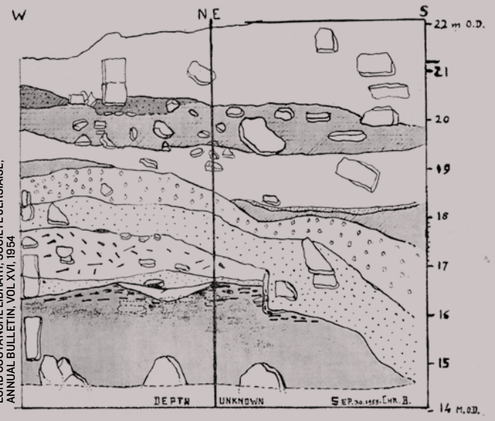
Under the surface, the ground holds layers of evidence – both human and non-human. Strata can describe moments in geological time (below), as well as relatively more recent human civilisation. A 4,500-year-old settlement was uncovered by Palestinian and French archaeologists in 1998 at Tell es Sakan (opposite). The site has since been periodically threatened with destruction by both Israeli and Hamas forces

The ground bears evidence of the violence suffered by the Palestinian people, as well as their resilience, writes *Dima Srouji*

Depth unknown



LORD COUTANCHE LIBRARY, SOCIÉTÉ JERSIAISE. ANNUAL BULLETIN, VOL XVI, 1954

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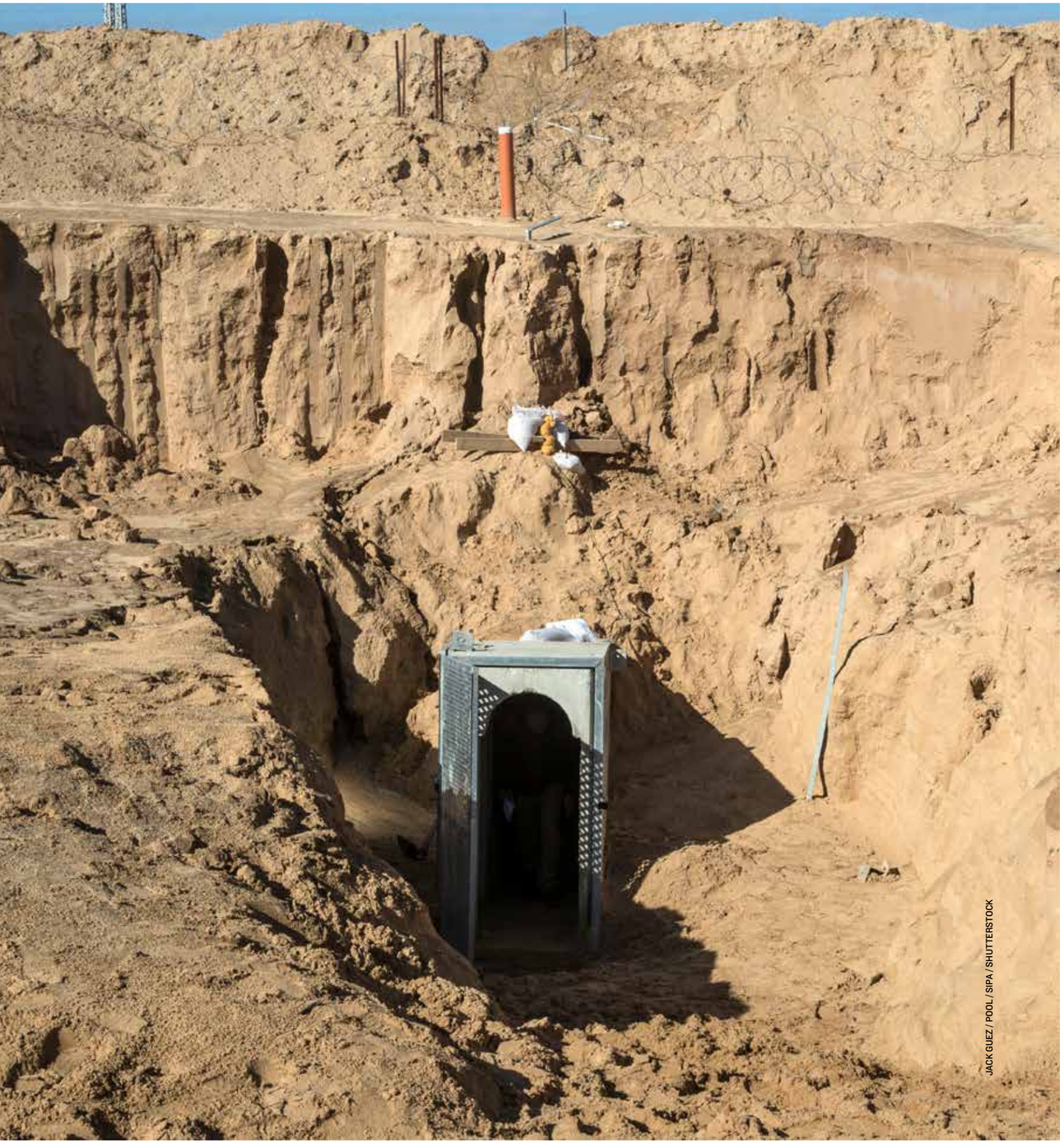
Geomolg, the national GIS (geographic information system) of the State of Palestine, recently resumed full functionality after years of technical issues and slow performance. Upon loading, the system focuses on Gaza City by default, displaying 2024 satellite imagery. Comparing this with satellite images from 2021 reveals a staggering level of destruction. Even for those who have closely followed the situation, the extent of the devastation is shocking. Acres of agricultural land have been replaced by the blue pixels of temporary tents. The landscape is pockmarked with craters the size of buildings. Olive trees have been uprooted, their places now marked by the tracks of tanks. It is troubling to imagine where these trees might have ended up, possibly shading a pavement in Tel Aviv. The destruction is everywhere, in the north, in the south, in Rafah, Gaza City, the refugee camps, the beach, the agricultural areas to the east, in the valleys. When Gazans say there is no safe place, this satellite imagery stands as evidence.

