

The social impacts of antiquities looting:  
The case of a deadly feud in Palestine

الأثار الاجتماعية لسرقة الآثار : حالة شجار قاتلة في فلسطين

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الملخص باللغة العربية: تتعرض مصادر التراث الأثري والثقافي في فلسطين للخطر الشديد بسبب استمرار أعمال التنقيب الأثري غير المشروع. وقد أدت هذه الأعمال في الآونة الأخيرة إلى اندلاع شجار عنيف بين عائلتين: عائلة أحد أفراد مجموعة لصوص الآثار، وعائلة صاحب المكان الذي تم فيه الحفر. وقد أدى هذا الشجار إلى قتل ثلاثة أشخاص، وحرقت عدة ممتلكات؛ بالإضافة إلى تعريض سلامة وأمن المواطنين المحليين للخطر. وتتلخص هذه الحادثة بقيام مجموعة مكونة من ثلاثة أفراد بالحفر في بيت قديم يقع في خربة قوزة/ حوارة بهدف استخراج مواد أثرية لبيعها في السوق السوداء لحسابهم الخاص؛ وقد تم اكتشاف أمرهم متلبسين بالجرم من مالك البيت؛ وسرعان ما تطورت الأحداث حتى وصلت إلى شجار عنيف ودام. ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تسليط الضوء على المخاطر الاجتماعية التي تسبب فيها سرقة الآثار على كل من لصوص الآثار أنفسهم، وعلى السلم الأهلي ورفاهية المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سرقة الآثار؛ شجار دامي؛ فلسطين؛ حوارة؛ المخاطر الجسدية.

**Abstract:** The archaeological and cultural heritage resources of Palestine are always under serious threat due to the ongoing looting of antiquities. The vandalism inflicted upon one archaeological site, however, has recently resulted in the outbreak of a violent and deadly quarrel between two Palestinian families. One was the family of an antiquities looter and the other the owners of an abandoned traditional house, located within an identified

archaeological site (Quza), where the looting gang of three individuals excavated for a brief period in hopes of extracting marketable archaeological objects. This inter-familial feud in Huwwara led to the torching of properties and multiple killings, in the process endangering the safety and security of the local citizenry. The main aim of this paper is to highlight the social risks of antiquities looting, to both the looters themselves and for the civil order and well-being of the larger community.

**Keywords:** Antiquities looting and looters; deadly feuds; Palestinian territories; Huwwara; and physical hazards.

## 1. Introduction

Palestine's archaeological and cultural heritage resources are subject to ongoing vandalism, destruction and looting, even in the midst of the lockdown related to the coronavirus pandemic. Antiquities looting activity in Palestine over the past two centuries has resulted in severe damage to a large number of archaeological sites and features, both major and minor; in the irreparable destruction of well-stratified cultural layers at a large number of looted sites dating to several different periods<sup>1</sup>; and in the extraction of approximately 8.4 million archaeological objects from their cultural contexts without any kind of documentation (this estimated number of objects covers the period from May 1967 to June 2019)<sup>2</sup>. A number of scholars have studied the phenomenon of antiquities looting in Palestine from various perspectives in order to identify its history, its current reality, its driving forces, its extent, and its impact on the country's archaeological and heritage resources<sup>3</sup>. Some of these experts have presented relevant recommendations aimed at stemming the growth of this devastating phenomenon and reducing its impact on our

<sup>1</sup> Al-Houdalieh, S. (2013). "Physical hazards encountered by antiquities looters: A case study from the Palestinian National Territories", *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 145 (4), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Houdalieh, S., & Jamal, H. (2020). "The level of offenses against archaeological and heritage resources, one year after implementation of the new Palestinian antiquities law", *Law and Society* 8 (1), p. 493.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Houdalieh, S. (2012). "Palestinian antiquities looters, their skill development, methodology and specialised terminology: An ethnographic study", *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 144 (2), p. 116.

archaeological and heritage resources<sup>4</sup>. The realities and their challenges for the archaeological and cultural heritage sector are clear, and the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the security agencies, along with other local and international entities, have all made efforts toward safeguarding and protecting Palestine's heritage resources. Nevertheless, the Palestinians have thus far never succeeded in curbing this vexing problem.

