

SAVED TREASURES OF GAZA

5000 YEARS OF HISTORY

Visitor's guide

INSTITUT
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ARABE



Introduction

Since its creation in 1949, the territory of the Gaza Strip (365 sq. km) has been characterized by its isolation and its extreme population and building density. Its contemporary history has been punctuated by wars and humanitarian crises that have eclipsed the glorious past of this great Mediterranean port of Arabian riches. Since the terrorist attack and hostage-taking by Hamas on October 7, 2023, the Gaza Strip has suffered exceptional destruction: as a result of war and Israeli bombardment, the number of civilian victims and casualties is staggering.

The tragic events of the 20th and 21st centuries until the present war have swept away the history of this ancient oasis, a place of passage and contact open to the world. Who remembers that Gaza, born from the meeting of sand and sea, has had a prestigious past uninterrupted since the Bronze Age?

The hundred or so works on display here take us through the Canaanite, Egyptian, Philistine, Neo-Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Arab civilizations of this narrow coastal strip. The wealth of this oasis, once praised for its prosperity and gentle way of life, coveted for its strategic position, a haven for caravan traders and a port for treasures from Arabia, Africa and the Mediterranean, is now in great jeopardy.

At a time when Gaza's heritage is undergoing unprecedented attack and wild speculation about its future is sweeping away 5,000 years of existence, more than ever its history needs to be known.

A heritage in exile

In autumn 2006, around a hundred crates containing 529 archaeological works from Gaza arrived in Geneva for the exhibition '**Gaza at the crossroads of civilisations**' (2007). The exhibition featured pieces that had arrived on French soil in 2000 and 260 works from Jawdat Khoudary's private collection, which was subsequently donated to the Palestinian National Authority. For 17 years, the works that were to form the future archaeological museum of Gaza have been crated in Geneva, ready for departure. But the conditions for their safe return to their country of origin have not been met. At a time when Palestinian cultural heritage is the victim of unprecedented destruction, the 123 works presented today echo the rich and long history of Gaza, preserved thanks to the Geneva Museum of Art and History, which holds the collection.

1994 – 2000: Franco-Palestinian excavations and exceptional discoveries

In autumn 2000, the IMA opened the '**Mediterranean Gaza**' exhibition, presenting the results of archaeological excavations carried out in Gaza since 1994. The exhibition is the result of a Franco-Palestinian cooperation agreement which, for the first time since Israel withdrew from the enclave, has enabled teams from the École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem (EBAF), the CNRS and the Palestinian Antiquities Service to discover four sites of major importance. The most spectacular discoveries were the ancient port of Antedon, the Byzantine mosaics of Mukheitim (Jabâlya) and the exceptional monastery of Saint Hilarion (Nussayrât), as well as the prestigious Tall al-Sakan. The exceptional pieces in this collection were under the care of the IMA until their arrival in Geneva in 2007.

I – Gaza, 5,000 years of History

Contemporary tragedy has contributed to the obliteration of the multi-millennial history of this prosperous oasis, coveted by every empire in the region. Gaza lies on the edge of the desert, facing the coastal dune that separates it from the sea. A natural frontier post between Egypt and Asia, the “Gaza Valley” (Wadi Ghazza) is the last haven of peace before the inhospitable desert. An oasis with a rich commercial and political past, Gaza and its region were a major stake in the rivalry between the powers of the Nile Valley and those of Mesopotamia. As a Mediterranean port and convergence point for caravan routes from Africa, Arabia and India, its strategic location made ancient Gaza “the largest city in Syria”, according to Strabo, attracting in turn the envy of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and finally the Mamluks and Ottomans...

Bronze and Iron Ages

On the Way of Horus (or Via Maris), the road from Egypt to Palestine, the Wadi Ghazza ford is a strategic location. Nearby are two major Bronze Age sites: Tell es-Sakan (c. 3500 to 2350 BCE) and Tell al’Ajul (c. 1900 to 1200 BCE). From the first half of the 4th millennium BCE, long-lasting ties with Egypt were established, before it took over southern Palestine in the Early Bronze Age and organized the Egyptian province of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age. That period also corresponds to the entry of the city of Gaza into history. Founded probably in the first half of the 3rd millennium BCE, the city is first mentioned in Egyptian texts from the reign of Thutmose III (1481-1425 BCE). It was named “Hazattu”, from which derives the current Arabic name, “Ghazza”. An Egyptian royal agent was stationed here to oversee the region, but the city remained a kingdom whose king pledged allegiance to the pharaoh.