These marks – the tracks of tanks, the craters of bombs, the destroyed buildings – are the surface readings of genocide, etched into the earth. The tank tracks curve, loop, across large swathes of the Gaza Strip like the traces of a kitchen towel wiping dirt off a dusty table. But this is only the surface of a complex and entangled subterranean web of time, memory, life and death. Beneath the surface of the Gaza Strip are hundreds of ancient archaeological sites with an archive of further and deeper evidence. According to the French archaeologist René Elter, the entire strip, particularly along the coast, is an archaeological site. The sites are still being discovered: during construction works in 2022, an ancient burial site was found in Beit Lahia, just north of Gaza City. The site, less than a mile from the ancient port of Anthedon, revealed 125 tombs, many of which contained intact skeletons.

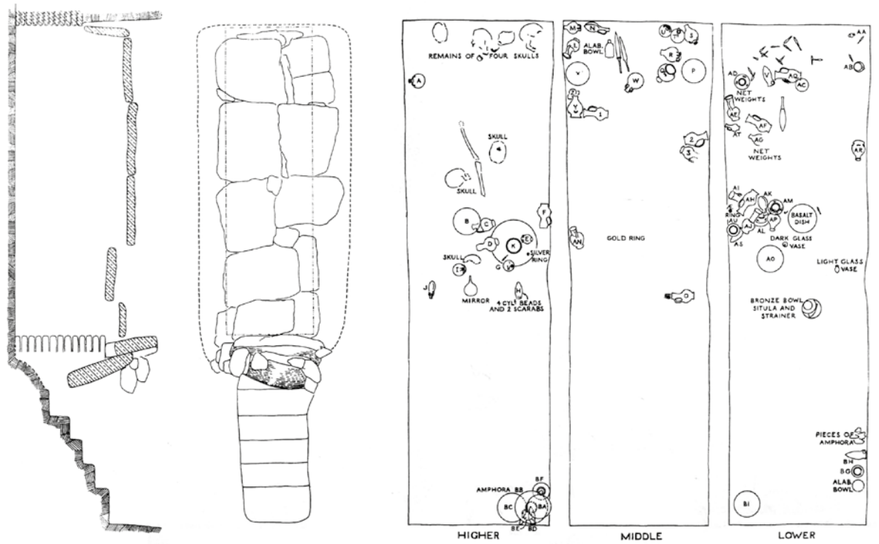
These traces have been laid horizontally along the surface of the earth, and as time passes, history can be read vertically through the stack of layers. Each stratum contains within it marks from a particular period, and as time moves forward, the marks are made vertically. This cross-section, in archaeology and geology called the law of superposition, allows time to be understood linearly in the ground. These disciplines attempt to discipline time so that it forms neat layers, but the presence of the Palestinian people has a different way of leaving traces. For a Palestinian farmer in Beit Lahia, a stone that sticks out strangely in their field could either be the tip of a buried tomb thousands of years old, or the hidden entrance to a tunnel built in the last few decades.