The antiquities looters are aware of the wide range of potential physical hazards that they face in connection with their fieldwork, dangers such as cave-ins; contact with different dangerous insects, snakes, or other animals; injuries from falling stones or excavation tools; and mishaps involving heavy mechanized equipment—with some of these risks only compounded by working during inclement weather. In Palestine, several such occurrences in the last few decades have resulted in death, serious injuries involving broken bones or the amputation of limbs, and the onset of acute skin diseases, among others<sup>5</sup>. As an example, a fatal incident took place as this article was in preparation in a village about 30 km southwest of Huwwara. In this case, a five-member group was working at midnight within an ancient, abandoned deep cistern, where they were using a gasoline-powered generator, a rock drill machine, and traditional equipment. At a certain point they also poured petroleum-based thinner over a large rock, with the intention of

<sup>4</sup> Kersel, M. (2006). License to sell: the legal trade of antiquities in Israel, unpublished PhD, England: Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, cf. Kersel, M. (2007). "Transcending borders: objects on the move", *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 3 (2), pp. 81–98, cf. Al-Houdalieh, S. (2006). "The destruction of Palestinian archaeological heritage: Saffa village as a model", *Near Eastern Archaeology* 69, pp. 100–112, cf. Al-Houdalieh, S. (2010). "Archaeological heritage and related institutions in the Palestinian National Territories 16 years after signing the Oslo Accords", *Present Pasts* 2 (1), pp. 31–53, cf. Yahya, A. (2008). "Looting and "salvaging", how the wall, illegal digging and the antiquities trade are ravaging Palestinian cultural heritage", *Jerusalem Quarterly* 33, pp. 39–55, cf. Yahya, A. (2010). "Looting and "salvaging" the heritage of Palestine", *Present Pasts* 2 (1), pp. 96–100, cf. Sayej, Gh. (2014). "Palestinian archaeology between political conflict and peace process", *Online Journal in Public Archaeology* 4, pp. 37-41, cf. Al-Houdalieh, S., & Tawafsha, S. (2017). "The destruction of archaeological resources in the Palestinian Territories, Area C: Kafr Shiyan as a case study", *Near Eastern Archaeology* 80 (1), pp. 40-49, cf. Al-Houdalieh, S., & Jamal, H., op. cit, pp. 489-521.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Houdalieh, S. (2013), op.cit, pp. 320-333.

weakening and breaking it with fire. Two of the team (brothers) died on the spot, and the issued autopsy report indicates that they had died due to suffocation.

Diggers are likewise aware of the potential social and legal risks involved in their illicit excavation, but their concerns are usually minimal and purely practical, expressed through comments like: "[T]o avoid the risk that might arise from discovery by the owner of the land, or by the Israeli or Palestinian authorities [we try] to extract the objects in the shortest time possible"<sup>6</sup>. However, the records of the Tourist and Antiquities Police Department indicate that numerous heated disputes have occurred over the past three decades among the antiquities looters themselves, between the looters and land owners, and between antiquities looters and employees of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. All but one of these altercations ended without actual physical harm to the participants or to their property. The exception was an incident in which a fistfight occurred in the field between four employees of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and three antiquities looters. As a result of this particular occurrence (on 3 February 2019, in the Ramallah governorate), two of the Ministry employees were hospitalized and their vehicle was severely damaged.

The main aim of this present article is to highlight the social risks attendant to antiquities looting, potential impacts not only for the looters themselves but also upon the civil peace and welfare of their fellow citizens. The methodology implemented in this research study includes several components and draws upon various resources, such as: the reports of the Palestinian security agencies (disclosure: the second author serves as Director of the Tourist and Antiquities Police Department), various media outlets, site visits, interviews with local residents of Huwwara town, the archive of the Tourist and Antiquities Police Department, and a review of the existing literature.

2. **Huwwara case:** Bellow we present four sub-topics, which are:  
Huwwara: location, population and history; the bloody quarrel;

<sup>6</sup> Al-Houdalieh, S. (2012). Op.cit, p. 117.

Participation and experience of Huwwara residents in antiquities looting; and finally, Why this house in particular?