Gaza, a city of Philistia in the Assyrian, Persian and Hellenistic periods

At the beginning of the 12th century BCE, groups probably from the Aegean world established trading posts on the coastal plains of the region; Gaza then became one of the major city-states of Philistia. It remained Philistine well into the 7th century, after its conquest by the Assyrians in 734 BCE. The king of Gaza pledged allegiance and acknowledged his vassalage to Nineveh. With the new empire of Nebuchadnezzar II, Gaza became Babylon’s outpost on the empire’s western frontier. In 539 BCE, the Persian Cyrus seized Babylon and founded the Achaemenid Empire. During the Persian period, which lasted two centuries, Gaza was the pearl of the Mediterranean. During his conquest of Syria, Alexander of Macedonia imposed a cruel siege on the city in 332 BCE, with systematic massacres, looting and destruction. This disaster led to the rebuilding of Gaza under the dominant influence of Hellenistic culture. The city retained its renown and commercial importance under Alexander’s successors, the Lagids and Seleucids, who vied with each other over its control.

The Roman and Byzantine periods

In 97 BCE, Gaza was conquered and devastated by the Jewish Hasmonean kingdom, and left abandoned: Gaza Deserta. Pompey seized it in 61 BCE and Greek laws were reinstated in the city. The new Gaza was rebuilt and adorned with a theater, a hippodrome, and certainly a gymnasium and a stadium. In the 4th century, Christian sailors from Egypt settled in Gaza, particularly in its port, Maiuma. The city of Gaza and its Romanized aristocracy remained loyal to Zeus Marnas until the 5th century, when they were forced to convert to the Christian faith. A Byzantine basilica, the Eudoxiana, was built on the ruins of the Marneion, which was destroyed in 402. The city also boasted a Jewish farming community, notably in Maiuma, where remnants of

a 6th-century synagogue were uncovered. Monasticism developed in the region, under the impetus of Gaza-born Hilarion (c. 291-c. 371). The city became an active center of Christian and intellectual life, notably with the famous Rhetorical School of Gaza chaired by Procopius. New buildings were erected, including the episcopal palace, the covered market and the *thermae*; a school of talented mosaicists worked in the city and neighboring towns.

The Muslim period

In 637, Muslim armies took Gaza, where the vast majority of the population was Christian and the status of the small Jewish and Samaritan communities was respected. Until the Crusades, these communities continued to flourish in a city that was gradually becoming Muslim. Gaza was still a great city, rich in crafts, gardens and vineyards. It became a thriving pilgrimage center, as it was claimed that the Prophet's grandfather was buried there. The Crusades ushered in a new period of violence. Crusaders occupied Gaza from 1149 to 1187, which transformed its architecture. They built a large Romanesque church, which later became the Great Omari Mosque. After Gaza's conquest by the Mamluks (1260-1277), peace set in, and mosques and khans were built. In 1516, Gaza became Ottoman, and the city began to decline as new trade routes, particularly by sea, diverted international traffic.

Gaza 1905–1922, vanishing heritage and landscape

When visiting Gaza in the early 20th century, travelers would discover the quaint charm of the city surrounded by small gardens, the picturesque palm groves in the dunes and the fishing port. The previously unpublished photographs in the collection of the *Ecole Biblique et Archéologique de Jérusalem* (EBAF) are unique records of these vanished landscapes. The 20th century was to bring its share of upheavals to Gaza. World War I did not spare this parcel of land, with the British bombardments of 1917 destroying much of its architectural heritage. The arrival of refugees from 1947, when the State of Israel was created, became a massive influx during the first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949). Nearly 200,000 “castaways of history” joined the 80,000 inhabitants of this coastal strip. The aftermath of this war defined the contours of the “Gaza Strip”, a 365-square-kilometer enclave. The port city of Gaza was thereafter cut off from its hinterland and from the roads that once made it so rich.