Though separated by millennia, these two spaces are not unlike



JACK GUEZ / POOL / SIPA / SHUTTERSTOCK

‘The tunnels are accidentally archaeological in their depth and entanglement with the other strata’



While archaeologists and geologists hope to understand the ground linearly, with layers neatly stacked according to their time in the ground, this is often not the case in Gaza. Tombs like those of Tel el Ajjul (below), forensically documented by a team led by Flinders Petrie in the 1930s, have been shuffled by the digging of Palestinian tunnels (opposite)

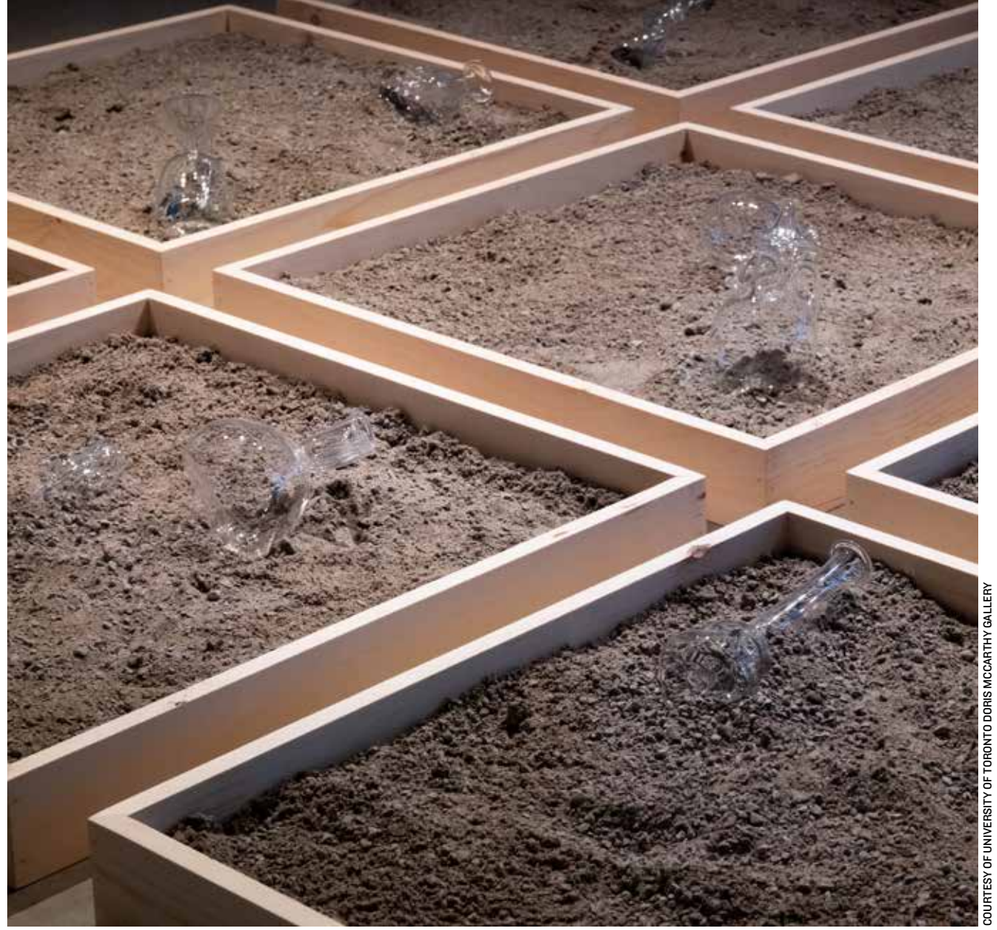
each other – subterranean architecture offering room for memory, ritual and shelter of and for the living as well as the dead. Each bombing of Gaza has pushed the resistance further into the ground, argues Eyal Weizman, turning the ‘axis of conflict’ 90 degrees. In his 2021 article ‘Tunnel Vision’ in the *London Review of Books*, he describes how Gaza’s first tunnels, dug in 1982 to connect two parts of Rafah after the city was divided, have since been used for the flow of medical supplies, food and weapons into the strip. For the last 40 years, tunnels have been destroyed and redug, expanded, extended and redirected. This infrastructure for movement, built over many years, is an architectural feat. Palestinians use the tunnels to travel from Gaza to Egypt, to receive an education in Cairo, or from Egypt to Gaza to visit their families and deliver medicines to their grandparents. The tunnels serve not only the militants who have one idea of Palestinian liberation, but also Palestinians who exercise liberation through the right to movement. ‘The sides of the tunnel walls were smooth in some sections and rocky in others,’ describes an anonymous witness in the 2021 book *Open Gaza: Architectures of Hope*, edited by Michael Sorkin and Deen Sharp. She was navigating the tunnels to get to her family. ‘My nerves began to get the best of me as we sat looking toward the end of the tunnel for any movement.’

