

Ramallah, Al-Bireh

The Twin Cities

By Issam Halayqa

Ramallah

Ramallah is located 16 kilometers north of Jerusalem, at an elevation of 900 meters above sea level at the crest of the hills in the central ridge of Palestine. The current name is derived from the Aramaic compound name Rama El (God is exalted).

The earliest archaeological remains in the area come from Khirbet Radana, two kilometers north of Ramallah, with some finds from the Early Bronze Age, 3000 BC. But the principal remains consist of an agricultural village that dates from the Iron Age (late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries BC) to the middle of the eleventh century BC where houses, silos, and a series of cisterns were found. A jar handle with letters in the proto-Canaanite script was also found there.

Roman-Byzantine and early Arab remains were found in many archaeological sites in the vicinity of Ramallah. The Roman period is represented by rock-cut tombs and a lead coffin from the third century AD.



Al-Manara Square.

The second major settlement is represented by Khirbet et-Tira, approximately 1.5 kilometers west of Ramallah. It was inhabited during the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods. The Byzantine remains include parts of the fortification system, two churches, an olive-press water system that consists of a rock-cut pool, a channel, and cisterns. The remains of the Byzantine church follow a basilica plan and are paved with colorful mosaics. It was dated to the fifth century and was in use until the eighth century. Two burial inscriptions on a marble stone adorned with a cross were found on the site. The tombstone reads: "Here lies the honored bodies of Stephaophoros, the young of Constantia and Posemnia"; and the other inscription: "It is Dina who has bought with (her) money

and properties the house of Christ, offering it as a gift to His footprints." But according to the Italian Franciscan archeologist Fr. Bellarmino Bagatti, the first inscription does not refer to a burial but to a deposition of relics, and the second inscription refers to the offering of a chancel screen by a woman upon entering the monastic life.

After the abandonment of Khirbet et-Tira, the center of Ramallah moved to the place of the present-day old town. During the twelfth century, French Crusaders built a stronghold in Ramallah and named it Ramalie, and this period is represented in the remains of a Crusader tower, known as At-Tira, which can still be seen in the old part of town.

Oral history connects the people of the city with the immigration of the Christian



Palestinian Dishes



Falafel

Falafel (فلافل) is a small crunchy ball made from raw chickpeas soaked overnight in water, then strained and ground with onion, garlic, parsley, coriander, a combination of spices (cumin, allspice, black pepper, cinnamon), salt, and baking soda mixed with a little water. In Egypt falafel is made with chickpeas or fava beans (*foul*), or a combination of the two. Chickpeas are one of the earliest cultivated vegetables (pulses), 7,500 years old; they originated in southeast Turkey. Falafel has grown to become a common type of fast food in every city in Palestine, the Middle East, and the world. It is usually served in pita bread, which acts as a pocket, or wrapped in a flatbread known as *lafa*. The pita is spread with hummus or *labaneh* and then stuffed with falafel balls topped with slices of tomatoes and pickled cucumber, chili sauce, and French fries, and drizzled with tahini sauce.

Falafel balls may also be eaten alone as a snack or served as part of a *mezze*. The Copts of Egypt claim to have first made the dish as a replacement for meat during Lent.

Falafel can be made by hand or with a tool called an *aleb falafel*. The mixture is then deep-fried. It can be stuffed with white cheese or diced onion with sumac. Falafel can be coated with sesame seeds before being fried.

family of Rashid Haddadin from Al-Karak, Jordan, in the late fifteenth century. Haddadin was in conflict with a local sheikh in Al-Karak, so he and his companions left Al-Karak and lived in a ruin called Ramallah, near the predominantly Muslim town Al-Bireh.

According to the Ottoman archives, the population of Ramallah at the beginning of the Ottoman period (in 1592) was 225, divided into 45 families. In 1838, American traveler Edward Robinson visited Ramallah and stated that its population was 800. This number rose to 900 in 1912 and reached 2,292 in 1922, according to the first population census carried out by the Mandate government. After the *Nakba* in 1948, a large number of Palestinians who were expelled from their villages and cities inside the Green Line dwelt in Ramallah, thus bringing about a significant increase in the population. The refugees were integrated into the life of the town and played a great role in its growth.

Today, Ramallah and Al-Bireh form one modern and open geographic unit; the two cities are a magnet for many Palestinians because of the availability of jobs and proximity to Jerusalem. A recent challenge is the pressure of increasing population growth. According to the latest statistics of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the total population of Ramallah and Al-Bireh Governorate has reached 205,448.

Ramallah is known as the “Bride of Palestine” because of its general topographical beauty. Its pleasant, cool climate has made it a popular summer resort. As a fast-growing cosmopolitan town, it has a lively town center, museums, art galleries, theatres, parks, a booming restaurant scene, and a bustling nightlife. It is also

welcoming to visitors who will find comfortable places to stay, some of Palestine’s best restaurants, good transport, and other tourism-related services, not to mention hospitable, friendly people.

The modern cities of Ramallah and Al-Bireh constitute a major urban center, and host the ad hoc administrative center of the Palestinian government.

