

ARTICLE

How the Past Became a Weapon of Genocide in Palestine

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Abstract

It has long been acknowledged that the past can be a weapon. In Palestine, reports of the targeting of archaeological sites, museums, archives, and other locations of cultural heritage by Tel Aviv have been increasing drastically since 7 October 2023 (although they took place before). This article seeks to contextualise these destructions of heritage within a larger project of controlling history and understands this project to be a cornerstone of European colonialism, comparing it with Britain's colonial control over how ancient sites are interpreted in what is now Zimbabwe. It asks what the role of the historian is in a time of genocide and revisits what it means to do “decolonial” work while history is being weaponised for colonial occupation. And it requires those of us who are interested in the past (and especially the ancient past) to reckon with our position in the belly of the beast.

Keywords: colonialism; decolonisation; history; origins; Palestine

Too much has been made of origins. All origins are arbitrary. This is not to say that they are not also nurturing, but they are essentially coercive and indifferent.¹

The morning that I sat down to write this article, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, presented a report to the UN's Human Rights Council, entitled “From Economy of Occupation to Economy of Genocide.”² The report documents “the role of corporate entities in sustaining Israel's illegal occupation and ongoing genocidal campaign in Gaza,” including through the construction of illegal settlements, through corporate and charity activities that have supported Israel's colonial occupation of Palestine, and through the involvement of particular commercial sectors,

¹ Brand 2002, 64.

² The report is available at the following UN website: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/a-hrc-59-23-from-economy-of-occupation-to-economy-of-genocide-report-special-rapporteur-francesca-albanese-palestine-2025/> (Albanese 2025). On the use of the term “genocide,” see the International Court of Justice interim judgement on the plausibility of genocide, of January 2025, which stated as follows: “In the Court's view, the facts and circumstances mentioned above are sufficient to conclude that at least some of the rights claimed by South Africa and for which it is seeking protection are plausible.” The interim judgement is available here: <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203447>.

like tech, with the Israeli war machine. But at Section 82, Albanese turns to a contributing factor that seems, on the face of it, much less profitable:

In Israel, universities—particularly law schools, archaeology and Middle Eastern studies departments—contribute to the ideological scaffolding of apartheid, cultivating State-aligned narratives, erasing Palestinian history and justifying occupation practices.

And she goes on to compare this mode of historiography to the more often discussed complicity between science and technology departments and weapon manufacturers that supply Israel's genocide, including Elbit Systems and Lockheed Martin.

It should come as a surprise to absolutely no one that archaeology is a weapon. It has functioned as justification for occupation at least since Napoleon Bonaparte set off to occupy Egypt in 1798, taking with him the *Commission des Sciences et des Arts*, a motley crew of over 100 academics who would author the books that are sometimes known as the first works of professional Egyptology and find—though it was not lost—the infamous Rosetta Stone.³ And Israel's deliberate erasure of Palestinian history (illegal under the 1954 Hague Convention) is not *new* either, and certainly does not date only to Israel's genocidal escalation after Operation Al Aqsa Flood on 7 October 2023: accusations of looting and deliberate destruction have increased in the last 18 months, but the targeting of cultural heritage has been an acknowledged aspect of the occupation of Palestine, which has now been going on more than seventy years.⁴ Here, I want to show that there is nothing particularly special about Israel's use of an invented past as “ideological scaffolding” for apartheid—it is continuous with the way the past is curated across other projects of European colonialism.⁵ And I want to argue that this use of the past is not just aimed at the historicide of the Palestinians, but at the death of history itself.

³ This Napoleonic colonising expedition is, for Said 1978, one of the starting points of Orientalism. The bibliography on the coloniality of archaeology is enormous. See, for instance, Effros and Lai 2018; Greenberg and Hamilakis 2022; Laluk and Aguilar 2023; Lyons and Papadopoulos 2002; Moro-Abadía 2006, among many others.