This constantly changing, compressing, expanding network touches the surface in residential gardens and courtyards, car parks and alleyways across the strip. Interlaced with the tunnels, archaeological sites now no longer read stratigraphically; the ground’s verticality has been shuffled. It is not unlikely that the process of digging the tunnels of resistance led to the accidental excavation and exhumation of some of our ancestors and their goods. The tunnels themselves are accidentally archaeological in their depth and entanglement with the other strata. The ground acts as a complex field of contestation, resisting occupation and genocide; remnants of Palestinian ancestors interlock with excavated tunnels that provide Gazans with access to medicine and strength.

Above ground, the surface of Gaza, like the rest of Palestine, is scattered with thousands of ancient *tells* (mounds), like molehills, covering tombs that were once used for mourning rituals. Shovels, baskets and Palestinian labour were used by British and American archaeologists as early as the 19th century for excavations across historic Palestine. In Sebastia, north-west of Nablus in the West Bank, hundreds of Palestinian women were compelled to excavate a site of which they were the owners. In 1908, they were forced to cut down their own orchards and groves, which they had cultivated

‘British archaeologists disciplined the objects into endless lists, severed from their context and life’

COURTESY OF THE PALESTINE EXPLORATION FUND, LONDON



COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO DORIS MCCARTHY GALLERY

The labour of excavation on archaeological sites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was commonly undertaken by Palestinian women (opposite), often those whose land was being dug up by British archaeologists. The installation *Maternal Exhumations* from 2012 (left), by the author of this keynote essay, Dima Srouji, is an ode to these women, imagining a day when the artefacts they exhumed return to the soil

for generations, for the excavations to take place. Their hands were responsible for the exhumation of thousands of artefacts which were then taken to different museums in the US, UK, Turkey and Jordan.

The value of these artefacts to the Palestinian people is spiritual. Our ancestral memories are embedded in them: the depicted goddesses resemble our maternal ancestors’ figures; the vessels are still often made and used by craftspeople in Palestine today; the human remains are in some cases our direct biological ancestors. But the value these artefacts hold for archaeological institutions in the west is not the same. The artefacts take on an entirely different role when they are displaced and on display in glass vitrines in London or Istanbul. There, separated from the ground, they perform a nation-building agenda, generating financial and cultural value for the nation that looted them. The small glass figure of the goddess Astarte, for example, is a spectacle in the Victoria & Albert Museum’s Glass Gallery. Millions of people have seen her in her vitrine over decades and have most likely not questioned the location of the soil from which she was extracted, by whom, or how she arrived there. Instead, visitors probably appreciate the museum for providing this educational and cultural experience in Britain.

Having separated Palestinians from their land and their artefacts, British archaeologists performed another level of separation, ‘disciplining’ the objects into endless lists, severed from their context and life. In four excavation reports, published as *Ancient Gaza* between 1931 and 1934, the eugenicist and archaeologist Flinders Petrie listed every artefact found in the archaeological site of Tell el Ajjul in Gaza. This morbid list of grave goods and human remains is not unlike the recent list of tens of thousands of names released by the Palestinian Ministry of Health, naming the Palestinians who have been killed since October 2023. The tombs of Tell el Ajjul were also documented on hundreds of ‘tomb cards’, archaeological records illustrated and annotated by Petrie and his team during the excavations – and now held in the UCL Department of Archaeology archives. On the front, the cards feature drawings of the tomb layouts, including the human remains, the position they were found in and the artefacts buried along with them. So-called grave goods – including pottery, jewellery, tools, inscriptions, vessels full of perfume for the afterlife, and other objects for burial rituals – are documented on the back, with descriptions of their dimensions, orientation and other notes Petrie and his team found worthy of mention. Some of the burial rituals described on these tomb cards remain today, including the Christian tradition of placing roses on tombs and graves, a ritual repeated on a daily basis in Gaza.

