



These pictures show a view of the archaeological site of Saint Hilarion in the center of the Gaza Strip. — AFP photos



A picture shows a view of the archaeological site of Saint Hilarion in the center of the Gaza Strip.

RICH HERITAGE BURIED UNDER IMPOVERISHED GAZA STRIP

While workers labored on a large construction site in the Gaza Strip, a security guard noticed a strange piece of stone sticking out of the earth. "I thought it was a tunnel," said Ahmad, the young guard, referring to secret passages dug by the Islamist group Hamas to help it battle the Zionists.

In the Gaza Strip, ruled by Hamas and repeatedly ravaged by war, people are more familiar with burying the dead than digging up their heritage. But what Ahmad found in January was part of a Roman necropolis dating from about 2,000 years ago—representative of the impoverished Palestinian territory's rich, if under-developed, archaeological treasures.

After the last war between Zionist and Hamas in May 2021 left a trail of damage in Gaza, Egypt began a reconstruction initiative worth \$500 million. As part of that project in Jabaliya, in the north of the coastal enclave, bulldozers were digging up the sandy soil in order to build new concrete buildings when Ahmad made his discovery. "I notified the Egyptian foremen, who immediately contacted local authorities and asked the workers to stop," said Ahmad, a Palestinian who preferred not to give his full name.

With rumors on social media of a big discovery, Gaza's antiquities service called in the French non-governmental group Premiere Urgence Internationale and the French Biblical and Archaeological School of Jerusalem to evaluate the site's impor-

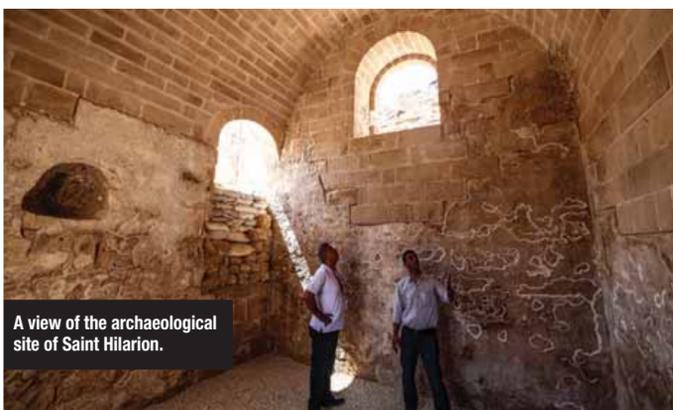
ance and mark off the area. "The first excavations permitted the identification of about 40 tombs dating from the ancient Roman period between the first and second centuries AD," said French archaeologist Rene Elter, who led the team dispatched to Jabaliya.

"The necropolis is larger than these 40 tombs and should have between 80 and 100," he said. One of the burial sites found so far is decorated with multi-colored paintings representing crowns and garlands of bay leaves, as well as jars for funereal drinks, the archaeologist added.

'Treasures' of Gaza

Archaeology is a highly political subject in the Zionist entity and the Palestinian territories, and discoveries are used to justify the territorial claims of each people. While the Jewish state has a number of archaeologists reporting on an impressive number of ancient treasures, the sector is largely neglected in Gaza. Authorities periodically announce discoveries in the territory, but tourism at archaeological sites is limited. Zionist entity and Egypt, which shares a border with Gaza, tightly restrict the flow of people in and out of the enclave administered by Hamas since 2007. "However, there is no difference between what you can find in Gaza and on the other side of the barrier" in the Zionist entity, Elter said. "It's the same great history."

"In Gaza, a lot of sites have disappeared because of conflict and construc-



A view of the archaeological site of Saint Hilarion.

tion, but the territory is an immense archaeological site which needs many teams of experts," he added. Stakes and fences have been erected around the Roman necropolis, which is watched over constantly by guards as new buildings go up nearby.