II – Endangered heritage in peril

For over 20 years, the territory's enclave status and the successive conflicts have irreparably damaged its buried archeological heritage. With over 2.2 million inhabitants (in January 2022), the Gaza Strip has one of the highest population densities in the region. In such a context, it was difficult to build for the future without destroying the past. The numerous construction projects, the risk of destroying historic sites and the possibility of chance discoveries called for an emergency archeology and preservation program. The Intiqal (Transmission) program, implemented from 2017 by the NGO Première Urgence Internationale, in partnership with the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and EBAF, has helped save several sites and contributed to training over a hundred archeology and architecture graduates. Since the beginning of the war, it is the Palestinians who have intervened to save sites and archeological collections that are threatened or in great danger, and who, in the future, will be responsible for assessing the impact of the conflict on their heritage.

The Intiqal project is supported by the Consulate General of France in Jerusalem, the British Council, UNESCO, ALIPH (International Alliance for Heritage Protection) and the French Development Agency (Agence Française de Développement, AFD). Other institutional partners include the Louvre Museum and the French National Institute of Cultural Heritage (Institut National du Patrimoine, INP).

From humanitarian crisis to war, developing a new archeology

Since the start of the war of October 2023, UNESCO has observed damage to 76 cultural sites in the Gaza Strip, based on satellite images as of February 17, 2025.

In view of the threats to this heritage, UNESCO resorted to the emergency procedure provided for in the World Heritage Convention. On July 26, 2024, the Monastery of Saint Hilarion was listed as a World Heritage Site in Danger. In addition to this complex, recognized for its universal value,

UNESCO has now listed nearly 345 sites, historic buildings and vestiges of ancient cities in Gaza City, Khan Yunis, Dayr el-Balah, Rafah and Beit Hanoun, as well as in eight refugee camps and numerous villages.

Action in wartime: documenting, evacuating, stabilizing, saving

Since the beginning of the war, Palestinians on the ground have been working to document, preserve and save endangered cultural assets in the Gaza Strip, with the assistance of local and international players. The International Alliance for Heritage Protection (ALIPH), active in Gaza since 2020, has been supporting emergency projects since the start of the conflict. These actions have enabled museum and private collections to be sheltered, sites and monuments to be documented and stabilized, and Palestinian professionals to be trained in rescue operations.

These operations, deployed at the height of the bombardments, are adapting to the tenuous ceasefire. Those doing the work now face new challenges. Assessing the impact of the conflict on heritage and implementing rescue and preservation operations in the humanitarian and material situation prevailing in Gaza raises unprecedented challenges: debris management, in areas where two-thirds of buildings have been destroyed and essential infrastructure has disappeared; securing access, via mine clearance, to sites close to combat zones, where almost 30% of bombs and explosives remain buried and unexploded will be colossal, fundamental issues for the future of Gaza and the preservation of its heritage and history.

These projects, supported by ALIPH in Gaza, are run by the Palestinian Museum, RIWAQ (Center for Architectural Conservation), Première Urgence Internationale, the Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation, the Mayasem Association for Arts and Culture, the Iwan Center and the Rafah Museum, in partnership with the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

Practical informations

Access

Institut du monde arabe
1, rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard
Place Mohammed V – 75005 Paris
01 40 51 38 38 / www.imarabe.org

Exhibition halls (levels -1 and -2)

Metro stations : Jussieu, Cardinal-Lemoine, Sully-Morland

Bus : 63, 67, 86, 87, 89

IMA public parking lot

Admission

11€, 9€ (reduced) et 7€ (12-26 ans)

Under 12 : free

Opening hours

Tuesday - friday : 10am - 6pm

Saturday, Sunday and bank holidays :

10am-7pm

Summer opening hours (july-august 2025) :

Tuesday - Friday and Sunday :

11am-7pm

Saturday 11am-8pm

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