu

Taquu, a small village within the Bethlehem governorate, captured media attention during a recent looting operation by the Israel Defense Forces. Looting archaeological artifacts by the Israeli state and confiscating previously looted artifacts from the West Bank are very common. There are many testimonies from residents of archaeological cities throughout the West Bank who recall occasions when military trucks arrived at night to loot valuable artifacts. Taquu is worth touching on, though it is not a particularly urgent case, because of the community’s immediate activism when the IDF looted an ancient baptismal basin from the village.



Israeli Defense Forces caught on cellphone footage looting a baptismal font from the village of Taquu. Screenshot from footage by Hussein Shejaeya, July 20, 2020.

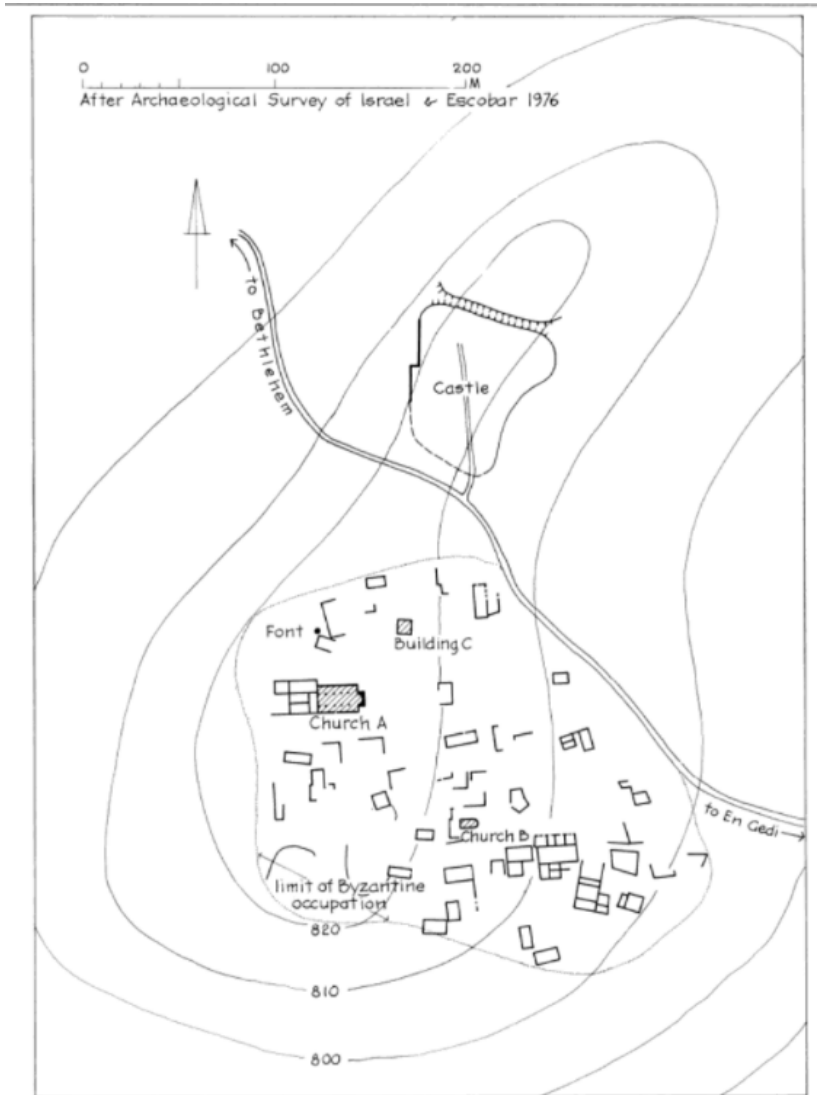


Baptismal font photographed on November 6, 1940, on the day of the opening ceremony of the Jaamari water source of Ain Hamda. Photograph courtesy of the Matson Collection, Library of Congress.