"We are trying to fight antiquities trafficking," said Jamal Abu Rida, director of the local archaeological service tasked with protecting the necropolis and which hopes to find investors for further excavation. Since Hamas took control 15 years ago, Gaza has endured four wars and numerous escalations of tension. "The image of Gaza is often associated with violence, but

its history is bursting with archaeological treasures that need to be protected for future generations," said Jihad Abu Hassan, director of the local Premiere Urgence mission. Demographics add to the pressure. Gaza is a tiny, overcrowded strip of land whose population in 15 years has ballooned from 1.4 million to 2.3 million. As a result, building construction has accelerated. "Some people avoid telling authorities if there is an archaeological discovery on a construction site out of fear of not being compensated" for the resulting work stoppage, Abu Hassan said.

"We lose archaeological sites every day," which shows the need for a strategy

to defend the enclave's heritage, including training local archaeologists, he said. Over the last few years, his organization has helped to educate 84 archaeological technicians. Doing so also offers employment prospects, in an impoverished territory where youth joblessness exceeds 60 percent.

Still hunting stones

One rare success is the preservation of the Byzantine monastery of Saint Hilarion. It opened several years ago to the public and includes an atrium, baths and multiple churches, standing as testament to an era when Gaza was a crossroads for Mediterranean pilgrims. "We receive around 14,000 visitors a year, including school students," said Fadel al-Otol, 41, a Palestinian archaeologist whose early passion for ancient ruins was formalized with training in France.

As a child during the first Palestinian intifada, or uprising, Otol said he hunted stones to hurl at Zionist soldiers. "Today I look for stones to prove to the military that we have a great history," he said. Wandering around the Saint Hilarion site, Otol pondered his dream: "That we excavate all the archaeological sites of Gaza and that they be accessible to the public to show our history and culture to the entire world." If nothing is done, he said, "the sites would disappear forever." — AFP



Racers run with their buffaloes in a traditional buffalo race during the rice-planting festival in Chonburi.



A racer rides on the back of a wooden plough as he races his buffaloes during the rice-planting festival in Chonburi to mark the start of paddy-sowing season. — AFP photos

Mud, sweat and cheers: Traditional Thai water buffalo race enthralls crowds

Boys scurry, duck and weave through crowds sheltering from the suffocating heat before upending buckets of cooling water on beefy bovines waiting to compete at the annual traditional Thai buffalo races in Chonburi on Sunday. The riotously noisy, muddy and slightly chaotic annual tradition marks the beginning of the rice planting season with the festival-like atmosphere in the eastern province taking place for the first time in two years.

The main event sees four pairs of harnessed buffalo gallop across a decorated paddy field, with intrepid racers sprinting barefoot through the shallow muddy waters and attempting to both control their beasts and remain upright.

"Before the race starts, we are a little excited and nervous," said Sompong Ratanasatien, 33, drenched and breathing heavily after his latest bout. The trickiest point was the start line, he said, where racers must wait for the official start whistle as they attempt to manoeuvre

the heavy beasts into position and keep them calm. "After that it depends on our buffalo and how he matches with my skills," said Ratanasatien, who was enjoying a winning streak with his two-year-old bovine Kao.

Urged on with a small metal-tipped bamboo whip, the usually placid animals are unrecognizable as they rampage down the watery field. Bouts are divided according to weight and size, with the heaviest creatures slightly slower to a practiced eye but requiring significantly more skill to control. And the racers, who work and train with the buffaloes for weeks in preparation, don't always have the upper hand. Numerous races got off to false starts as the hapless human racers were literally dragged through the mud.

"I think normal people cannot do (it)," said Within Lueanguksorn, who had travelled from Bangkok to watch the races. "There is a relation between the people and them (buffaloes)," the 38-year-old

added. The animals often looked close to careening out of control as they thundered across the finish line, scattering any spectator foolish enough to stand nearby. Racer Noppadon Yindeesuk, 45, admitted the tradition can be hazardous. "It could be a bit dangerous if the buffaloes are running too close to each other because it could cause an accident—so the riders must be careful," he explained.