⁴ See the Forensic Architecture 2022 report on Anthon, which was bombed by Israel in 2012, 2014, 2018, and 2021, for an example. The notion that this destruction is deliberate is contested, but the Palestinian minister for Tourism and Antiquities, Hani Hayek, first emphasised that this was the case in November 2024, and evidence is collected in the Al Haq report by Alexia Guillaume 2022, which alleges deliberate destruction—especially in the Israeli air strikes of May 2021—of sites, including the Great Omari Mosque, the Historic Church of Saint Porphyrius (and other churches), the Tell el-Sakan archaeological site, Tal Umm Amer, and the remains of the Saint Hilarion Monastery. Al-Barsh 2023 compiled a report on behalf of Heritage for Peace. See also Saber 2024, Schrader 2024, and Al-Houdalieh 2025 for some examples of journalistic coverage of these attacks. See Raz 2024 on the relationship between the looting of artefacts and other kinds of looting.

⁵ Many present-day Zionists reject the idea that Israel is a colonial occupation, and even try to weaponise the language of indigeneity in support of it. The most obvious way to make the argument that Israel is a European colonial project is simply to cite the words of Theodor Herzl, who along with other early Zionists famously considered Argentina and Kenya (at the time British occupied East Africa, under what is known as the “Uganda Scheme”) as possible locations for Zionist colonisation. Herzl wrote in a 1902 letter to Rhodes (the architect of British-occupied Zimbabwe) that his Zionist plan was “something colonial,” using the terms of colonialism that many Zionists used for decades to refer to their project (see Masalha 2012, 2). See Pappé 2008 and Zureik 2015 for a fuller treatment of this argument, and the special issue of *Settler Colonial Studies* on ‘Past Is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine’ (Salamanca et al. 2012) for a variety of perspectives on understanding the Zionist project as settler colonialism. See Docker 2012 for the relationship between colonialism and genocide in Palestine. Finkelstein 2005 rebukes Peters 1984, who argues that Palestine was empty before the Zionist project, and Said, of course, always knew that the Zionist project was settler colonial (see especially Said 1979).

1. Zionism and other classicisms

One way to show that Israel's control of the past in Palestine is continuous with other projects of European colonialism would be to focus on the way those other settler colonial projects are also characterised by deliberate destruction both of archaeological sites and as part of colonial archaeological practices. Such an argument could detail, for instance, the fact that under the French mandate of Syria, French colonial archaeologists destroyed the town of Tadmur in 1929 in order to “reveal” the classical ruins of Palmyra that lay beneath this living Muslim town.⁶ But Israel's control of the past—like many other European colonial projects' attempts to control the past—goes far beyond the coloniality of archaeology. Israel weaponises the past through narrative as much as through destruction.

To understand this narrative control, let us briefly compare the historiographical claims made by the ultra-Zionist Temple Mount Faithful movement about the complex known as the *Haram al-Sharif*, which houses the Al Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, with other European colonial historiographical narratives.⁷ Once a fringe movement aimed at razing the Al Aqsa mosque and building a Jewish temple inside the complex, Temple Mount Faithful is increasingly becoming more mainstream. Israel's Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi David Lau publicly declared in 2016 that he supported the building of a Jewish temple on the site, and in 2014, Israel's now acting foreign minister Tzipi Hotovely remarked in a video that “Temple Mount must go back to being a place for Jewish prayer.”⁸ This idea that Muslim presence is a perversion of the “truest” ancient form of a site (to which it should by rights *go back*) is not just a historiographic feature of Zionism's control of the past; it is Europe's hegemonic narrative of history—a narrative I have elsewhere called “Classicism.”⁹

The 1929 French colonial archaeologists destroyed the town of Tadmur to restore what they saw as the “true” Greek and Roman past lying beneath. But Classicism is not only material destruction. It is also the curation of an ancient precedent for colonial projects. The idea that the *Haram al-Sharif* hides the site's true, ancient, Jewish-Israeli meaning is a useful precedent for Israel's settler colonial occupation of Palestine. It invents an ancient history for a state that is only as old as its declaration in 1948. This narrative was equally useful to Cecil Rhodes in his own colonial quest to occupy the land he would call Rhodesia, as is clear from the case of the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe (Figure 1). Rhodes had, in the words of Shadreck Chirikure, an “obsession with Great Zimbabwe,” and many of the British colonial archaeologists who went to the site under his patronage came back with a story that was extremely helpful to his colonial project.¹⁰ In their colonial fairytale, it was not ancient African people who had built this site (the colonisers' racism would not allow them to believe that ancient Black people were capable of such a thing) but the Phoenicians.

