

EDITORIAL

The Potter, the Poet, and Storytelling

Palestine from Above 2

Yazid Anani, Guest Editor

If God is the first potter, creating man out of mud, and if man's creation of idols has always been the greatest sin in monotheistic religions (by approximating the perfection of art created by the divine artist), then it is the artists who echoed the creative discourse – ranging from cave drawings, Babylonian temples, Egyptian reliefs, Byzantine iconography, and Italian renaissance paintings – and who imposed new images to existing meta-narratives.

And if God is the first poet, whose words are inscribed in the commandments of the sacred texts, then poetry is the ultimate sin, and poets are the impersonation of the divine power of scripture. That is why in Arabic the poet is known as *mash'ur* and *majdhub* – “smitten” and “deranged” by the divinity.

Nonetheless, heresy has surpassed the ability of man to perfect pottery and the language of poetry. Artists moved from the flight of words, to the physical attempts at elevating themselves and creating instruments of flying. Since the mid-nineteenth century airborne cameras via balloons, kites, dirigibles, airplanes, satellites, and drones have contributed largely in mapping terrains, surveilling human activities, and studying urban morphology as well as earth's ecology. Throughout the pre-modern ages, humanity gazed up towards the celestial in a desire to locate itself in the universe with cosmological yearnings to resolve humanity's existential questions: How was the world created? Where are we going, and where do we stand within the universal spatial temporal context?

In geometry, surveying, and structural mechanics, humans created terrestrial monuments that had cosmological

alignment and significance. These monuments were constructed to be seen by the deities of the skies. Neolithic stone circles, Mesopotamian ziggurats, Egyptian and Mayan pyramids and obelisks, the Nazca Lines, Hindu temples, Cretan nature sanctuaries, Mycenaean citadels, and others were all expressions of a terrestrial connection with the cosmos and a response to the gaze of celestial gods and goddesses who controlled earth. This gaze has been inverted with the emergence of aviation and aerial technology. It is not only the elevated skills of poetry and pottery that the human has acquired but also the skill of the celestial power of gazing on humanity itself from the sky.

The idea of the exhibition “Palestine From Above” came while Salim Tamari and I were investigating one of the aerial images of al-Bireh from the Bavarian State Archives. We were trying to demystify the location of the mysterious railway which was constructed at the end of WWI between Jerusalem and al-Balu‘ area in al-Bireh. What struck me most was my inability to relate the aerial point of view to the familiar landscape of al-Balu‘ where I lived for most of my childhood. Although, the landscape has been altered dramatically, I felt helpless by my incapacity to understand the landscape in that image through its topographic features. This drove the idea of an exhibition that could be a means of enabling us to understand how the Palestinian landscape has been first perceived, and then transformed, from the sky.

“Palestine from Above” juxtaposes layers of collected historic material with artworks, using a process of research conducted by the Qattan Foundation and its partners in 2019–20. The research explored



“Hercules,” in *Kitab suwar al-kawakib* [Book of the Constellations of the Fixed Stars], ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn ‘Umar al-Sufi (1009–10), Bodleian Library, Oxford, 80; available from wikimedia commons, online at bit.ly/2NetkC9 (accessed 15 June 2020).

how mapping and imaging technology has been historically used to depict the Palestinian landscape for surveillance purposes, art, documentation, planning, and other uses. Such data and material have enabled empires and armies to accumulate knowledge in the form of visual compendia that eventually supported the shaping of politics, culture, economy, and ideology. As a significant component of the exhibition and in partnership with the Institute for Palestinian Studies, issues 81 and 82 of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* have been dedicated to host a plethora of contributions on themes that emerged during the exhibition research process. The two volumes will later be merged together to comprise the exhibition catalogue together with a selection of textual and visual archival material and briefs on the artworks and artists.

