

Jericho

The Oldest City in the World



By Hamdan Taha

Jericho is located in the lower part of the Jordan Valley, 10 kilometers west of the Jordan River and 12 kilometers north of the Dead Sea. It is part of the fracture (*ghor*) known as the Great Rift Valley, visible on the earth's surface from north Syria to East Africa.

Jericho is known as the lowest point on earth (the town is 230 meters below sea level) and the oldest city in the world. It has been mentioned in ancient historical and religious sources.

The site of Tell es-Sultan is identified with ancient Jericho. It has been described as the city of palms, God's paradise, the city of the moon, the city of giants (*jabareen*), and the capital of the *ghwar*. The city is also known by its Arabic name *Ariha*. Recently, the name Jericho

Jericho. Photo by Palestine Image Bank.



Middle Bronze Age II, fortification at Tell es-Sultan.

(*Ruha*) was discovered on an Egyptian scarab from the second millennium BC at Tell es-Sultan.

The region of Jericho is composed of an arid plain watered by three main springs: Ain es-Sultan, Ain Deuk, and Ain Nuweima. Southwest of Jericho run the springs of Wadi Qelt, with Ain el-Fawwar and Ain Fara, which rise a few miles up the wadi west of Jericho. Located south of Jericho is Wadi Nuweima. The combination of alluvial soil, perennial springs, and tropical climate has made Jericho an attractive place for human settlement.

As the oldest city in the world, Jericho has assumed a pioneering place in the history of humanity with the emergence of the first settled society based on the

Chalcolithic painting on a pottery shard, Tell el-Mafjar.



Palestinian Dishes



Leafy Greens

Palestine's leafy greens begin to shoot up in the springtime through the sidewalks, in small gardens, and on the mountains. Even though the untrained eye might only see weeds, Palestinians have long used these greens as an integral part of their diet. They are mostly found in the Jericho area, and they are free for the picking. You can also buy them at the local vegetable stand. The most well-known plants are *mulukhiyah* (Jew's mallow), *hindbeh* (dandelion), Swiss chard (beet), spinach, *hwerneh* (mustard greens), *jarjeer* (arugula or rocket), *khubbeizeh*, and *backleh* (purslane). Each one is prepared in a different way, but they are all easy to make.

domestication of plants and animals. It was the showplace of the Neolithic Revolution in human history more than 10,000 years ago.

The remains of the early Neolithic settlement are represented at Tell es-Sultan by a small settlement that consists of rectangular and round houses built of mud-brick and surrounded by a wall and towers. To the west, a round stone tower, 8.5 meters in diameter and preserved to a height of 7.75 meters, represents the earliest preserved piece of a fortification

system from the eighth millennium BC. A striking cultic feature of Neolithic life is represented by a number of plastered skulls, on which the features of the human face have been modeled in painted plaster.

At the beginning of the third millennium BC, the first urban city was found at Tell es-Sultan, protected by a double mud-brick city wall. During the Bronze Age II, Jericho flourished as a major Canaanite urban center in Palestine. The fortification system of the city consists of a massive wall built of stone and glacis, with a two-meter-thick wall built on top. The Middle Bronze Age tombs preserve a unique testimony of daily life through artefacts such as pottery, personal belongings, and furniture. In the Late Bronze Age, Jericho is linked with a series of religious traditions, including the story of Joshua's capture of Jericho and Elisha's Spring. At the end of the Iron Age the city center moved to the site of Telul Abu Alayeq, on the banks of Wadi Qelt, two kilometers south of Tell es-Sultan. From the



Tell es-Sultan MB II cult vessel.

Persian period onward, Jericho was known as a winter resort for rulers and Palestine's wealthy inhabitants. During the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, the Jericho region witnessed the birth of Christianity and relevant events connected with John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the Essenes.

The city of Jericho was fortified during the Roman period and became the district's administrative center. It witnessed the famous love story between General Antony and Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. Jericho was the residence of King Herod, who rebuilt it as a garden city along the banks of Wadi Qelt. His construction projects included a series of elaborate palaces, a theatre, and a hippodrome, as well as a water system that consisted of channels and aqueducts. Due to its strategic importance the entire Jordan Valley was protected by a series of fortresses built on the top of the hills surrounding the plain. After the death of Herod, Jericho became an estate of the Roman emperor.

During the New Testament period, Jericho is linked with the stories of Jesus. He passed through Jericho and cured two blind men; he converted Zacchaeus the tax collector. His miraculous deeds are linked to the Mount of Temptation, the site of the baptism, and the story of the Good Samaritan. From the fourth century AD onward, Jericho was a main destination for religious pilgrimage.

Jericho flourished during the Byzantine period, and its center moved again to a site near the present center of Jericho, as is evidenced by the large number of settlements, churches, and monasteries. In the sixth century AD, Jericho was depicted on the Madaba mosaic map, showing the

church and the city of palms. Historical and archaeological sources attest to the thriving life during the Byzantine period. The literary sources, travellers, pilgrim accounts, and inscriptions provide important information about various aspects of Byzantine life.

Jericho was mentioned in the Qur'an as the city of giants (*jabareen*). During the Umayyad dynasty (661–750), Jericho was part of Jund Filastin. It flourished during this period, as is evidenced by the eighth-century Umayyad palace at Khirbet el-Mafjer. The site was attributed to Umayyad Caliph Hisham bin Abed el-Malik (724–743 AD) and his heir el-Walid II (743–744 AD)

Palestinian Dresses

Jericho Traditional Dress

This is one of the oldest dresses of Palestine that comes from the oldest city in the world. The dress is distinguished by its red vertical embroidery design. More than ten yards long, the dress is pleated into several layers to protect from the heat of the sun and the cold of the desert.



Photo courtesy of ©MahaSaca, Palestinian Heritage Center, Bethlehem, Palestine.



Hisham's Palace mosaic.

on the basis of some epigraphic materials. The Umayyads repaired the water system and constructed new aqueducts to supply Hisham's palace with water and to irrigate its fields. The spectacular palace, with its lavish architecture (palace, bath, mosque, and elaborate fountain) and mosaic art, was used as a winter resort for a short period, until it was destroyed in a severe earthquake ca. 749 AD. Later on, during the Abbasid and Ayyubid periods, the site was inhabited by a small agricultural estate.

During the medieval period, the plantation and production of sugar were among the main economic activities in Jericho. The site of Tawaheen

es-Sukkar features a relatively well-preserved industrial installation for manufacturing sugar from this period.

During the late-Ottoman period, Jericho fell into decline. The lack of security and the tax policy of the Ottomans were the main reasons for this decline.

Life in the city was revived at the end of the nineteenth century. Modern Jericho has benefited from its natural and human resources, rich archaeological and cultural resources, fertile land, and warm climate in addition to its strategic location across the Jordan as a gateway to the Arab world. Agriculture and tourism represent the main assets of the city. Jericho today is one of Palestine's main tourist destinations.

Ossuary, Roman period.



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