

Retrocognition in Sebastiya

Ethnographic Habitat, Place Memories, and Cultural Identity

By Ali Qleibo



A plethora of signs and symbols deployed over the past five millennia undergird our sense of “Palestinianness” and constitute the hermeneutics of Palestinian ethnography. The location and objects that make up our habitat are central to the personal, social, and cultural aspects of our experience in the unique socio-ecological niche that our ancestors carved out. Wherever one looks, whatever one smells, tastes, hears, or touches, one is submerged in culturally produced signs that constitute the memory of the place.

The orderly rows of olive trees that clamber up our mountains, the patches of wheat, the burning aroma of the taboo, the remote solitary sanctuary astride a distant mountaintop, down to the elongated stone-built platform, *mastabeh*, the lemon tree in the courtyard, and the grapevine pergola that shades the porch of the house; all are symbolic of the cultural milieu in which our sense of belonging, of home and hearth, is reiterated in myriad signs. The understanding of objects, organisational landscapes, and the Palestinian iconic symbols assumes its referential value in an environmental approach to signs and the information they convey.

Sebastiya drowns in the magic of history whose signs abound in whichever direction we look or walk. Perched on a mountaintop surrounded by a range of mountains of olives that cascade into the endless horizon, Sebastiya is a typical Hellenistic/Roman/Byzantine and Crusader fortress. The spectacular panorama that the ancient capital of Samaria commands rolls up the mountain and into the

acropolis. The expansive green fields of wheat, olive orchards, and, in spring, the pale pink-white blossom of the almond and apricot trees swell between the columns of the Roman *cardo*, the collapsed apses of John the Baptist’s Crusader church, and the still remains of Hellenistic watchtowers.

Sebastiya is a provincial town composed of lower and upper residential quarters. The lower city was used as commercial and living quarters, and lies underneath the extant Arab town. The acropolis was reserved exclusively for religious edifices – as was customary among the Greeks and Romans. Preliminary archaeological research has focused on the top of the mountain. A path passes through well-tended fruit-bearing orchards and circulates past the church of St. John the Baptist, past the remains of the temple of Augustus and the scattered stones and capitals of the Greco-Roman amphitheatre.

Remnants of the Roman living quarters lie underneath the modern houses that sprawl across the mountain. Except for the *cardo* that leads up the winding road from the western Roman gate (faint traces of which survive in the olive orchards) and the orderly roman columns, stub-like, that delineate the



Sebastiya almonds and trails.

Sebastiya as a living museum-cum-archaeological park provides sites of interaction between personal and collective identities, between memory and history. From the images and signs of a frozen Greco-Roman-Byzantine past to the haunted houses of childhood, the town as a “place memory” creates an ethnographic habitat that stores recordings made by our ancestors.

general outline of the stadium that lies on the northern slope of the mountain, little remains of the ancient capital of Samaria.

Once a bishopric that boasted a great cathedral and a huge Christian congregation distributed in sparsely populated outposts such as Bet Umrin, Nus Jbeil, Naqura, Pazzaria, and all the neighbouring hamlets, the entire region has now become Muslim. To mark the demographic change the Ottoman Sultan Abdel Hamid converted the Crusader cathedral into the big Friday Mosque.

Strolling through the picturesque winding village streets near the Friday Mosque one passes a 20-metre-deep archaeological pit. This is the site that

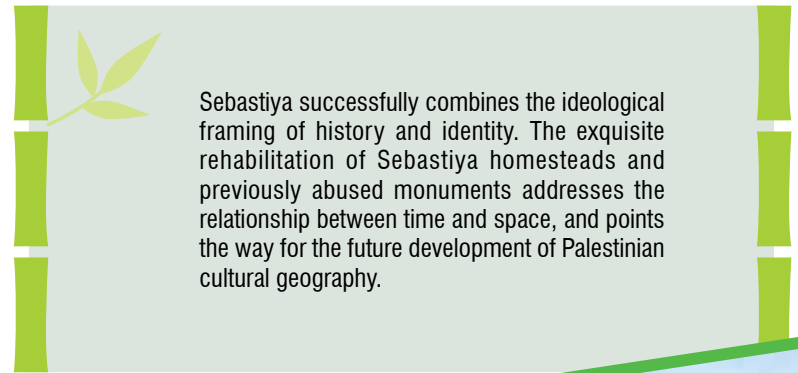


A stone platform, Byzantine stones, and later secular usages.

marks the royal Roman cemetery. A few huge stone sarcophagi carved with lion heads and other mythological scenes remind us of the fact that the Arab/Crusader town is built on a Greco-Roman temenos. Through the imaginative rehabilitation of the peasant dwellings adjacent to the Crusader cathedral, we glimpse a pioneering heritage sight in which the Palestinian cultural milieu is exquisitely reconstructed and laid bare. The layers of Greco-Roman and Crusader archaeological columns, apses, and stone foundations belie the welding of ancient sacred religious structures with later secular domestic vestiges. These vestiges encompass past and modern secondary usages to delineate the iconic symbols of which the Palestinian habitat is constitutively constituted. The village as a totalising system of signification reproduces, updates, and revitalises the key symbols of Palestinian habitat as a memory place par excellence. In the process, Sebastiya emerges as a veritable cultural museum-cum-archaeological park.