A group of remarkable researchers and scholars sifted through stacks of documents in relevant libraries and archives including Istanbul University Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Harbiye Askeri Müzesi, Atatürk Library, the Australian War Memorial, the National Library of Australia, the Hebrew University Libraries, Israel State Archives, the National Archives of the UK, the Bavarian State Archives, and the Library of Congress. Among the researchers who contributed their work were the main researchers: Zeynep Çelik, professor of architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology; Salim Tamari, Birzeit University professor of sociology (Emeritus); Andrew Yip, director of the Ultra High-Resolution Scanning Laboratory at the University of New South Wales, Sydney; Michael Talbot, senior lecturer in the history of the modern Middle East at the University of Greenwich; Zeinab Azarbadegan, PhD candidate in the Department of History, Columbia University; Chloe Emmot, PhD student at the University of Greenwich; Anne Caldwell, postgraduate researcher at University of Kent; Sarah El Bulbeisi, researcher at Orient-Institut Beirut; Robin Schmahl, Bavarian Archives research assistant; and Walid Habbas, research specialist in the Israeli archives.

Through displaying works by artists alongside historical archival material, the exhibition attempts to subvert the power of writing history and documenting society and landscape by the different regimes of power. Initial contributions of artwork include the following artists and groups: Amer Shomali, Andrew Yip, Rania Stephan, Studio CAMP, Rene Gabri and Ayreen Anastas, Jack Persekian, Sophie Ernest, Khaled Jarrar, Nahed Awad, Kamal Jaafari, DAAR, Gian Spina, the Eye Film Museum, Forensic Architecture, and Riwaq.

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.” So wrote Theodore Adorno in his *Cultural Criticism and Society* (1949). It seems that it is forbidden to utilize the divine language of art and poetry in perfecting the representation of cataclysmic trauma. This would have been considered as barbarism, in the sense of using the divine languages of art and poetry, not only in the creation of anti-monotheistic verses and idols, but in perfecting the transfiguration of the first divine work of pottery and poetry.

Wars as the most violent human experience have always been depicted by artists, through strokes, colors, textures, and patterns, and especially by those artists who

were recruited as soldiers in the battlefields: with their perennial encounters with the roar of artillery, the burst of shells, the stories of their fellow soldiers, death, tragedies, destruction, and triumphs. Their journeys and discoveries have been popular subjects in sketches and drawings in an attempt to portray the severity of war, its operations, emotions, values, and symbols. Their artworks probe not only how aesthetics respond to war, but the notion of violence itself. A big portion of Palestinian art has often been framed by what contemporary Western theory would consider as Propaganda Art, immersed with the motifs of trauma and victimhood. If Palestinians are living an ongoing colonial tragedy and trauma that persist outside the temporal demarcations of signposts as 1916, 1948, 1967, 1987, 1993, then storytelling through poetry and art is the only remaining tool for narrating the violent distortion and transfiguration of humanity as the antithesis to that imposed by the Western paradigm of *l'art pour l'art*.



This issue of the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, the second volume dedicated to Palestine from Above, covers new themes of landscape and aerial perspectives not addressed in *JQ* 81.

“Along the Wings of a Tornado: The Aerial Aesthetics of Frank Hurley in Palestine” by Andrew Yip and Emma Crott views the presence of the Australians in Palestine after the end of World War I through the eyes of Australian photographer Frank Hurley. Hurley’s aerial images played a role in blurring the line between reporting and artistic expression. His photographs were prominent in composition techniques that aestheticize and restage the experience of trench warfare. His tours in Palestine enhance our understanding of the role of war photography and artists in combat.

Isotta Poggi’s “History Turns Space into Place: A French Voyage to the Dead Sea Basin in 1864” examines how landscape perspectives are predominantly stipulated by human understanding of culture. De Luynes’ *Voyage* chronicles the journey illustrating a French cultural lens in Ottoman Palestine. Inspired by the Bible’s scriptures, De Luynes goal was to identify the locations of the biblical “cursed” cities following the scripture into the context of the geophysical environment of the Dead Sea basin in 1864.

Jeffrey Howry’s “The Tale of Two Villages – a New Perspective on the Historic Palestinian Landscape” examines the preliminary findings of historic sites and features from the Roman, Byzantine, and late Ottoman/Mandate eras of Tel Megiddo using a special type of remote sensing data (LiDAR). The importance of Tel Megiddo lies in its strategic location between the eastern Mediterranean coast and the Jezreel valley (Marj ibn ‘Amr). The article highlights the significantly different conditions in which LiDAR imagery can provide essential data on the context and structure of archaeological sites spanning millennia of occupation. At al-Lajjun it was possible to highlight field patterns, many of which were physically destroyed in recent decades. At Abu Shusha, the multi-terraced character of some of the highest terrain became evident.