### 2.1.Huwwara: location, population and history

The town of Huwwara (also rendered *Huwwara*) is located about 7 km south of Nablus, stretching along Road 60, a major north-south artery. It is surrounded by several other small towns and villages: A'sira al-Qibliya and Burin to the north; Za'tara and Yasuf to the south; A'warta and Beita to the east; and Jamma'in and Einabus to the west. The total area of Huwwara is approximately 8,000 dunums (one dunum equals 1,000 square meters or 0.25 acre)<sup>7</sup>, and the total population of the town in 2017 was 6,659<sup>8</sup>. The majority of the town's population is composed of three extended families (sing. *hamulah*) of patrilineal descent<sup>9</sup>. As a result of the Oslo accords signed by the Palestinian and Israeli leadership in the 1990s, the lands of Huwwara were split between two administrative areas: Area B, under Palestinian civil control but Israeli security control (38 percent of the town's land), and Area C, under full Israeli civil and security control (62 percent of Huwwara lands)<sup>10</sup>.

Huwwara and its environs include five identified archaeological sites: Kh. A'tarud, Bab Beit el-Khirbeh, et-Tira, Matar, and Quza<sup>11</sup>; collectively they contain remains dating from the Early Bronze Age (3200–2000 BCE) through the Turkish-Ottoman period (1516–1917 CE)<sup>12</sup>. Quza, the spark that ignited the latest disturbance, is located just to the south of Huwwara, and its total population as of 1961 was 148 persons<sup>13</sup>. However, the gradual southward expansion of new construction in Huwwara over the past three

<sup>7</sup> The Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem. (2014). Huwwara town profile. [http://vprofile.arij.org/nablus/pdfs/vprofile/Huwwara\\_tp\\_en.pdf](http://vprofile.arij.org/nablus/pdfs/vprofile/Huwwara_tp_en.pdf), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics. (2018). Preliminary results of the population, housing and establishment census, 2017. Ramallah: Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics, P. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Dabbagh, M. (2002-2003). *Biladuna filistin, fi el diar al nabulsiya*, second part. Kafr Qari': Dar Al-Huda, p. 359-360.

<sup>10</sup> The Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (2014), op.cit, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Dabbagh, M. (2002-2003), op.cit, p. 359-360.

<sup>12</sup> Finkelstein, I., & Lederman, Z. (eds.) (1997). *Archaeological survey of the hill country of Benjamin*. Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, pp. 675-691.

<sup>13</sup> Al-Dabbagh, M. (2002-2003), op. cit, p. 360.

decades has resulted an intermingling of the houses of the two residential centers, thus Quza has been recently considered as part of Huwwara. Quza was surveyed by C. R. Conder and H. H. Kitchener in the 1870s, when they stated that it is "a small village at the foot of the hill in an open valley, supplied by a well on the east. In the "Samaritan Chronicle" it is noticed and its ancient name given as Kirjath Tzekathah. It is possibly the Chusi of Judith"<sup>14</sup>. During a survey conducted in the 1980s, the Israel Antiquities Authority included an entry for Quza, indicating that it is an inhabited place and that "remains of the medieval ruin can be seen in the northern part of the village". The ceramic sherds collected during that survey were dated to the Iron Age II, Byzantine/Umayyad, Crusader/Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Turkish-Ottoman periods<sup>15</sup>.

## 2.2. The bloody quarrel

Based on reports provided to us by the Palestinian Police departments, Nablus Archaeology Department, and the news media, the story of this recent violent conflict can be summarized as follows: A looting gang, consisting of three males between 31 and 37 years of age, all residents of Huwwara town, started digging in an abandoned traditional house located in Quza. This occurred at approximately 5:00 pm on 18 April 2020, during the lockdown related to the coronavirus pandemic. The diggers used a metal detector and traditional equipment with the aim of extracting, for their own enrichment, any possible valuable objects. The metal detector emitted signals and the promising spots were quickly dug in search of metallic objects, but no items of value were found, only a few nails and an iron bar. About half an hour after commencing work, and while still engrossed in their digging, the looters were surprised by the arrival of the son of the house's owner. It was an embarrassing moment, because the members of two parties in fact all knew each other quite well, belonging to two branches of the same large extended family. The son asked the men to stop their digging immediately, and then called his father. When the owner of the building arrived and saw the extent

<sup>14</sup> Conder, C. R., & Kitchener, R. E. (1882). The survey of Western Palestine: memoirs of the topography, orography, hydrology: Samaria (vol. 2), London: The committee of the Palestine exploration fund. pp. 285-286.