The contemporary Geomolg satellite imagery of the area surrounding Tell el Ajjul shows the site covered in mounds of rubble, buildings that have been bombed and evidence of the lives that have been lost. The *tells*, layered with architectural debris, everyday artefacts like pottery and cosmetic vessels, and human remains, are now paralleled by new mounds of destruction. The contemporary mounds, formed from the rubble of bombed buildings and shattered structures, hold within them the truth; they are witnesses to genocide. Palestinian parents who were preparing family lunches, children intent on their homework, or playing board games, are now part of this archaeology. Their remains are evidence of Palestinian life, preserved in the ground; as such, their deaths do not end their roles as active members of the Palestinian resistance. Gazans beneath the rubble may in fact still be alive now, a stratum of living evidence. Describing the ground as an archaeology of the living and the dead, in the case of Gaza, is literal.

The town of Sebastia is a living and breathing archaeological site: the ruins are above ground rather than subterranean and are used as if they were built precisely for this current community. The Roman amphitheatre is still used as a performance space, the Roman forum as a sports ground and a wedding venue, the ancient colonnade as a lovers’ walk. These sites are a reminder that archaeology does not conform to Petrie’s definition; the ruins of Sebastia are not merely property of the deceased to be collected by institutions. Instead, they are contemporary monuments that are used every day by the living community. The colonial methods of extraction and classification of soil, minerals, relics and other resources from the ground – which persist today – deny communities their historical claims to the land. This extractive approach often strips away the cultural context and significance of these artefacts, reducing them to mere objects of study, exotic spectacles and profitable resources, rather than parts of a living heritage and a local economy.

The understanding of Palestine in the west today is not so different from the perception in the 19th and 20th centuries, when pilgrims would return from their travels and hire illustrators to represent what they experienced. The exaggerated picturesque landscapes, the yellow skies, the overly decorated orientalist architecture are similar in the western imaginary of Palestine – and Gaza – today. That imaginary has transitioned from the orientalist visions of mythical biblical land with exotic costumes

‘The ruins are contemporary monuments that are used every day by the living community’