Michael Talbot, Anne Caldwell, and Chloe Emmott's "Perceiving Palestine: British Visions of the Holy Land" analyzes how Palestine was perceived by superimposing biblical landmarks onto modern mapping surveys, supported by recent biblical scholarship, to play a role in re-imagining Palestine in British eyes. These aerial, high-elevation, and cartographic depictions of Palestine allow us to visualize the developing narratives of control. The privileging and foregrounding of an ancient, biblical landscape that all but erased the lived experience of contemporary Palestinians became familiar in today's topographical transformations.

Sarah El Bulbeisi's "Palestine in the Imagination of the Imperial German Self" sheds light on the power of the German imperial presence in Palestine. She reviews the visual and textual fragments left by the German Air Force from their surveillance missions in Palestine carried out during the end of World War I and the published photographs selected by Gustav Dalman in his classic compendium of German aerial photography in the 1917–18 period.

In "Late Ottoman Visions of Palestine," Zeynep Çelik and Zeinab Azarbadegan view how late Ottoman official politics displayed shifting attitudes towards Palestine. The Ottomans were aware of the "perceptive" power of aerial views and their ability to augment the authority, dominance, and control of those who could own and use the technology successfully. The efficiency and pace with which such new technologies were adopted, however, left new unequal relations between European powers who were able to consolidate their colonial interests and the Ottomans.

"Jerusalem Demography" by Rassem Khamaisi is a study in "demographobia" – the obsession with Arab fertility trends – and how it affects population planning in Israel. The essay identifies demographic conditions in Jerusalem and analyzes the city's national, ethnic, cultural, religious, and geopolitical attributes. The relationship between demographics, geography, and democracy, and how these considerations are employed in spatial planning and resource control, are also examined.

In an article published in June 1930, Muhammad Roshan Akhtar, the editor of the English edition of the Jaffa newspaper *Filastin*, called for the establishment of an Arab federation, considering Jews to be an integral part of a political community whose territory sprawled "from Basra to Jaffa." In "Beyond the Boundaries of 'The Land of the Deer' R. Binyamin between Jewish and Arab Geographies, and the Critique of the Zionist-Colonial Connection," *Avi-ram Tzoreff* examines the crystallization of Binyamin's spatial perception in the period of the British Mandate, and the importance he saw in identification with the anti-colonial struggle, and the affinities between this orientation and the attitudes held by Palestinian intellectuals and political activists during the 1930s.

"I Witness Silwan – Who Is Watching Whom?" is an act of visual decolonization in the neighborhood of Batan al-Hawa, in the Silwan neighborhood of Jerusalem. Monumental sets of eyes and goldfinches (*tayr hassun*) – the putative national bird of Palestine – are being installed in the hillside overlooking the Wadi Hilwa (Kidron Valley), facing West Jerusalem and the Old City. The eyes depicted belong to local heroes, international leaders, philosophers, activists, revolutionaries, writers, and artists,

and are visible from far away. Susan Greene in this “Letter from Jerusalem” examines the aim of Israel and its proxy “nonprofits” to solidify Jewish Israeli sovereignty in East Jerusalem by dispossessing Palestinians in the Old City basin, which includes the Old City’s Muslim Quarter and surrounding Palestinian neighborhoods such as Silwan and its vicinity.

Penny Johnson’s “Are You Coming With a Bulldozer to Silwan?” is a review of two Palestinian guides to Jerusalem and its environs, as well as sites in the West Bank, Gaza, and historic Palestine: *Wujood: The Grassroots Guide to Jerusalem* (2019) Grassroots Al-Quds, and *Pilgrimage, Sciences and Sufism: Islamic Art in the West Bank and Gaza* (2004), published by the Museum with No Frontiers and the Palestinian Authority. The review explores the fate of Palestinian guides to Jerusalem amid the well-financed marketing campaigns of both the Israeli government and right-wing settler organizations like the Ir David Foundation.

“The Alleys of Jerusalem Will Miss You” is a tribute to the late Albert Aghazarian by historian Nazmi Jubeh.

Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, the leading novelist and poet from Bethlehem, was born one hundred years ago. His centennial was accompanied by a resurgence of interest in his literature, poetry, and his artistic creativity, in the Palestinian and Arab press. JQ will be addressing his patrimony in a forthcoming issue, which we hope will shed new light on his life, art, and literature.

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