<sup>15</sup> Finkelstein, I., & Lederman, Z. (eds.). (1997), op.cit, pp. 682-683.

of the damage caused to his property by their digging (**Fig. 1**), he responded angrily. He scolded them, confiscated the metal detector, and informed them that he would immediately inform the relevant authorities. They all then walked out of the house and left the premises. (**Figure 1**)

The same day of the crime, employees of the Tourist and Antiquities Police arrested the owner of the metal detector, and one day later a second member of this looting gang surrendered himself to the police department in Nablus. The third member of the gang had disappeared. The police officers interrogated the two suspects in custody and then transferred them, together with the interrogation reports and the seized material, to the Investigation Department of the Police Directorate, where they were questioned further. That body in turn transferred the suspects' case to the Public Prosecution, which issued a formal arrest warrant for both defendants. Then on 21 May 2020, after being in custody for about a month, the two men were released until the date of their second hearing. On 30 May 2020, nine days after the men's release, the family of one of the three defendants attacked a retail establishment operated by the complainant and set fire to it (**Fig. 2**). In response to this extreme situation, the complainant's family began firing on the attackers, resulting in two persons being killed on the spot, while a third was seriously injured and died six days later (one of the released looting suspects was among the deceased). As a reaction to the killings, other attackers then set fire to two vehicles and two additional buildings, all the private property of the complainant. On this same day, the Palestinian security agencies arrested four persons as suspects in the killings (**Fig. 3**). Later, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas offered his condolences to the family of those who were killed as a result of this deadly feud, by calling the man who was the father of two of the victims and the brother of the third. Many Palestinians considered the president's act of consolation as an important step toward calming the inflamed social situation and promoting a return to peace within the community. (**Figure 2 & Figure 3**)

### 2.3.Participation and experience of Huwwara residents in antiquities looting

Based on several previous research studies on antiquities looting and looters conducted by the first author over the past two decades, and also on the records of the Tourist and Antiquities Police Department, we can say that a large number of Huwwara residents have conducted or participated in illegal excavations. A few of them are professionals with well-developed skills and experience in fieldwork, but the great majority are amateurs. Most of the professionals have operated organized groups of three to seven persons, excavating well-known archaeological sites located both inside and outside the Nablus Governorate. The vast majority of Huwwara's antiquities looters have been lucky not to be caught red-handed, however a few have on occasion been summoned or arrested by Palestinian or Israeli security agencies. Of these, the majority were released after signing pledges not to excavate any more, while some were arrested and charged small fines, and of course had their excavation tools and any antiquities in their possession confiscated.

#### 2.4. Why this house in particular?

Our site visit and interviews with local people indicate that this house is part of a late Ottoman-era courtyard compound, formerly inhabited by members of one large extended family. Once we came into the courtyard via its main outside entrance, we noticed that the ground within is totally covered with tall seasonal plants, bushes, untrimmed pomegranate trees, and heaps of debris. Therefore, we gained the impression that this courtyard compound was being ignored by its owners. This compound consists of several houses all situated around the single courtyard (**Fig. 4**), and all of them have gradually been abandoned over the course of the past four decades. The targeted house within this compound originally consisted of two floors (**Fig. 5**) connected via an internal staircase and features a single entrance at ground level and a tall double window upstairs. The lower floor was once used for livestock and the storage of agricultural equipment, while the upper floor served as living space. To this basic structure a third (partial) level was added in the 1960s; it consists of one upstairs room and is connected with the courtyard via a cement staircase. (**Figure 4 and Figure 5**)

Through our survey of a small area located just to the north and east of this compound, we documented remains of ancient walls (**Fig. 6**), a

segment of an unpaved lane or passageway (**Fig. 7**), and several looting pits (**Fig. 8**). The remains of ancient walls are visible along the village passageways, and on a nearby parcel of agricultural land. These walls are built of stones of various sizes and stand in height from few centimeters to 1.3 m above the present ground level, and some served later as the foundations for traditional buildings that date to the late Ottoman era (**Fig. 9**). A segment of one passageway was traced for a distance of 53 m, measuring 1.2 m wide and bounded by stone walls 0.9 m in thickness. The looting pits are varied in size, shape, and depth, the largest pit measuring 4.6 m x 2,5 m x 2.1 m deep and the smallest one 1.3 m x 1 m x 0.9 m deep. Due to the growth already of seasonal plants in and around these disturbed areas, we concluded that these pits were not freshly excavated. (**Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9**)

