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Archaeology, War, and Colonial Heritage in Regimes in the  
West Bank, Palestine

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## **The Governance of the Past: Archaeology, War, and Colonial Heritage Regimes in the West Bank, Palestine**

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The recent approval, on 20 May, 2026, by the Israeli government of a plan allocating 250 million shekels (approximately 118 million Canadian dollars) for the development and control of archaeological and heritage sites in the occupied West Bank, the Jordan Valley, and the Hebron Desert represents a deeply alarming escalation in the politicization of archaeology and cultural heritage. The announced measures, which include the construction of new heritage centers, tourism infrastructure, and the expansion of Israeli administrative authority over archaeological sites, must not be viewed merely as cultural or touristic initiatives. Rather, they form part of a broader political and colonial project aimed at reshaping the historical landscape of the occupied Palestinian territories and consolidating Israeli territorial claims through the selective governance of the past.

Archaeology should remain a scientific and humanitarian discipline dedicated to the preservation, study, and interpretation of shared human history. Across the world, archaeological heritage belongs not only to individual nations but also to humanity as a whole. However, in situations of prolonged military occupation and settler colonial expansion, archaeology is frequently transformed into a political instrument. In the occupied Palestinian territories, archaeological narratives have increasingly been mobilized to justify territorial annexation, alter historical memory, and legitimize the expansion of settlements considered illegal under international law.

Particularly alarming are recent legislative efforts to establish an “Israeli Antiquities Authority” with jurisdiction over archaeological sites in the occupied West Bank. Such initiatives directly undermine international legal frameworks governing the protection of cultural heritage in occupied territories. They stand in contradiction to the principles of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, as well as UNESCO conventions that prohibit the appropriation or unilateral transformation of cultural heritage under occupation. Cultural heritage in occupied territories must, accordingly, be protected, preserved, and managed in cooperation with the oc-

cupied population, not appropriated as an extension of military and political control.

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has strongly condemned Israel's recent decision to classify 63 archaeological sites in the occupied West Bank as "Israeli heritage." According to the Applied Research Institute–Jerusalem (ARIJ), 58 of these sites are in the Nablus Governorate, one in Salfit, and two in Ramallah. ARIJ further reports that Israel has already classified more than 2,400 Palestinian archaeological and heritage sites across the West Bank as part of Israeli heritage infrastructure. These figures reflect not isolated incidents, but rather a systematic policy aimed at the appropriation, reinterpretation, and administrative control of Palestinian cultural landscapes.

The implications of these actions extend far beyond archaeology itself. Heritage is inseparable from identity, collective memory, and the cultural continuity of communities. Palestinian archaeological sites, historic villages, sacred landscapes, and cultural monuments form an essential component of Palestinian historical identity and cultural existence. Any unilateral attempt to reframe or absorb these sites into an exclusively Israeli national narrative threatens the integrity, authenticity, and historical context of the heritage itself. Such practices contribute to the erasure of Palestinian historical presence and risk transforming archaeology into a mechanism of exclusion rather than a bridge between cultures.

The governance of archaeology under conditions of military occupation raises urgent ethical questions for the international academic and heritage community. Archaeology cannot be separated from the political realities in which it operates. Excavations, conservation projects, tourism infrastructure, naming practices, and heritage classifications all carry political implications when undertaken in occupied territories without the participation and consent of the indigenous population. In this context, the creation of archaeological parks, heritage trails, and tourism projects linked to settlements contributes not only to the physical fragmentation of Palestinian land but also to the symbolic colonization of historical narratives.

These developments are taking place amid unprecedented violence and instability in the occupied Palestinian territories. Since October 2023, more than 1,000 Palestinians in the West Bank have reportedly been killed and over 7,000 injured. At the same time, settlement expansion, land confiscation, and restrictions on Palestinian movement have intensified significantly. Against this backdrop, the expansion of Israeli control over archaeological sites cannot be understood in isolation from the broader mechanisms of occupation and territorial consolidation.

Furthermore, these actions directly contradict the July 2024 advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice, which declared Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories illegal and called for the evacuation of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Continued efforts to institutionalize Israeli control over Palestinian archaeological sites therefore not only violate international cultural heritage conventions but also challenge the broader

international legal consensus concerning the occupied status of these territories.

The international community must recognize that the struggle over archaeology in Palestine is not simply a debate about stones, ruins, or ancient history. It is fundamentally a struggle over narrative, sovereignty, memory, and the right of peoples to preserve and interpret their own cultural heritage. The selective use of archaeology to support contemporary political agendas undermines the credibility of the discipline itself and risks turning cultural heritage into an instrument of domination rather than preservation.



*Figure 1: Israeli forces raid the archaeological site in the town of Sebastia (W/FAA Archive, 02/12/ 2025).*

UNESCO, international archaeological associations, universities, museums, and heritage organizations must therefore take immediate and responsible action. Silence in the face of such developments risks normalizing the politicization and colonial appropriation of archaeology in occupied territories. International institutions should actively support the protection of Palestinian cultural heritage, promote independent monitoring of endangered archaeological sites, and reject unilateral measures that violate international law and professional ethical standards.

Academic institutions and archaeologists worldwide also bear a moral responsibility to defend the principles of ethical archaeology and heritage justice. Archaeology should contribute to dialogue, coexistence, and the protection of human history in all its diversity—not to exclusion, dispossession, or colonial expansion. The safeguarding of Palestinian cultural heritage is therefore not solely a Palestinian issue; it is a global responsibility tied to the protection of humanity's shared past and the defense of international cultural and legal norms.

## The Governance of the Past

The governance of the past in Palestine has become inseparable from the politics of the present. Unless the international community acts decisively, archaeology risks becoming yet another arena through which occupation, territorial control, and historical erasure are institutionalized under the language of heritage preservation.

### Biography

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