British colonialism crafted an ancient precedent to justify its occupation of Zimbabwe, imagining the Phoenicians as early colonial occupiers, an “ancient race of hardy colonisers” who would serve as the legitimating ancestors of British occupiers.¹¹ The use of Classicism to

⁶ I have argued elsewhere that this colonial destruction is involved in a joust for narrative hegemony with the destruction of the Temple of Bel by *Daesh* in 2015. See Baird, Kamash, and Raja 2023; Mulder 2022; Ward 2025a.

⁷ On this group, see Inbari 2012 and Galor 2017, 146–62.

⁸ See Omer-Man 2015 for a list of similar provocations, and Booth 2016, who describes, for *The Washington Post*, Israeli settlers walking through the *Haram al-Sharif* complex wearing T-shirts depicting the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

⁹ Ward, forthcoming. See also Ward (2025b) and Ward (2025c).

¹⁰ Chirikure 2020, 7.

¹¹ See Bruwer 1965 for an example of this argument, and compare Hensman 1900. Compare also Yuzwa 2021 for the use of this “hardy colonisers” trope in the colonisation of what would become the Americas.

fabricate an ancient precedent for European colonisation is not restricted to these two settler-colonial projects. Britain also invented an ancient fairytale to justify its occupation of India, and Patricia Lorcin has examined the way that French occupiers used Rome as a precedent for their colonisation of Algeria.¹² This narrative has particularly frequently been weaponised against Muslim populations, who are easily excluded from the ability to claim ancient precedent because of the fact that Islam does not come to the world until after the conventional end point of the classical period.¹³ It is not only Muslims at risk, but all those on the underside of European colonialism who risk being “Muslimised,” that is, positioned as latecomers to a land that colonial occupiers claim to be theirs on the basis of a fabricated ancient precedent.

2. Killing with history and the killing of history

To understand the Zionist control of the past in Palestine as part of the historiographic project of European colonialism is to take our lead from Herzl himself, who famously argued that the Zionist project would provide an “outpost of Western civilisation in a sea of barbarism.”¹⁴ Frantz Fanon and Edward Said agreed that colonisation is a “historical process,” and many others—among them recently Priya Satia and Schlomo Sand—have shown that the study of history itself serves to produce ideas of origin for ethno-nation state and colonial projects.¹⁵ If the Zionist colonial project is a project of “Western civilisation,” then it is wholly unsurprising that it should depend on a Westernese narrative of history.¹⁶ But Israel’s current weaponising of the past in the genocide of the Palestinians is not only something to be chalked up among the murderous mechanics of European colonialism: it is also taking place in a world where the so-called decolonial turn, in history as in other disciplines, is supposed to have already happened.¹⁷

It was 1997 when Eric Hobsbawm famously wrote in *On History*: “I used to think that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can.”¹⁸ The idea that contemporary political projects use historical narratives as their “ideological scaffolding,” then, to repeat Francesca Albanese’s term again, has been well known for decades.¹⁹ The question for this current moment is not so much *how does*

¹² Lorcin 2002. See also Effros 2018 on Rome and French-occupied Algeria. See Asif 2017; 2020 and Vasunia 2013 for a broader examination of the role of the classical in colonial India. See also Ram-Prasad 2024 on the role played by Proto-Indo-European in this narrative. Compare also Goff 2014 on West Africa and Greenwood 2010 on the Anglophone Caribbean.

¹³ And in some versions of this narrative, the classical *ends* as in Henri Pirenne’s 1937 famous thesis. The Islamophobia of this Classicism is the subject of my current book project. See Ward 2025b for a preview.

¹⁴ On this quotation, see Penslar 2020.