In an attempt to ascertain why this house in particular was chosen by this looting gang for vandalism, the first author interviewed one of Huwwara's antiquities looters (a 39-year-old educated male) who is well-known to the author from a previous research project. (The second author was not involved in this interview in order to minimize the subject's possible fear of prosecution.) The brief interview was carried out in a café in Nablus, and the subject's responses are summarized as follows: I believe that they have chosen this house to dig up for four reasons: (1) They are aware that Quza is a high potential archaeological site, and therefore it deserves exploration. (2) They may have information indicating that the area of the house has never been excavated previously by diggers (antiquities looters). (3) They might have gained information indicating that the owner of the house visits the place very rarely, or even does not visit it at all; and finally, (4) Compared with the other houses of the same courtyard compound, this house is in relatively good structural condition, so it is secure to excavate in it.

### 3. Conclusions

Despite all efforts made by the Palestinians to combat antiquities looting since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994, the country's entire archaeological heritage is at serious risk. The activities of antiquities looting throughout Palestine during the last few decades have resulted in irreparable damage to the vast majority of the archaeological sites

and features; in the extraction of more than 8 million archaeological objects, almost all of which have found their way into the illegal antiquities market; and in the eruption of disputes, both major and minor, between the antiquities looters and landowners. We are aware that all these previous conflicts were resolved without any real physical harm to individuals and/or properties. However, at present we have witnessed a truly deadly incident of a kind unprecedented in the long history of antiquities looting, at least on the Palestinian scene.

In order to curb the phenomenon of antiquities looting, and the potential physical and social risks connected with it, we strongly recommend the following three measures: (1) Raising awareness among the Palestinian general public on the value and importance of cultural heritage resources, and their beneficial impacts both locally and globally. This can be achieved through school curricula, workshops, conferences, and media programs, among others. (2) Strict enforcement of the newly enacted antiquities decree, Law No. 11/2018, through the Palestinian police and court mechanisms. The implementation of the harsh provisions of this law—harsh according to some local archaeologists, anthropologists, lawyers, and intellectuals—will surely send credible signals to all would-be perpetrators. Therefore, it can be an effective mechanism for diminishing the extent of the on-going antiquities looting and the related social risks. (For further information on the provisions of this antiquities law and its enforcement, see: Abu al-Saud and Abu El-Ezz 2020; Al-Houdalieh and Jamal 2020)<sup>16</sup>. (3) Improving oversight and engaging the general public in safeguarding and protecting the archaeological and cultural heritage sites and resources. To this end, the General Directorate of the Protection Department of the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, along with the Tourist and Antiquities Police Department, should triple their staffs and budgets over the next five years, with the goal of establishing a real partnership with all components of Palestinian society. At present, the Palestinian Authority's General Directorate of the Antiquities Protection Department employs 43 officers, and the Tourist and Antiquities

<sup>16</sup> Abu al-Saud, L., & Abu El-Ezz, A. (2020). " The Palestinian tangible cultural heritage law of the year 2018", *Revue Minbar et-Tourath El-Etheri* 4 (8), pp. 148-193, cf. Al-Houdalieh, S. & Kamal. H. (2020), op.cit, 489-521.

Police Department employs 129 officers, with both entities operational only in the West Bank (Gaza has been excluded due to the difficulty of obtaining the necessary information from the equivalent enforcement bodies there). At present, approximately 90 percent of the annual budgets of the two above-mentioned institutions of the West Bank is allocated to employee salaries, with the balance earmarked for building capacity and organizing events.

#### 4. Illustrations:

Figure 1: One of the excavated spots in the targeted house.



Photo by the Tourist and Antiquities Police Department.

Figure 2: The store owned by the complainant is engulfed in flames.



Source: <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2020/05/31/1340994.html>

Figure 3: The targeted courtyard compound in Quza, looking south.



Photo by the authors.

Figure 4: The targeted house in Quza, looking south.



Photo by the authors.

Figure 5: Remains of ancient walls just outside the targeted courtyard, looking east.



Photo by the authors.

Figure 6: Segment of a traditional village passageway, looking north.



Photo by the authors.

Figure 7: A looting pit, located to the northeast of the targeted courtyard, looking east.



Photo by the authors.

Figure 8: Remains of an ancient wall (bottom courses) which later served as the foundation for a late Ottoman structure, located northeast of the targeted courtyard; view looking west.



Photo by the authors.

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