International Conference

Palestinian Heritage in Peril

Collect, Preserve, Reconstruct

May 18th-19th, 2027
Auditorium of the School of Languages and Civilisations, Bulac
65 rue des Grands Moulins,
75013 Paris

The ongoing destruction of the Gaza Strip for over two years has severely damaged most vital infrastructure, professional sectors, heritage sites, and cultural venues. As a result, UNESCO has documented the destruction of more than a hundred heritage, archaeological, and cultural sites, many of which, like schools and hospitals, are targeted by the Israeli military. In this context, the "Gaza Histoire" project (https://gazahistoire.hypotheses.org/) has made it its mission to document the history, destruction, and reconstruction of these heritage sites. This conference builds on and presents the collective's work over the past two years.

This campaign of cultural destruction is not a recent phenomenon, and 2023 has merely served to brutally accelerate long-standing practices. The idea of erasing or preventing cultural expression and heritage preservation in Gaza and more broadly in Palestine is part of Israeli policies aimed at erasing, reappropriating, or even destroying Palestine's cultural heritage.

The preservation of Palestinian heritage is inextricably linked to Palestinian history, whether in Mandatory Palestine or in exile, and to the history of colonization. Control over certain historical sites and biblical archaeology lies at the heart of the strategy to construct an Israeli national narrative. Palestinian history is marked by examples that underscore the centrality of heritage issues: villages abandoned or destroyed from the Nakba to the present; archives and libraries confiscated, lost, or destroyed; and, more classically, the gradual erasure of certain artistic practices under the influence of globalization—such as the tradition of icons in the face of the heritagization or even folklorization of certain material cultures, such as embroidery. The Palestinian experience of heritage thus sheds light, in many respects, on contemporary issues of preservation and restitution of material and intangible culture. Examples include the initiatives of Widad Kawar (Jordan) in support of the preservation of Palestinian material culture, or those of Anne-Marie Schayegh (Lebanon) in the field of Palestinian oral history. In the same vein, the preservation of libraries and written, visual, and audio archives—particularly private ones—has long held a central place within Palestinian institutions, such as *the Institute for Palestine Studies*, through private collections, or more recently through digitization projects led by the Museum of the Palestinian People, despite the long absence of an official archival policy. Finally, architects play a central role in

safeguarding built heritage, as exemplified by initiatives led by the Riwaq Center for Architectural Conservation.

Palestine has long been a particularly complex and instructive case for examining the challenges of heritage preservation amid war and colonialism. However, the past two years have seen an acceleration of efforts to erase Palestinian heritage; it is important to situate these within a long-term historical context to better understand the contemporary heritage crisis and the mobilizations it has sparked. **This international conference aims to examine how heritage is currently threatened and rendered invisible in Palestine (in Gaza, but also in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and within present-day Israeli territory) when it is not simply destroyed. The aim is to document acts of obstruction and resistance, as well as the processes of safeguarding and appropriating a diverse heritage across the territories of Palestine.** This involves international and Palestinian cultural and economic actors, as well as the local populations living in these areas and striving to remain there. A **comparative dimension** will be developed with other cultural areas where heritage is threatened or has disappeared, in order to grasp the specificities of the Palestinian context.

Axis 1. Written heritage: archives, registers of knowledge, and representations

Beginning in the late 19th century, Palestine and its major cities played a central role in the *Nahda* movement—the Arab intellectual renaissance—as well as in the revival of biblical studies. Palestine already possessed a dense and rich written heritage, linked in particular to the presence of the holy sites in Jerusalem, Hebron, and Safed, as well as to missionary activity. This produced a considerable body of documentary and archival material produced by government agencies, intellectuals, missionaries, photographers, religious institutions, associations, and political parties, as well as tourism agencies, industries, and manufacturers. A significant portion of these documentary resources has now been destroyed or confiscated by Israeli archival institutions or private collectors, or scattered as a result of successive migrations and exiles. Several archival collections and preservation initiatives nevertheless remain—such as the Dome of the Rock archives or those of Abu Dis, among others. These initiatives are sometimes led by folklorists, such as the collection of amulets gathered by Tawfiq Canaan and donated to the Birzeit University Museum. Similarly, Palestinian intellectual vitality has long been evident in the existence of numerous private libraries, rich in documentary resources. These collections, however, face several major challenges: the absence or weakness of structured archival policies; the fragility of certain collections, particularly rare documents from the medieval or Ottoman periods; and insufficient resources dedicated to cataloging, conservation, and promotion. Furthermore, these archives are constantly caught up in conflicts over legitimacy between Israelis and Palestinians, which concern both the ownership of the documents and, implicitly, the historical narratives they allow to be established or reconstructed. The war in Gaza has, moreover, revealed, on a large scale, the mechanisms of a deliberate strategy for the systematic destruction of documentary and archival collections—libraries, archives, and other heritage collections.

