

Gaza at the crossroads of civilisations

Gaza à la croisée des civilisations

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PRESS RELEASE

Geneva, January 2007. – **Stretched along the Mediterranean coast, the 362 km² of the Gaza Strip are shown on television news programmes with tragic regularity. Bombarded by images of burnt-out car shells, destroyed rows of houses and funeral processions flanked with green, yellow and black banners, our Western eyes can hardly imagine the fabulous archaeological riches lying there hidden under this daily ordinary violence.**

The many archaeological campaigns undertaken since the 19th century have nonetheless progressively revealed the antiquity and greatness of its past. These last fifteen years have been particularly fertile thanks to the ample size of the digs, jointly conducted by the Department of Antiquities of the Palestinian National Authority and the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem. The tens of thousands of objects unearthed from the excavations, in addition to those from the private collection of Jawdat Khoudary who for more than twenty years has been preserving the sometimes monumental relics that have appeared in Gaza's building sites, illustrate the diversity and continuity of the civilizations that have succeeded – and intermingled with – each other on this now exiguous territory.

With the five hundred and thirty objects that have been selected for the occasion – a world first – the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire invites the public to discover the daily, civil and religious life of the people dwelling in the Gaza Strip since 3500 B.C.

Gaza, a settlement with a multi-millennial history

The last perennial water source before the Sinai desert crossing, Gaza – located along the only overland route between Africa and Asia – has been known since time immemorial for its bountiful orchards, its pleasant climate and its abundant water resources. The region was held to be of major strategic importance since early Antiquity : the demand for Palestinian raw materials (copper and bitumen, as well as olive oil and wine) led predynastic Egypt to establish in 3500 B.C. the citadel of Tell Sakan on the banks of the Wadi Ghazzeah, some twelve kilometres from the modern city. The Egyptian predominance dwindled in the second millennium B.C. in front of the growing influence of the Syro-Palestinian populations known as the Hyksos. They gave to Gaza the exceptional site of Tell al-'Ajjul which was the first to be methodically excavated, an operation conducted from 1931 by Sir Flinders Petrie. The Gaza settlement however soon fell once again under the domination of Egypt, an event that entered the realm of History as the conquest by Thutmose III on 25 April 1468 B.C. was duly recorded in Egyptian archives. The territory of Gaza became dotted with other Egyptian fortresses, such as Deir-el-Balah which became famous for the discovery of a 14th-13th century B.C. necropolis comprising some fifty anthropomorphic sarcophagi made of baked clay.

In 734 B.C. the Assyrian empire took control of the region and made Gaza its southern border ; a border that would disappear before the unprecedented expansion of the Persian empire in 539 B.C. Gaza's commercial expansion from then became exponential : as a relay point between the incense and pepper caravan routes from Hadhramaut (Yemen) and the one opening the way to the raw materials of Palestine, the city and its territory harboured several ports at that time of intensely busy activity.

The Hellenistic world, always in the forefront with regard to maritime exchanges, wasted no time in founding a port and settlement four kilometres from Gaza. The Greeks, probably originating from Boeotia, established Anthedon of Palestine around 520 B.C., which was revealed from 1996 thanks to the joint excavations by the Palestinian Authority and the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem. Gaza's vocation was then set for more than a thousand years ; it became in effect a crossroads of civilisations between the Arabian caravan culture of the Nabateans, Egypt, the Levant, Syria and the Greek world, whose artistic influence profoundly permeated this privileged territory. Neither Alexander the Great's bloody conquest in 332 B.C. nor the utterly decimating one by Alexander Janneus in 96 B.C. were able to doom the fate of the land which rose from its ashes under the protection of Pompey in 57 B.C. Already sumptuous under the Romans, Gaza would achieve its zenith under the Byzantine empire : from the 5th century A.D. its wine was exported as far as England – and Geneva – while its School nurtured such leading theologians as Barsanuphius, John of Gaza and Mark the Deacon, whose writings profoundly influenced Christian literature both in the Orient and the Occident. The arrival of the Islamic religion in 637 A.D. would not change the aura of the city ; it remained a pivotal crossroads and from the 8th century sheltered the most highly celebrated school of law in all of Islam, founded by Muhammad al-Shafi'i. Contested between the Crusaders and the Islamic armies between the 11th and the 13th century, it progressively was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire while remaining a central stop on the pilgrimage route.

From the pottery of 3500 B.C. to a Byzantine column

The Musée d'Art et d'Histoire is preparing to host an exhibition that is exceptional for both its magnitude and for the nature of the objects displayed. Official bodies and a private collector have united to present a genuine archaeological anthology to the public of Geneva. The Department of Antiquities of the Palestinian National Authority has lent two hundred twenty-one objects found during the many joint Franco-Palestinian excavations undertaken since 1994. Parallel to this, Jawdat Khoudary has made available three hundred and nine pieces from his private archaeological collection, which is now registered in the official inventory of Palestinian cultural assets.

From five thousand five hundred year old jars to refined Egyptian alabaster vases, from a hoplite's helmet to Byzantine mosaics, from a zestful Menad to an Ayyubid period stele, from the painstaking reconstruction of a sumptuous Hellenistic dwelling to ornate Ottoman lintels, the diversity of civilizations that were cradled in the Gaza Strip will accompany the visitor through the rooms of the exhibit like a common theme that is both familiar yet surprising. An amphora from Gaza, found under the Saint-Pierre cathedral in 1980 by the Canton of Geneva's archaeological office, is placed at the threshold of the exhibition ; there it serves as a testimonial to the ancient links between Geneva and Gaza, as it was imported in the 5th century already.

This exhibit is the concrete manifestation of a hope, an aspiration founded on the – perhaps decisive – role played by a cultural initiative to explore the Palestinian identity with its many facets of such diversity. This hope has already taken a tangible form in the Middle East : the transport from Gaza of the Jawdat Khoudary collection pieces was effectuated on Tuesday 28 November 2006.

From the exhibition in Geneva to an archaeological museum in Gaza

The perfect state of preservation of the ancient harbours unearthed in Gaza-Blakhiah, in conjunction with the number and quality of artefacts recovered, have fostered a project aimed at building a major archaeological museum on the actual site of the antique ports. Under the patronage of UNESCO, the future museum will protect the archaic buildings as well as the archaeological collections and is being planned with the technical and scientific assistance of the City of Geneva, particularly with respect to the requisite architectural competition and the training of the Palestinian workforce. The presentation of the Geneva exhibition will constitute in this sense a possible forerunner for the future display in Gaza.

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