¹⁵ Fanon 1961, 40. See also Sand 2015 and Satia 2020, although this critique of the discipline of history is at least as old as the discipline itself. History plays a huge role throughout Said’s work, see especially Said (1978). Compare also Kanafani 2022, published in Arabic in 1967, on literature as a legitimating tool for the Zionist project.

¹⁶ The term “Westernese” is used by Salman Sayyid to describe the language of the West—see Sayyid 1997; 2014.

¹⁷ As Maldonado-Torres 2017 has pointed out, decolonial thought is as old as colonisation itself. But in historical studies, and within the Western (and Westoxicated) academy more generally, the most recent rise and fall of decolonial thought could broadly be traced to the period between the murder of George Floyd by the police officer Derek Chauvin and the restrictions placed on decolonial scholarship by the second iteration of the Trump administration. Outside of the West and the Westoxicated, of course, the story of decolonial thought could be told very differently—but the West’s enduring imperial epistemic hegemony means that the store of concepts that exist for dismantling the discourse of origins have not been marshalled against Israel’s genocide.

¹⁸ Hobsbawm 1997, 7.

¹⁹ Most famously perhaps in Pocock 2005.



Figure 1. The conical tower at the archaeological site of Great Zimbabwe, outside of Masvingo. Author's own photograph.

*Israel use the past as a weapon of occupation and genocide?—to which the answer would be in much the same way as other European colonial projects have always used history as a weapon of occupation and genocide—but rather what does it mean for attempts to “decolonise” history to have so categorically failed that Israel can continue to use the past in this way?*²⁰ We need to imagine “historicide” as not just killing *with* history but the killing of history.

The term “historicide” is among the recent effusions of terms inspired by Raphael Lemkin’s term “genocide” (coined in Lemkin 1944). Academics like Karma Nabulsi have been using the

²⁰ And Israel is far from alone in this endeavour. I have written elsewhere about other Islamophobic genocides that similarly rely on this historiographical narrative of Classicism, particularly in India and East Turkestan. See Ward 2025c.

term “scholasticide” since 2009 to describe Israel’s deliberate targeting of Palestinian schools and universities, and ecocide, urbicide, domicile, culturcide, and politicide also appear increasingly frequently to describe aspects of this genocide.²¹ By analogy, *historicide* refers to the deliberate destruction of the past and—I will argue here—of historiographical enquiry itself. Because presenting the most ancient version of a site, lying beneath the feet of its later users, as its “most true” or the “original” meaning is more than just the weaponisation of the past for a particular ethnonationalist project. It is an epistemological land grab, an attempt to control what it means to *do* history.

And although this is a reflex of European colonialism, it is also simply the hegemonic way that many historians, as well as those not trained professionally in historical disciplines, *do* history. We search for the etymological root of a word, or the origin of democracy, for the inciting incident of a war, or the beginning of racism. The lure of an origin holds epistemic weight, even though the arbitrariness of origins has been apparent at least since Said wrote that “there is no such thing as a merely given, or simply available starting-point: beginnings have to be made for each project in such a way as to enable what follows them.”²²

It is hard to ignore the fact that even as they legitimate so much violence against Muslims, Palestinians, refugees, and migrant people, and anyone else who can be positioned as latecomers to a land in Eurocentric and ethnonationalist discourse, origins put food on the table of the historian. The idea that the best way to know something is by privileged access to its origin is the argument many historians make to justify the continuation of their disciplines in the face of the existential threat of cuts to funding and resources. Origins are the ramparts of European colonialism, the world-making historiographic structures that—out of self-preservation—even the most self-avowedly decolonial historians do not touch.²³

This goes some way towards explaining why, as we have watched these imaginary origins be weaponised to justify the genocide of the Palestinians, subject organisations in historical disciplines have on the whole preferred to maintain a pretended “apolitical” silence. The American Historical Association voted in the majority for a resolution condemning the genocide of the Palestinians, but in January 2025, the resolution was vetoed by its Council, which felt that condemning this genocide was “outside the scope of the Association’s mission and purpose, defined in its Constitution.”²⁴ When I emailed the Liverpool Classicists Listserv, a mailing list that connects some 8,000+ colleagues across ancient studies, to inform them of an event I was chairing to discuss Albanese’s recent report, replies flooded in labelling my announcement “anti-Semitic hate mail” and “a disturbingly political hate

²¹ On *scholasticide*, see the Scholars Against the War on Palestine 2024 Toolkit. Ibrahim Rabaia and Lourdes Habash 2024 have named this “educide.”

