

# *HN51 [48 Circles]*

Gregory Buchakjian

Site-specific intervention commissioned by TAP Temporary Art Platform for *Scratch the Surface, Touch the Sun* in Hosn Niha Sanctuary, curated by Nour Osseiran and Jad Karam, with the support of the program Art et Territoire by Institut Français du Liban  
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Hosn Niha is an *enchanted* archeological site that could have found its place in Romantic painting and literature. Set in the middle of empty mountains with a spectacular view over the Beqaa, it is a *hidden gem* a few minutes away from the Zahle-Baalbek highway.



I never heard of Hosn Niha and after reading the material provided by TAP, I disregarded “*Hosn*” (fortification) as an introductory word - like “*Qal’at*” (castle) for Baalbek - and drove to Niha. Located 2,6 kilometers downhill, Niha is itself underrated. With the exception of a wedding photo session, I was the only visitor during the entire day. When I told the story of my confusion, none of my friends – that included artists, architects, historians, and generally curious people – knew Hosn Niha existed. The story of my confusion also needs to be told because the two neighboring sites are extremely different one from the other. Niha is nestled in lush greenery composed of all sorts of trees in the immediate vicinity of vineyards while Hosn Niha is on a lunar landscape of mineral concretions.

The main sanctuary at Hosn Niha (HN51) looks like the site of a catastrophe. The monumental door is surrounded by a pile of broken stones and the interior is full of rubble. Part of the debris disclose a white color and powdery texture like in a stone quarry. Hosn Niha indeed sustained serious damage during the 1975-1990 war: “Syrians and Israelis fought in the Kamid el-Loz region in 1982 and their front lines, in the form of huge earthen embankments, not only ran across the valley floor but also the site itself. The site was then bulldozed extensively by local and national treasure hunters in the 1980s.”<sup>1</sup> Though Hosn Niha presented its cataclysmic appearance before 1975, it became

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Newson and Ruth Young, “The archaeology of conflict-damaged sites: Hosn Niha in the Biqa’ Valley, Lebanon”, *Antiquity*, 89(344), 449-463. doi:10.15184/aqy.2015.4.

a wounded witness of the violence and corruption that ruined the country for the past decades.

At the time TAP invited me to propose a site-specific intervention in Hosn Niha, another built structure acted as a suffering witness of the violence and corruption that ruined the country for the past decades: the grain silos at the port of Beirut. The silos survived the 1975-1990 war in spite of their location in the immediate vicinity of the front line. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 2022, they were partially destroyed. Since then, the silos became an object of conflict between those who wished to preserve a de facto memorial of the tragedy and those who fancied *tabula rasa*. In the summer of 2022, fires ignited in the silos. One part collapsed on the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, another on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August, during the second commemoration of the explosion. What remained from the northern section continued to burn and collapsed on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August.

Both the temple and the silos have a relationship with agriculture in general and specifically cereals. The silos were designed to store 120.000 tons of wheat and corn while the temple overlooks the Beqaa valley that was a breadbasket in the Roman Empire. Without this source of wealth, it is hardly imaginable that monumental structures such as Hosn Niha, Biha and Baalbek would have ever existed. Temples being the largest and most solid edifices of the time, one could theoretically envision an alternative use as grain silos in specific situations.