Contributions under this first theme will address **strategies for preserving and reclaiming this heritage**, with particular attention to the role **of digital technology in recent years**. What are the effects of this digitization on the production of knowledge about Palestine? Can the production of fakes reshape discourses on the region's history when generative AI enables the creation of fake archives? How can we continue to generate knowledge about territories marked by the destruction or seizure of archives and documentation? What mobilizations and modes of action are being deployed to safeguard this written heritage, and who are the key actors? Finally, what legal questions do these preservation endeavors raise? Contributions that offer a comparative perspective on other regions or areas facing targeted and systematic destruction of their written heritage, and that highlight contextual approaches to addressing these challenges, will be particularly welcome.

Theme 2. Built Heritage

Built heritage in Palestine is, par excellence, a space of heritage tensions. To be convinced of this, one need only recall the diplomatic crisis that followed UNESCO's inscription of the Old City of Hebron, including the Tomb of the Patriarchs, on the World Heritage List. The approach to this heritage is marked by the diversity of the issues it raises.

First and foremost is the destruction or inaccessibility of built heritage, whether rural or urban, particularly in villages abandoned during the Nakba. Added to this is another form of disappearance, often linked to the limited heritage value attributed to certain architectural styles, particularly those from the Mamluk, Ottoman, or Mandate periods. Their preservation is now a central concern for certain Palestinian architects, who are committed to safeguarding both the heritage and the craftsmanship spanning different periods of Palestinian history. For example, the Riwaq collective of architects is working to inventory and document built heritage, particularly that inherited from the Ottoman era. There is also the question of recognition, as well as techniques for renovating and reconstructing a heritage that is often disputed and frequently threatened by processes of appropriation or expropriation. This issue particularly concerns holy sites and, more broadly, all sites belonging to a monumental religious topography.

The degradation and erasure of Gaza's heritage raise several questions. How can we document the destruction and what has disappeared? How has exponential urban development enabled the preservation of diverse architectural forms, and, in turn, how can we study urban history and geography in the absence of traces? To assess and analyze these issues, it is particularly important to consider the significance and preservation of iconographic sources (buildings, plans, maps), which enable documentation of spaces, territories, and places that have now entirely disappeared.

The contributions from this panel will raise questions about the roles of archaeologists, experts, and architects in documenting and preserving architectural forms that have now disappeared or, at the very least, are seriously threatened. More broadly, the issue of built heritage raises questions about the attention it receives and the prioritization of public policies, whether by the Palestinian Authority, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, or

other bodies. Issues related to built heritage in Palestine are also deeply shaped by questions of ownership, which place archives at the heart of preservation strategies. In this context, it will be necessary to examine, over the long term, the attention paid to Palestinian built heritage across different actors and periods: which built heritage generates interest, and what strategies are used to promote it, whether for tourism or other purposes. How can the organization of exhibitions abroad contribute to the preservation of Palestinian heritage? Finally, this heritage is intrinsically linked, particularly during times of war, to smuggling and the economy of archaeological objects and artifacts. In a context of blockade, heritage objects from Gaza circulate via clandestine or digital networks**.** Revenues, often monopolized by intermediaries**,** stem from an economy of scarcity, where the value of goods is amplified by their conflict-ridden provenance. This trend, much like the period from 1939 to 1945, highlights the tensions between preserving and monetizing cultural heritage in times of crisis.

How can we understand and interpret the specific nature of these issues in light of the destruction associated with contemporary conflicts, by situating them within a broader historical perspective across different eras—notably in light of documented phenomena of massification and technological developments, particularly within the European contexts of the two world wars?

Axis 3. Intangible Heritage

A third aspect of heritage practices concerns intangible heritage and lived practices. Daily, artisanal, and artistic practices (in music, embroidery, visual arts, theater, dance, etc.), as well as artisanal know-how, are profoundly affected by the upheaval of ecosystems linked to the genocidal acceleration of colonization in Palestine. Israeli attacks on intangible heritage—in its artisanal, cultural, popular, and artistic dimensions—are nothing new. The idea of eradicating culture has been central to Israeli colonial policy since the destruction of 1948 in Mandatory Palestine. The years of military occupation from 1967 through the 1990s saw Israel implement a policy aimed at preventing all forms of Palestinian cultural expression, including the closure of art galleries, cinemas, and theaters, and the banning of festivals. The Oslo process and the Second Intifada after 2000 imposed new restrictions on movement and the requirement for permits, hindering cultural mobility. But the past two years mark a further step in this ongoing process, exemplified in Gaza, where attacks on cultural heritage have also targeted cultural figures and actors, such as journalists and artists, as well as representatives of other professional groups (journalists, doctors, and academics).