²² Said 1975, 16. This colonial thought structure has not shifted even in the face of provocations from decolonial, colonised, Muslim, First Nations, and indigenous thinkers, who have reminded us that the idea that time moves from past to present to future is a colonial thought structure. For this temporal critique, see, for instance, Nanni 2012 and Landes 1983. For a summary of the ways that anticolonial time cultures have taken aim at imperial “clock time” or historical time, see Ward 2024.

²³ This is not the same as saying that *no one* has ever deconstructed the discourse of origins. Whitelam’s 2013 work on the constructedness of the so-called ancient Israel, Mikalachi 1998 on Britain’s struggle to curate an ancient origin for itself, and even my own meagre attempt under the heading “The Problem of Origins” (Ward 2023, 79) are all evidence of a (much larger) critique of origin positioning. But in spite of this critique, little has shifted at the level of hegemonic discourse inside and outside of the academic study of history where the invention of origins remains powerful.

²⁴ Quinn 2025 narrates these events. For the American Historical Association’s own reasoning, see <https://www.historians.org/news/business-meeting-resolution-update/>.

message” with “no connection to classical studies” (one senior professor even threatened that for drawing attention to the UN report I would be barred both from academic jobs in the United States and from visas to attend conferences there).²⁵

Those who pretend that historical disciplines are not political are aiding and abetting the use of archaeology as the “ideological scaffolding” of apartheid. They are allowing origin stories to masquerade as truth, rather than as retrojections of political projects in the present.²⁶ And they are standing by as historical and historiographical enquiry fades into irrelevance, no longer able to do anything except support the status quo politically and affirm the Eurocentric colonial ordering of the world. At least since Francis Fukuyama’s famous book in 1992, there have been those who have heralded—either in celebration or commiseration, depending on their political agenda—the so-called “end of history.” But Fukuyama (1992) was wrong: what will really end up killing history is not the triumph of neoliberal democracy and capitalism, but rather those who claim to do “apolitical” history, while in reality simply doing history that serves hegemonic politics. It has been a hard pill to swallow these last 18 months since 7 October 2023, watching disciplinary organisations and the vast majority of historians, classicists, archaeologists, and other scholars of the past be unable to raise their voices against genocide. It will be an even harder pill to swallow years from now, once the dust has settled and the words “occupation,” “apartheid,” and “genocide” no longer carry personal risks, when I will no doubt be asked to peer review publications with titles that revel in an empty aesthetic of decoloniality, like “Archaeology for Liberation” and “Reading Homer After Gaza.”²⁷ Those works will be as irrelevant as they are complicit if we cannot find a way to decolonise the discourse of origins and stop the weaponising of the past for genocide in this present moment.

Marchella Ward (“Chella”) is lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University. She is the author of numerous books, chapters and articles, the co-editor of *Critical Ancient World Studies: The Case for Forgetting Classics* (2024) and is currently writing a book about the Islamophobia of classicism. Chella is one of the co-hosts of *Radio ReOrient*, a podcast on decoloniality and Muslimness and a founding member of the Society for the Study of the Past, a new subject organisation aimed at doing history in solidarity with the occupied and the oppressed founded in opposition to the apathetic way that existing subject organisations responded to the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people. She writes frequently for non-specialists, and also writes for children.

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²⁵ The contents of this mailing list are a matter of public record: <https://listserv.liv.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa?A0=CLASSICISTS>.

²⁶ As Said, Sand and Enrique Dussel knew all too well that they were; see Dussel 1993; Said 1975; Sand, 2009; 2012.

²⁷ For this idea that “one day everyone will always have been against this,” see El Akkad 2025. The point is often made in the context of apartheid South Africa, where one wonders how apartheid was sustained for such a long period of time, given that no one today would admit that they were not always against it.

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