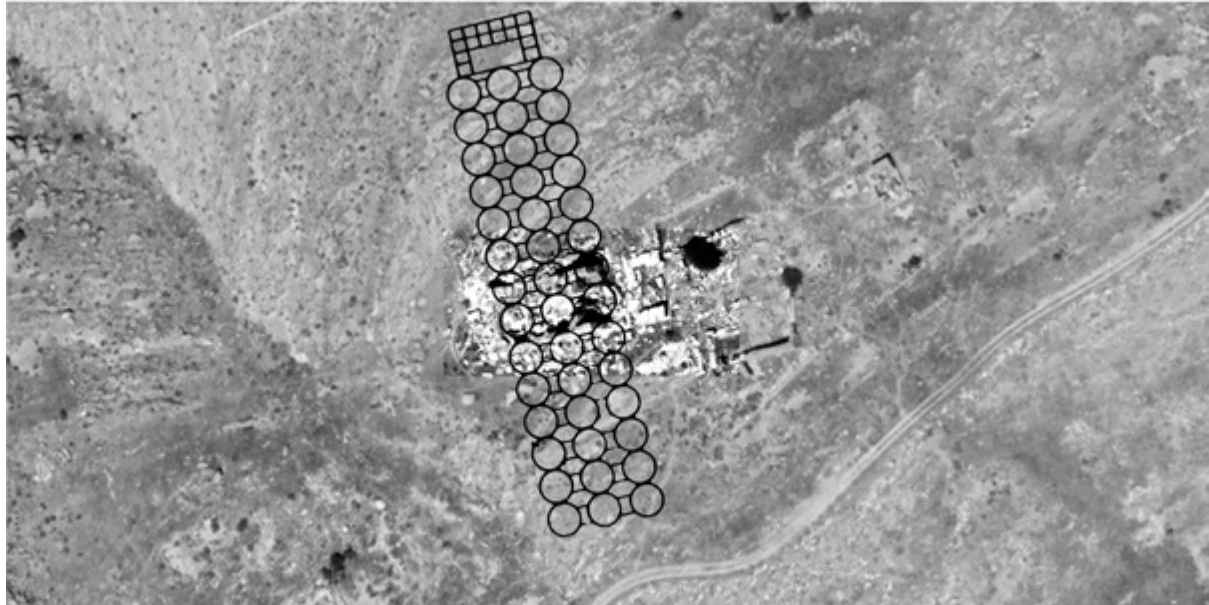


Both temple and port silos were remarkably executed. HN51 sanctuary is made of cyclopean blocks of stones. Moreover, both structures share the same orientation. In Hosn Niha, the original temples “probably devoted to the cult of waters, were oriented in an identical manner—towards the southeast and the valley.”<sup>2</sup> When HN51 was designed, “the old orientation was changed (...). The Temples of Niha A, Hosn Niha A and Qsarnaba

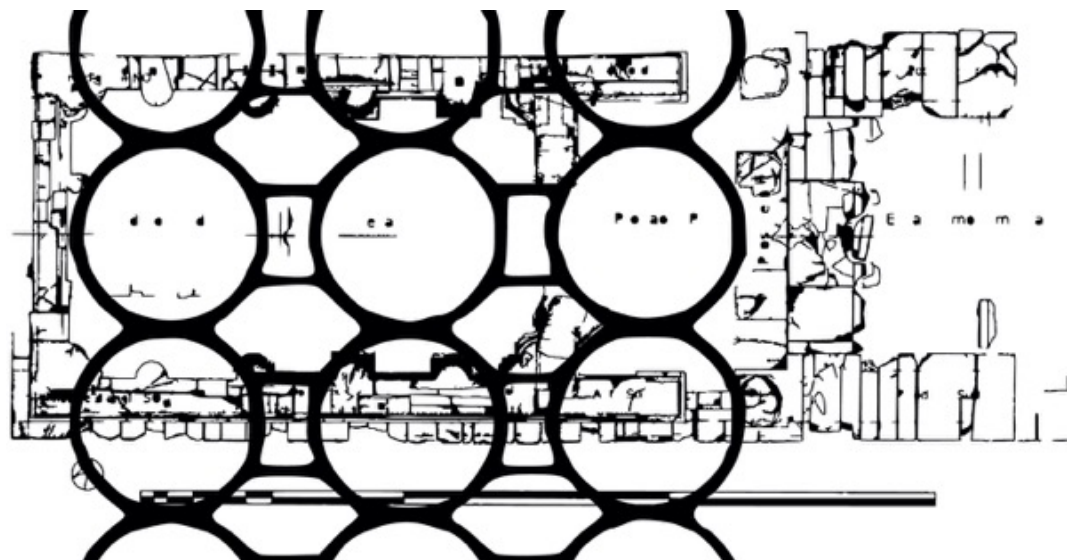
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<sup>2</sup> Giulio Magli, “Archaeoastronomy of the Temples of the Bekaa Valley”. *Heritage* 2021, 4, 1526–1537. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage4030084>

indeed all belong to a very limited range of azimuths ( $74^{\circ}$  to  $76^{\circ}30'$ ) and declinations ( $12^{\circ}30'$  to  $16^{\circ}$ ) which includes the values for Jupiter and Bacchus as well."<sup>3</sup> The silos were erected in the late 1960s on a recently constructed pier between two basins. The alignment followed the shape of the piers and the functionality to load grain from ships. It is coincidentally identical to the temple.