The published findings of the Tekoa Archaeological Expedition of 1968 celebrate the Baptistery in Taquu. Exhaustively studied during the excavations, the Baptistery was labeled one of the finest remaining baptisteries in Palestine.[19] Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school in Illinois, funded the excavation. The institution carries its motto proudly: “For Christ & His Kingdom.” Today the college offers a master’s of arts in Old Testament Archaeology, where students spend six weeks in Israel. Admission to the twelve-month program requires only “a basic knowledge of the bible” and competency in Hebrew.[20]

[19] Martin Heicksen, “Tekoa: Excavations in 1968,” *Grace Journal*, [link](#).

[20] Wheaton College, [link](#).



Plan of Taquu from the Tekoa Archaeological Expedition Survey, including the original location of the baptismal font in the Palestinian village. Courtesy of Martin Heicksen, Tekoa Archaeological Expedition Survey.

To students of this program, sites such as Taquu, though small villages with few monuments, are worth studying because of their religious significance. Taquu is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as Tekoa. In the publication, the author notes the baptismal font in its original location:

OF RECOGNIZABLE RUINS, THE MOST PROMINENT IS A MAGNIFICENT BAPTISTERY FROM A BYZANTINE CHURCH, WHICH HAS BEEN NOTED SINCE THE BEGINNING BY PRACTICALLY EVERY TRAVELLER TO THE AREA WHOSE WRITTEN ACCOUNT OF HIS EXPERIENCE IS PRESERVED. IT IS OCTAGONAL IN PLAN, ABOUT FIVE FEET, FOUR INCHES IN DIAMETER, AND FOUR FEET, SIX INCHES IN HEIGHT, HEWN FROM A SINGLE PIECE OF ROSE-COLOURED AND MARBLE-LIKE LIMESTONE, FOUND IN A QUARRY NOT TOO MANY MILES DISTANT. FOUR OPPOSITE IDEAS ARE DECORATED WITH CARVED SYMBOLS OF THE CHURCH—OVERLAPPING SQUARE, WREATHS, AND THE FLEUR-DE-LIS, WHICH ORIGINATED IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD, A FACT NOT GENERALLY KNOWN. THE SIDE OF THE BAPTISTERY IS CIRCULAR IN PLAN, WITH A STEP TOWARD A SMALLER DIAMETER AT THE BOTTOM. IT IS EQUIPPED WITH A DRAIN HOLE AND IS POSITIONED OVER A CISTERN IN THE GROTTA BENEATH THE CHURCH STRUCTURE.

In 2020, the IDF entered the village at night and looted the baptismal font on a heavy loading truck. The event was captured by Palestinian village residents on cellphones and went viral on Twitter.[21] While it is unclear where the font is today, we do know that it is in the custody of the Israeli authorities. And while looting by Israeli authorities with the “protection” of the IDF is quite common in the West Bank, it is rarely caught on video. Thus the filming of the event confirmed what Israeli and Zionist apologists had dismissed as “Palestinian paranoia,” skepticism that our disappearing artifacts were taken in the middle of the night by the IDF. Collecting evidence of such activity is critical, not only to building a case against the illegal trafficking and displacement of archaeological fragments and monuments from the West Bank to Israel but also because the evidence is itself an emotional and psychological relief. It is an affirmation that the surreal aspects of daily life in Palestine that lead to gaslighting and accusations of paranoia are in fact based on realities that make us feel psychotic.

The overwhelming evidence of the weaponization of archaeology by the state of Israel is difficult to archive and articulate. There is hidden underground material, within the earth’s crust, on personal data clouds, on residents’ cell phones, in printed photographs in private homes, and stashed in municipal drawers and filing cabinets that has not been accessed in decades. But there are also the eyewitness accounts of the Palestinian people where the intentional obfuscation is clear. The smoke and mirrors that obscure this system also hint at the violent, corrupt colonial strategy underlying it, in which artifacts are systemically looted by the state, where archaeological decisions are made in coordination with the military to benefit the state and its accomplices, and where the Palestinian residents and their histories are violently erased in the process. Calling out these patterns and continuing to unearth evidence is critical in the path toward Palestinian liberation as well as the liberation of archaeology.

[21] IDF looting baptismal font in Taquu. Captured by Akram Alamor. July 20, 2020, [link](#).