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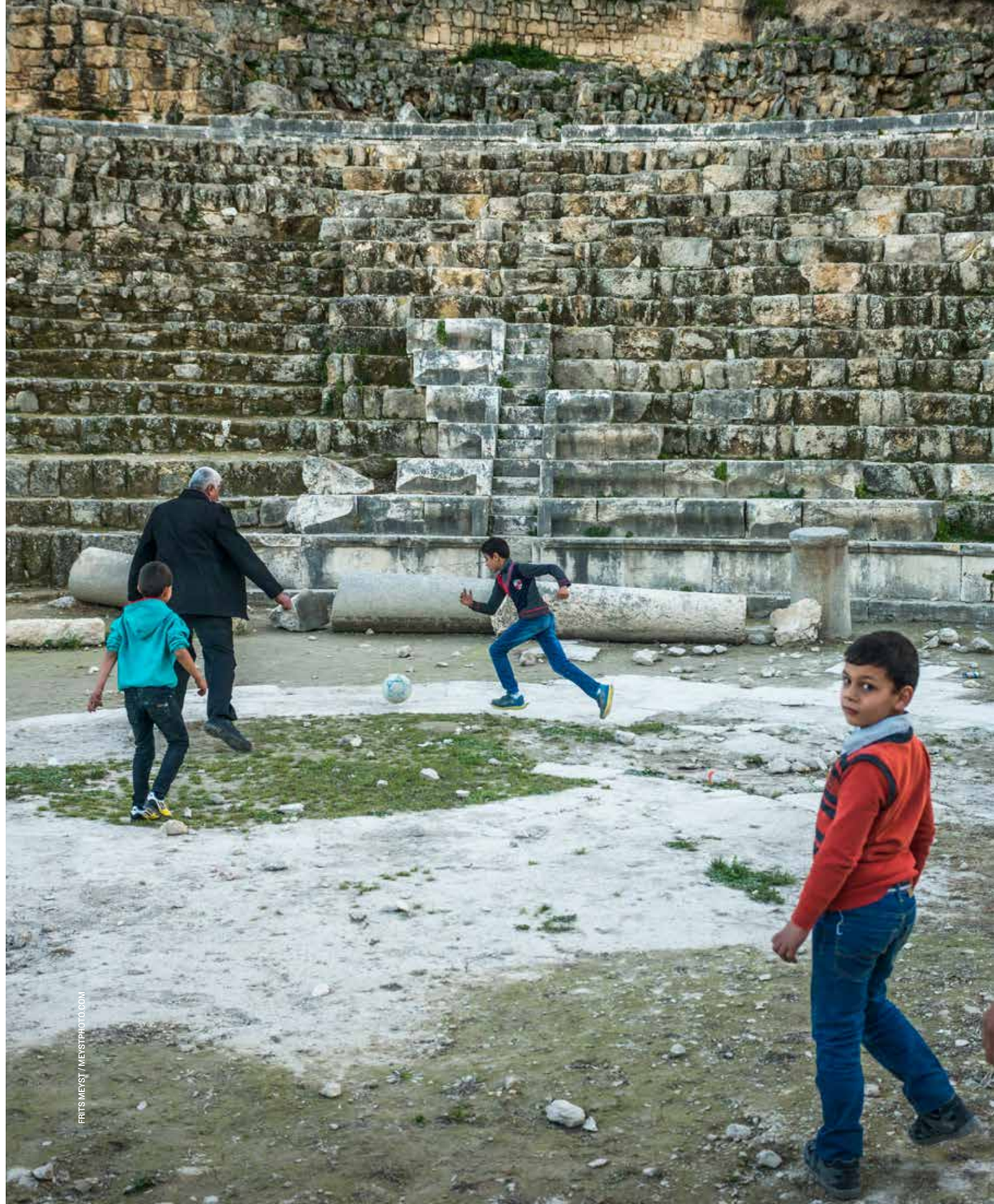
Archaeological findings continue to be uncovered in Palestine: in 2022, a farmer in the Bureij refugee camp in Gaza discovered a Byzantine mosaic beneath an olive grove (left). Palestinians live closely with and around these remnants of the past. In Sebastia, in the West Bank, a game of football is hosted in the Roman amphitheatre (opposite). In June 2024, it was reported that violent Israeli military incursions are increasingly frequent in the Palestinian village

and air thick with incense, to a terrorist-ridden, overpopulated concrete jungle sitting above tunnelled-out land – and is just as false. These images obscure the complexity of the ground and its people who have continuously inhabited the land for centuries. The Zionist narrative and the claim to Palestine as a Jewish state denies the entangled history of the land. Zionist archaeologists in Palestine continue the archaeological fantasies started by biblical archaeologists such as Petrie and maintain an interest in identifying select parts of the narrative of the land – in particular those relating to the Old Testament – while areas that have Canaanite, Ottoman or Arab remains are flattened.

The ground is a source for resurrection and liberation. A single grain of sand, a stone fragment or piece of cloth has the potential to hold evidence of a particular story, a thread that maintains the presence of Palestinian memory. The sand from a riverbed like the Belus in Gaza, where my maternal ancestors bathed to cleanse their bodies of ailments, was used to produce raw glass, which was then used to produce grave goods and perfume vessels. These ancestors would pray to Astarte, whose image was reproduced in limestone or clay from the ground itself. When they died, their tombs were filled with objects such as stone amulets, glass vessels filled with rose water and herbal oils to access paradise, and gold coins to aid in resurrection and to carry them to the afterlife.

There is also a physical struggle for liberation from below, beyond the spiritual. In Gaza’s case, the resistance burrows into the ground, carving out a network of underground passageways, shoving, scooping, drilling and compacting the earth to create hundreds of kilometres of subterranean resistance infrastructure. As Weizman writes, ‘The Gaza Strip is internationally defined as an “occupied territory” but the area under its surface appears to be a liberated zone.’ The ground is an active participant in the struggle for liberation.

In this way, the ground is both a battlefield and a sanctuary – an architecture where the struggles of the past and present converge, and where the seeds of future liberation are sown. The ground serves as a witness to the cycles of destruction and rebuilding that have characterised Gaza for millennia. Despite Israel’s continued attempts to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Palestinians, the entangled, rich vertical evidence is impossible to cleanse completely. The ground bears silent testimony to the endurance of the Palestinian people, standing as a dynamic monument to their resilience and tenacity. Every layer of soil, every buried artefact and every trace of habitation is testament to a vibrant, enduring culture that refuses to be extinguished.



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