The length of the temple could theoretically house the width of the silos or one section of three rows.



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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## The intervention

The main temple of Hosn Niha was proposed to be a displaced ephemeral marker for the current and bound-to-disappear monument, aka the silos.

Consequently, the plan of the silo was to be drawn on scale 1/1 on the temple and its surroundings. The proposal was utopian being given that the configuration of the temple Hosn Niha is craggy, uneven and barely practicable. Moreover, in order not to alter the archeological site, drawing was made in chalk so that the intervention would be ephemeral and would start to disappear before its completion.

The unmonumental performative action aiming to reconnect and recollect pieces of a broken history started on the 27<sup>th</sup> of October and was aimed to be pursued during the three consecutive days in the presence of the public. I was helped by Laurent Gongora, a French artist in residence in Deir el Qamar who volunteered for TAP and accompanied by Habib Chaar drone operator. Work was very hard because the curves needed to be thick enough to be seen from above, so that an entire afternoon was barely enough to complete one circle. In the evening, photographer and artist Ieva Saudargaitė paid a visit and suggested to use “كلس”, crushed limestone mixed with water and apply it with a brush, like paint. On the forthcoming morning, Friday 28<sup>th</sup>, Laurent and I went to Abu Khaled General Store in Halba and acquired “كلس”. We did a trial on a wall to verify that it was easily removable, then went on site and resumed working. Things were progressing well and fast and if things went well a large portion of the 48 circles could have been completed by Sunday evening.



However, around noon, an employee from the Directorate General of Antiquities ordered the work to be stopped immediately because it contravenes the rules of archeological sites [TAP had submitted to the DGA a proposal of the piece and no one emitted any objection]. The employee took pictures of the incriminated drawings and called someone – allegedly a supervisor – who was very angry as one could hear him screaming through the phone. The employee refused to give the name of the supervisor nor his and left. Minutes later, another employee from the DGA arrived. He was present on the previous day and witnessed the execution of the work. When he was asked to react to the events, he said “I don’t have anything to do with that.” In subsequent hours, negotiations were running between TAP, Institut Français, DGA and independent archeologists. In the afternoon, an officer from DGA visited TAP and confirmed that nothing blameworthy happened. However, the key person who reviewed TAP’s project and was in charge of the site was silent. He didn’t respond to TAP, Institut Français and the DGA senior officer. In consequence, TAP and the artist decided to keep the piece unfinished.

In the early morning of the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, DGA employees started the removal of the installation. On that day, visitors saw it unfinished and ruined at the same time. On the morning of Sunday, the 30<sup>th</sup> of October, the entire intervention was removed. At 4 PM, at the occasion of the Artist Guided Tour organized by TAP, I presented a piece in absentia. In the conclusion of his review of the event, Jim Quilty wrote: “Briefly, a wall of Hosn Niha has been illuminated with an observation of Theodor Adorno, that “no recollection is possible any more, save by way of perdition: eternity appears, not as such, but diffracted through the most perishable.””<sup>4</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Jim Quilty, “Sun, shadow and conversation at the ‘Fortress of Tranquility’”, L’Orient Today, 2 November 2022. Online: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1316682/sun-shadow-and-conversation-at-the-fortress-of-tranquility.html>

Figures:

1. Gregory Buchakjian working on HN51. Photo: Habib Chaar
2. Hosn Niha, Temple HN51, seen from North-West as Sunset. Photo: Gregory Buchakjian
3. Superposition of Hosn Niha sanctuary and Beirut Port Silos with precise scale and orientation. Photomontage by Gregory Buchakjian. Source: Google Maps.
4. Superposition of Hosn Niha sanctuary and the plan of the Port Silos structure of reinforced cylinders. Photomontage by Gregory Buchakjian. Sources: Google Maps and Karel Kerhart, 'Stavba obilního sila v Bejrútu', published in *Inženýrské Stavby* 3, 1971. P. 113.
5. Superposition of Hosn Niha sanctuary and the plan of the Port Silos structure of reinforced cylinders. Photomontage by Gregory Buchakjian. Sources: Jean Yasmine and Karel Kerhart, 'Stavba obilního sila v Bejrútu', published in *Inženýrské Stavby* 3, 1971. P. 113.
6. Gregory Buchakjian and Laurent Gongora working on HN51. Photo: Habib Chaar
7. Trace of HN51 on the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 2022. Photo: Gregory Buchakjian