

# Hebron – Al-Khalil

## The City of the Prophet Ibrahim



By Issa Sarie'

The city of Hebron is located about 30 kilometers south of Jerusalem. It is known by the name Khalil al-Rahman (God's friend). Ancient Hebron is identified with Tell al-Rumeideh, Haram al-Rameh (Mamre), and the old city. The city is famed as the burial place of the prophets Ibrahim, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives. The Hebron hills landscape is littered with mounds that contain the cultural remains of modern and ancient towns, and villages that bear witness to a history of human activity. Hebron has always been one of the main destinations for pilgrims and a trade

center. It is known for its exceptional religious value and its lush vineyards, traditional pottery and glassblowing, leather works, and other creative arts. As the main trade center in southern Palestine, Hebron is an ideal destination for visitors of all kinds.

The city is a whole day's walk from Jerusalem along the so-called Abraham Path. The trail winds along the central mountain range, which presents variable topographic formation – rugged mountainous heights, low hills, and flat valleys. The road is flanked by gently sloping hillsides planted with vineyards, olive groves, and fruit trees, particularly almonds, peaches, plums, and figs. Irregular stone walls known as terraces serve to prevent soil erosion by leveling the steep and uneven terrain of the rugged hills. The wider plains were used to cultivate cereals in the winter and vegetables and orchids in the summer. Cultivated trees grow side by side with shrubs and other types of wild trees (oak, carob, and pine), and form an important habitat for wildlife diversity. Local birds breed and nest in the trees, while other birds fly over the area during their migration period, using the cultivated valley and its surrounding trees as a source of food and water to sustain their journey.

In addition to the stone terraces, there are square or round watchtowers, known locally as *a'rreishe* (*manateer*

or *qsour*), which have been built with irregular stones collected from the fields. These watchtowers were used by farmers to store farming equipment and to collect and process vegetables and fruits, e.g., drying figs and grapes (*zabeeb*), and making grape syrup (*dibs*). Archaeological surveys have exposed many winepresses that indicate that a significant traditional vineyard cultivation and a wine industry have existed since antiquity in the Hebron area.

Despite the fact that archaeological investigations conducted in the city of Hebron are limited to a couple of sites guided by a biblical and political agenda, these investigations provide an opportunity to trace the extent of historical occupation of the city and examine how material-culture interpretation can be manipulated in the reconstructed actual history of people's everyday activities. The earliest settlement evidence in Hebron was identified in Jebel al-Rumeideh, southwest of the old town, where archaeological investigation has brought to light the sequence of occupation from the Chalcolithic period (4000 BC) to the Umayyad era (661–750 AD).

The first excavation, conducted from 1964 to 1966 by Philip Hammond from Princeton Theological Seminary, revealed massive fortified city walls and a gate from the Early and Middle Bronze