Still, he said he would be racing two of his buffalo-worth around 150,000 baht (\$4,200) each—Parewa and Pete. "They are over two years old, and they won the race last year," he said, grinning ear-to-ear, adding that he trained with them every three or four days. But there was an important point to Sunday's spectacle, Yindeesuk said. "I compete in the buffalo racing because I am trying to preserve our Chonburi traditions about good rice, good buffalo." — AFP



Racers run with their buffaloes in a traditional buffalo race during the rice-planting festival in Chonburi.



A racer splashes his buffalo with water before competing in a traditional buffalo race during the rice-planting festival in Chonburi.

Iran's next revolution will be female, says Cannes winner

Iran's next revolution will be brought on by women taking back the freedoms denied to them in the Islamic republic, said Zar Amir Ebrahimi, the winner of this year's Best Actress award at Cannes. Amir Ebrahimi took the prize for her role in "Holy Spider" as a journalist in Iran who investigates a serial killer murdering prostitutes, and who has to contend with a deeply misogynistic society placing many obstacles in her way.

But in contrast to the movie's hopelessly grim take on attitudes towards women in Iran—which became an Islamic republic after the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah—Amir Ebrahimi said she was now detecting signs that women were finally fighting back. "If there ever is another revolution in Iran, it will be a revolution by women," she said in an interview with AFP.

"Women are fighting to keep the few rights they have in this society. They are rolling up their sleeves and they dress differently. They go out and sing, and form clandestine dance groups. There has been so much pressure on us, we're ready to explode. That's why I have hope. Change has to happen," she said.

'We never dared'

Young women were even daring to defy the decades-old law that makes loose clothing and a headscarf compulsory for women in public, she said. "We never dared take off the headscarf in the street," said the 41-year-old actress, "but the young generation, they do." Directed by Danish-Iranian Ali Abbasi, "Holy Spider" is inspired by the true story of a working-class man who killed prostitutes in the early 2000s and became known as the "Spider Killer".

Abbasi was denied permission to film in Iran and it was ultimately shot in Jordan. Amir Ebrahimi said she herself has firsthand experience of unequal treatment of women in Iran. She became a star in her early twenties for her supporting role in one of the country's longest-running soap operas, "Nargess", but saw her life and career fall apart when a sex tape featuring her and her boyfriend was leaked online in 2006. Amir Ebrahimi initially denied being on the tape, acknowledging only years later that it had been really her.

Her boyfriend had nothing to do with the leak, she told AFP. "We were very much in love," she said, blaming instead

"a mutual friend with access to our computer" for releasing the footage. Intimate recordings of celebrities are "big business" in Iran, she said, estimating that the tape featuring her raked in some \$3 million on the black market. The high-profile case was taken on personally by Tehran's chief prosecutor, and the leak's author put on trial and punished.



Iranian actress and director, awarded Best Actress at the Cannes Film Festival 2022, Zar Amir Ebrahimi, poses during a photo session in Paris. — AFP

'Like in the film'

But far from getting the public support she hoped for, Amir Ebrahimi herself was shunned by her acting colleagues who felt she had "endangered Iranian cinema", and found public opinion to be firmly on the side of the man who had leaked the tape. "It was like in the film, where the killer becomes a hero," she said. "This shows a sick society, a society that is not accustomed to recognizing women."

She added: "That is exactly what the government always wants, that everybody becomes everybody else's enemy." But Amir Ebrahimi said she holds no resentment towards Iranian society. "Even though it destroyed me, I understand that we are all victims of tradition and of a religious society." Amir Ebrahimi left Iran during the scandal, "traumatized", and now lives in Paris. "It's not easy to start from scratch when you've already known success," she said. "You arrive somewhere and you don't even speak the language. I took the metro and couldn't understand a word." Finding acting work was not easy in her newly-adopted country where film professionals usually wanted to type-cast her. "They see me as a refugee, of course. Or an immigrant, of course. It's rare that I get other offers," she said. — AFP