Famous tourist and historical sites include the old town, the Efranj Tower, a traditional olive press, St. George Church, Maqam Ibrahim al-Khalil, viewed as the patron of the town, the Ottoman court, Ramallah Museum, Ramallah Cultural Palace, Mahmoud Darwish Memorial Museum, and Al-Barwa Park.

Al-Bireh

The name Al-Bireh is a modification of the Canaanite plural Bi’erot (water/oil wells). Al-Bireh, as Ramallah’s twin city, lies 900 meters above sea level and is located on the central mountain ridge of Palestine, a strategic location that has facilitated its progress and success. It served as a cross-border point in the trade between the north and south, along the caravan route between Jerusalem and Nablus. According

to oral history, people ascribed the foundation of their city to Hussein Tansah, who came from Showbak, Jordan, dwelt in Al-Bireh and merged with its families.

The earliest settlement was in Tel en-Nasbeh, approximately two kilometers south of Al-Bireh, on the Al-Bireh–Jerusalem road. Excavations carried out on the site by William F. Badè on behalf of the Palestine Institute of the Pacific School of Religion between 1926 and 1935 showed that the earliest traces of occupation go back to the Chalcolithic period and to the early Bronze Age (around 3000 BC). A series of tombs and dwelling caves provides evidence of this early settlement. The main occupation of the site was during the Iron Age. The settlement was indicated by domestic quarters and by a massive city wall and an elaborate gate. There is also evidence of occupation in the Persian, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods.

Approximately two kilometers to the west, a settlement from the Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods was recovered. During the Roman period, the city of Al-Bireh was known as Berta “Castle” and from this era, ruins of three pools south of the old

Palestinian Dresses

Ramallah Traditional Dress

Ramallah dresses are made of either black or white linen. They are cross-stitched with deep red threads and decorated with various beautiful designs that include palm trees, horse heads, combs, and geometric shapes. The headdress is known as the *saffeh* and is embroidered with red thread and decorated with *iqal* of gold and silver coins and a beautiful silver necklace.



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

mosque, as well as stepped caves with semi-niches meticulously sculpted with human bones, can be found. Roman remains are represented in many wells spread throughout the city, ten of which are in Ras Et-Tahuna, in the municipal park, and another ten in Netarich.

During the Crusader period, a settlement was established in Al-Bireh, and was first known as Mahumeria and changed to Magna Mahumeria, which means "worshipping." Al-Bireh was an important village because of its proximity to Jerusalem, especially after the fall of Jerusalem in 1099. The Crusaders built a tower and an administrative building (curia), which was used as a Crusader headquarters. A church located at the center of the city was built during this period to commemorate the Christian tradition that indicates that the Virgin Mary and her betrothed Joseph rested in the city and lost Jesus on their way back from Jerusalem to Nazareth. This church was named The Church of the Holy Family and was first mentioned in 1128, when it and the other 21 villages appurtenances were confirmed to the Holy Sepulcher by Pope Honorius II. Around 1172, the Pilgrim Theodric recorded that the church, which had recently been renovated, was dedicated to St. Mary and belonged to the Templars. It might have been converted into a mosque during the Ayyubid period. By 1514 the vaulting had collapsed, but most walls were still recognized until World War I. The church plan is a three-aisled basilica of four bays, measuring overall about 22 by 34/37 meters. Its east end terminated in three semi-circular apses, the central one being preceded by a barrel vault 2.10 meters deep. The walls were about 2.70 meters thick; on the inside they were faced throughout with smoothly dressed ashlar, and on the outside with rougher blocks. The main door was most probably in the center of the west end. During this era, the caravanserai – a very important landmark of the city – was built near a water spring.

Islamic traditions indicate that Caliph Omar had rested on his trip from Medina in Arabia to Jerusalem to receive the keys of Jerusalem from the Byzantines. A mosque was established in 1195 AD at the place where Omar is said to have prayed, a mosque known as the Omari Mosque, built during the Ayyubid period. Following the Battle of Hattin between the Ayyubids and the Franks, Salah al-Din captured the town, and the ancient name Al-Bireh was revived again. In the Ottoman period, the city became an important political and administrative center as well as a center of justice. It was inhabited by the Ottoman administrator and was home to a military base known as Taboor. Many Ottoman monuments, such as Al-Ayn mosque and old buildings, of which only the foundations remained, as well as many shrines dedicated to pious clerics, are spread throughout the city and include Maqam Sheikh Najm, Sheikh Abdullah, Sheikh Mujahid, Sheikh Sheiban, Sheikh Yusuf, Umm Khalil, and Al-Botma.

Al-Bireh today has many cultural centers as well as organizations for women, youth, and sports, which indicates the vitality of the social life and the interaction between the people of the city. Among the most prominent cultural centers are the Yasser Arafat Memorial and Museum in the southeastern part of the Muqatta, Khan al-Bireh Museum south of the city center, Inash al-Usra Charitable Society and Museum, Al-Bireh Cultural Center in the city center, Al-Bireh Public Library that serves students from elementary grades to university, and Al-Bireh Youth Foundation, a youth sports organization that includes the Majed Asaad Sports Complex.

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