Contributions may address the challenges of safeguarding this heritage in Palestine or elsewhere, given its multifaceted nature: for instance, certain intangible heritage practices intersect with economic activities, such as olive harvesting or soap production, particularly in Nablus. These practices, like intangible cultural heritage as a whole, are severely threatened by the scale of past and ongoing environmental destruction and soil pollution, particularly in Wadi Gaza. What aspects of Palestinian life—at the intersection of production, the assertion of identity and collective identity, and artistic expression—are targeted when intangible

cultural heritage is targeted? Moreover, artists, intellectuals, and ordinary people alike continue to transmit and create despite the destruction, constituting a form of living resistance, whether through personal or collective forms of creation: sketchbooks, music workshops, etc. Contributions may thus analyze how artists and cultural practitioners mobilize in the face of destruction, how practices and imaginaries reconfigure themselves to resist this environment and constitute genuine practices and repertoires of survival. Who are the actors involved in these practices aimed at reviving memory practices, and what is the role of intergenerational transmission? More generally, how do cultural and artistic practices help preserve hope and transmission? Particular attention may be given to studying how displaced persons, refugees, and members of the Palestinian diaspora preserve and transmit intangible cultural practices by examining the mechanisms of resilience, adaptation, or disappearance of these practices in situations of exile.

Theme 4: Reconstructing Lost Heritage

More generally, a final theme may be devoted to reconstructing or restoring destroyed or lost cultural heritage. Through discourse analysis, papers may examine competing narratives surrounding reconstruction projects. We are thinking in particular of Donald Trump's statements regarding the potential implementation of a "Riviera"-style project on the site of present-day Gaza City. Contributions may also revisit the international legal response to question the authority of the actors involved in these processes of reparation and reconstruction. The aim will thus be to analyze these projects in terms of their competing dimensions and what they reveal about the political and social visions envisaged for the future of these territories. Proposals may also examine international legal responses (conventions, resolutions, sanction mechanisms) and question the role, legitimacy, and effectiveness of the actors involved in reparation and reconstruction efforts**.**

This research area may also examine the economics of heritage restoration and the construction sector by analyzing the utopian or dystopian visions associated with these projections and aspirations for reconstruction, whether concerning built heritage or material heritage more broadly. One example is the initiative already underway to reconstruct part of the manuscripts from the al-'Umari Mosque collection in Gaza. It will thus be necessary to revisit both the proposed projects and heritage doctrines, as well as heritage and architectural techniques, and, more broadly, the materialities envisioned to implement these processes of reconstruction or reconstitution. Particular attention may also be paid to virtual or digital reconstructions, whether in the form of three-dimensional models or imaging technologies that enable the restoration of vanished urban and social realities.

Finally, the issue of reconstruction—particularly of documentary collections—may be linked to restitution. Presentations may thus connect the challenges of reconstruction with potential claims for the restitution of archaeological artifacts, works of art, written heritage, or manuscript collections made by Palestinian authorities, whether directed at Israeli authorities or former colonial powers, as well as to the states and institutions in Europe or North America that hold this type of heritage.

****

Proposals for papers should be submitted in English or French to veronique.bontemps[at]cnrs.fr, norig.neveu[at]univ-amu.fr, and Syrine.Saltaji[at]univ-paris1.fr by October 15, 2026, at the latest. Applicants will receive a response in mid-November. Abstracts should specify the sources and fieldwork that the presentation will be based on. They must not exceed 500 words and should be accompanied by a brief author biography (250 words max).

The conference is intended to produce a collective publication. Therefore, preliminary contributions must be submitted by April 15, 2027, to facilitate discussion. Following the conference, a first draft of the article is due by December 15, 2027 (publication is scheduled for late 2028–early 2029).

Organizing Committee:
Raphaël Banc-Lévêque
Véronique Bontemps
Fadime Deli
Sébastien Haule
Flore Heinrich
Marion Lauréat Macé
Norig Neveu
Syrine Saltaji
Fabrice Virgili