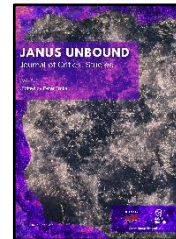


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Letter from Palestine:

Heyam Ihsan Ibrahim Al-Bittar: Guardian of Gaza's Endangered Heritage

Loay Abu Alsaud

Introduction

Heyam Ihsan Ibrahim Al-Bittar is a pioneering Palestinian archaeologist, educator, and cultural heritage specialist and the only female archaeologist currently working in the Gaza Strip. Since 2009, she has served as an Archaeological Supervisor in the Department of Archaeological Studies and Research at the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in Gaza. In a region which has endured routine bombardments, mass displacements and the destruction of the built environment and infrastructure, her dedication to preserving both the tangible and intangible history of Gaza throughout the ongoing genocide has leant a particular urgency to her work and research.

Al-Bittar studied History, Archaeology and Social Studies at the Islamic University of Gaza before graduating with a Master's degree in History in 2023. Her master's thesis, entitled *The History and Architecture of the Al-Umari Great Mosque of Gaza*, constitutes a landmark study, documenting the epigraphic and architectural elements of one of Palestine's most significant religious and cultural monuments. Her interdisciplinary training has been applied through archaeological fieldwork, historical research, advocacy and policymaking around the conservation of Gazan cultural heritage sites. She has been responsible for supervising multiple excavations, producing detailed technical reports and leading conservation initiatives at archaeological sites across the Gaza Strip, including Tell el-Sakan, Blakhiyyeh, Jabaliya, and Umm al-'Amr. Al-Bittar has also played a key role as a curator at the Archaeological Museum of Gaza and in organizing exhibitions in cities including Deir al-Balah, Rafah and Khan Younis. She has also represented Gaza on several expert committees dedicated to safeguarding Palestinian heritage and promoting awareness in both local and international forums.

From 2008 to 2015, Al-Bittar contributed to academic life as a Teaching Assistant in the Faculty of Arts at the Islamic University of Gaza. She has previously taught courses in archaeology, architectural history, excavation methods, restoration and museology, educating future generations about critically endanger-

ed cultural heritage. During this period, she authored several studies on Gaza's ancient history, including on the Canaanite period and the legacy of Ottoman-era military architecture. In recognition of her research excellence, she was awarded the Islamic University's Scientific Research Prize for best graduate thesis.

In October 2023, following the intensification of Israeli bombardment on Gaza, Al-Bittar's work took on an even greater urgency. The Great Omari Mosque—an emblem of Islamic civilization and the focus of her master's thesis—was severely damaged. Shortly after, Al-Bittar was displaced multiple times during the intensive shelling of her neighbourhood, sleeping with her four children and elderly mother in local schools and makeshift shelters. Reflecting on the conditions there she said to me in personal conversation: “There is no electricity at all. All day long, we hear nothing but the sounds of missiles and explosions—they never stop for even a moment. We can see tanks in the streets, even just a kilometer away from the building we're hiding in. My young children are terrified by the bombing, and my mother, who suffers from heart disease and high blood pressure, is also extremely afraid and constantly anxious. We barely sleep, and even when we do, our sleep is interrupted. Still, we cannot leave the city because of my mother's condition—she cannot walk—so we are forced to stay here.” Amid internet disruptions, airstrikes, and daily threats to life she was nonetheless able to send a digital copy of her thesis out of Gaza, ensuring that a critical piece of Gaza's history could be preserved.

In the face of catastrophic destruction, with archives incinerated by Israeli bombardment and books being burned as fuel and with all of Gaza's universities having been partially or totally destroyed, Al-Bittar's research has become an act of cultural defiance under exceptional circumstances. Her meticulous recording of inscriptions and architectural elements at the Great Omari Mosque now stands as one of the only surviving testimonies to the site's rich and diverse heritage.



Figure 1 Heyam Al-Bittar in 29 Augustus 2022 (Source: JINHA). <https://jin-haagency1.com/ar/althqaft-w-alfn/mhawlat-lhmayt-almbany-alathryt-bmdynt-ghzt-33522>

In 2024, she was selected by the Palestinian American Research Center (PARC) Board of Directors as the 2025–2026 Tanya Baker-Asad Scholar at the Pant-héon-Sorbonne in Paris. The scholarship was intended to support her continued research on Islamic architecture and heritage preservation but due to the ongoing siege on Gaza, she has been prevented from leaving the Strip to begin her doctoral studies.

Despite this, Al-Bittar continues to advocate for the protection and promotion of Palestinian heritage. Her career exemplifies an unwavering commitment to scholarship and public service: a vision of resilience despite the extraordinary dangers and obstacles she continues to face.

In spite of being under-researched and poorly documented, Palestinian women have been active in archaeological excavation and research for at least a century. Yusra Al-Ḥaifawiyah, for example, was the first known Palestinian woman to participate in professional archaeological excavations, working alongside British archaeologist Dorothy Garrod and several other local Bedouin women in the Mount Carmel caves between 1929 and 1935. As site forewoman Yusra made a landmark discovery of a Neanderthal skull, known as *Tabun 1*, thought to be the “missing link” between Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens and considered one of the most significant paleoanthropological finds of the 20th century. She dreamed of studying at Cambridge, a vision supported by Garrod. Despite her considerable skill in the field, Yusra was displaced and likely killed during the events of the 1948 Nakba. Her story only resurfaced in 1997 thanks to Pamela Jane Smith, who rediscovered Garrod’s lost archive in France.

The case tragically mirrors the situation of Gaza’s sole woman archaeologist today. Without an active approach to reappraising archives that ensures that displaced and killed researchers are not written out of scholarly histories, Pales-

tinian women in particular risk being consigned to the same obscurity that Yusra endured for decades.



Figure 2 Yusra with Dorothy Garrod at Mount Carmel in 1934. Image 1998.294.52, reproduced here with permission from the Dorothy Garrod Archive, Pitt Rivers Museum.

Biography

Loay Abu Alsaud is Director of the Department of Social Sciences and Associate Professor of Archaeology at An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine since 2012. He supervised archaeological excavations at sites in Nablus including Tell Sufan, Khirbet Al Shiekh Hemeed, Monastery of Bir Al-Hamam, and the Old City of Nablus. He has published many articles about the archaeology of the Roman and Byzantine periods in the Nablus area, in English, Spanish, and Arabic, in regional and international journals. Faculty of Humanities and Educational Sciences, An-Najah National University, Nablus, Palestine. E-mail: loayabualsaud@najah.edu. Website: www.najah.edu.

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