Staying in the tastefully restored lodging in Sebastiya one enjoys the comforts of modernity provided by IKEA furniture while enjoying sleeping in a room whose foundations rest on more than three thousand years of history. Modern comfort and archaeological remains co-exist to impart a special aesthetic quality to the bedrooms, terraces, courtyards, and almost every nook and cranny. In fact, all the details serve to remind one of the cultural diversity and complex history that underlie Palestinian cultural expressions.

Iconic signs of the recent past are lavishly though discretely displayed. An old weather-beaten doorway hangs as a memo on a well-restored stone wall in an open courtyard, *hoash*. A luscious green lemon tree stands in the courtyard under the cerulean sky. Along the courtyard's Ottoman wall, archaeologists have revealed a crusader water conduit that treks down the hill and passes underneath the homes adjacent to the Crusader cathedral built on the foundations of a yet earlier Byzantine church. Capitals, broken columns, and hewn boulders of Greco-Roman and Crusader monuments scatter in the labyrinthine alleys in the shadow of later Ottoman residences.



Sebastiya successfully combines the ideological framing of history and identity. The exquisite rehabilitation of Sebastiya homesteads and previously abused monuments addresses the relationship between time and space, and points the way for the future development of Palestinian cultural geography.



A single single-room dwelling with vine and lemon and fig trees.

The impeccable archaeological work lay bare the traces of the composite historical cultural habitat that underlie contemporary Palestinian cultural identity.

The organisation and layout of these symbols reveal the shared systems of meaning that construct cultural habitat and provide its structure and vitality. As cultural icons they generate emotional responses. These signs and symbols frame the Palestinian cultural experience and represent socio-cultural values and assumptions. As cultural icons they elicit internalised norms

of behaviour and generate emotional responses linking members. They are the discursive elements in a totalising system of signification.

Vestiges of former days of glory abound in the Ottoman family compounds. A generic Palestinian word, *qaser*, designates such compounds. *Qaser* may be loosely translated as "palace," but it is more of a family homestead. Inside the Al-Kayed family fort, a few metres from the main square with its charming café built in the sixties, I was surprised to find that the dwellings were not different from the traditional peasant



Ayyubid entrance to Knights Hall.

home. Each extended family lived in the same traditional single-room-style peasant home in which the upper loft was kept for human use and the lower floor reserved for chickens, sheep, the cow, the donkey, and the mule. An Ottoman administrative centre for the adjacent villages, the residence of the families belonging to the feudal clan who enjoyed expansive land holdings and exercised power, shared one single large edifice: *al-qaser*. The Al-Kayed clan fortress gives the city its special character and reminds one of the raging Qays/Yaman local battles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Deserted single-family dwellings abound. One strolls past an abandoned *taboon* oven, a stone platform,

mastabeh, on which our grandparents sat as they wiled away the afternoons, a single-room domed dwelling, a long path leading to the welcoming green door of a dreamy house tucked away under a vine canopy that becomes a shady second-floor pergola (*areeshah*), a nuptial *'illiyah*, a single second-floor room reserved for the newlyweds, a stone fence enclosing an ancient moss-covered stone dome; twisting labyrinthine alleys winding between the old village houses whose foundations rise on Crusader, Byzantine, and Greco-Roman massive boulders that once supported the temenos of the cathedral complex.

Sebastiya is a living ode to Palestinian life, a museum of memories with which

we are already acquainted though Fairuz's classical ballads. In fact, the lyrics and melodies immortalised by Fairuz haunt the old town of Sebastiya.

Sebastiya is a "place memory" par excellence, wherein the visitor "remembers" events that have been experienced by others, and it is closely associated with retrocognition, which literally means "backward knowing." In retrocognition, visitors and locals witness events as "a playback of a past scene." Thus, place memory and retrocognition juxtapose present-day environmental place memory with alterations in time that might let you literally see the past (retrocognition). With retrocognition there is a dream-like state and an altered sense of time.



A vine pergola through Crusader window.

Each village has its own narrative, its own individuality, and its own unique character. Sebastiya brings together Biblical, Roman, Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman archaeological architectural elements, not as cold relics but as an integral expression of Palestinian key symbols and signs within an ecological niche that the Palestinian genius has sculpted through the past five millennia.

In Sebastiya, history and its relationship with narratives constitutive of national identity weave a lyrical poem that celebrates the roots of Palestinian national identity in antiquity. By situating the cultural architectural narrative within the local spatial context and connecting it to wider regional cultural geography



Byzantine, Crusader, and Ottoman traces.

and history, the heritage attraction sites become signifiers that help advance the understanding of the highly diversified cultural expressions of Palestinian national identity.

In Sebastiya we find a venue that reveals the composite multi-layered historical and demographic levels of which our cultural identity is an expression. Sebastiya as an iconic heritage site has come to symbolise fundamental aspects of “Palestinianness,” and in so doing presents the nation as a family, a group of relations with shared history,

values and beliefs, and common characteristics.

Dr. Ali Qleibo is an anthropologist, author, and artist. A specialist in the social history of Jerusalem and Palestinian peasant culture, he is the author of Before the Mountains Disappear, Jerusalem in the Heart, and Surviving the Wall, an ethnographic chronicle of contemporary Palestinians and their roots in ancient Semitic civilisations. Dr. Qleibo lectures at Al-Quds University. He can be reached at aqleibo@yahoo.com.

Article photos by Ali Qleibo