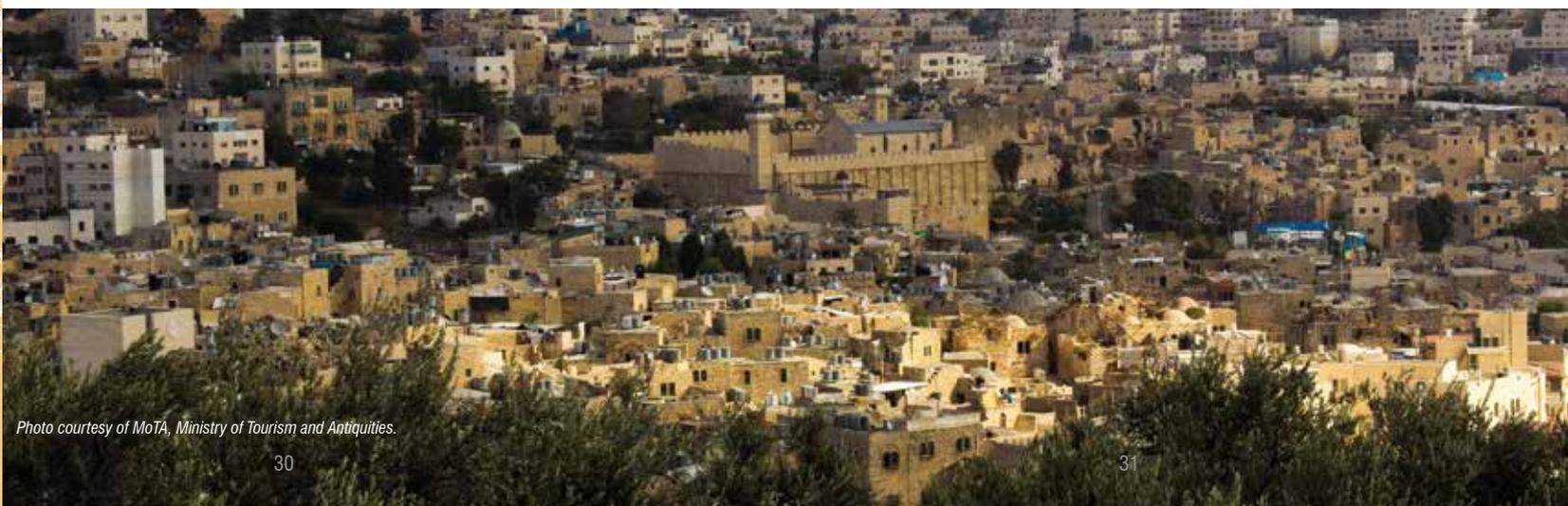


Photo courtesy of MoTA, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.



Dry-stone terraces, Hebron.

period (2300–1450 BC). The material culture consists of pottery vessels, jewelry, Egyptian scarabs, a toggle-pin dagger, and a cuneiform tablet on which are recorded a few personal names as well as a transaction involving sheep. This substantial material culture, and other artifacts, shed light on Canaanite community life and its environment. A scarab found by Hammond bears the praenomen of Pharaoh Ramesses II. Further excavations that have been conducted by the Israeli authorities have revealed meager remains from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I, which is similar to excavations in many other Canaanite city-states in the central hills of Palestine. The excavations have also revealed that Tell al-Rumeideh was inhabited during the Iron Age and the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. There are scant remains from the Roman and Early Islamic periods.

The second major chapter in the history of Hebron is represented by the archaeological site of Haram al-Rameh, identified with ancient Mamre. According to tradition, the prophet Ibrahim/Abraham pitched his tent under an oak tree in the area of Mamre. It is where the prophet received the three angels who informed him that his barren wife Sarah would give birth to his son Isaac. Herod built an enclosure around the site and a well in the southwestern corner. The archaeological excavations have revealed material culture that indicates the presence of an altar for Qaus, the chief Edomite God. Hadrian built a temple

for the God Hermes around 130 AD.

Mamre, with its higher altitude and cooler climate than that of the lower site, was the ideal main station for the coastal cities' caravans that came via the Wad al-Qof road. After the first century AD, Mamre became one of the main market fairs in Palestine. The recovery of the smashed head of Dionysus-Bacchus from the excavations of 1984–1986 point toward a significant annual wine-drinking festival that took place on the site. Vineyard products, mainly wine, were always the main trade items of the Hebron area in antiquity.

In the fourth century, the Edomite cult on the site was terminated by Emperor Constantine, and a Byzantine sanctuary with three naves was constructed in its place. The Monastery of Mamre was represented on the famous sixth-century mosaic map of Madaba in Jordan. The monastery was probably destroyed in 614, during the Persian invasion. The site was reused during the medieval period and has recently been rehabilitated by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities as an archaeological park.

In the old city of Hebron, every single building has a complex history and provides evidence of what went before, which is of tremendous value for the local communities. The town's development during the Mamluk (twelfth century) period took place mostly around the sacred site of Al-Haram al-Ibrahimi on its eastern edge. During the Ottoman period (1517–1918 AD), the old city

flourished and expanded to the north and east. The old town of Hebron was built above the suq, with narrow alleys that led to quarters named after families or professions, with openings to wider covered streets to facilitate access to the mosque. As the city had no fortified structure, the continuous wall of closely knit extended-family houses around a common courtyard, known as a *hosh*, provided protection at its outer edges. In trade communities, the suq was the main means of livelihood, and architecture evolved accordingly. Walking through the suq today offers a fascinating journey through its history as one sees such traditional local products as pottery, handblown glass, rugs, embroidered items, wool, fresh and dried fruits, and dried yogurt.

Hebron lies on the ancient trade and pilgrimage route to Mecca that connects Damascus and Cairo. The memories of pilgrims, traders, travelers, merchants, craftsmen, and prayers are maintained in the structure of the Suq, Khan al-Tujjar, Al-Hammam, and the ruins of the household structures in the heart of the old town. The Hebron Rehabilitation Committee – with its philosophy of passing down to future generations crucial components of the narrative and historical identity, and aiming to revive the socio-cultural life in the old city of Hebron – has made great strides in restoring and valorizing the historical core of the city. The old town of Hebron is one of the few Islamic cities that has preserved its authentic identity, visible in its urban fabric and prestigious architecture, and corroborated by its craftsmanship. It represents a unique living museum, comprehensively maintaining and presenting the ancient and modern way of life.

Religions are rooted in this relatively small and diverse environmental

## Palestinian Dishes



### Qidreh

Hebron's traditional dish, *qidreh* (قدرة), which means "cooking pot," is made from chicken or lamb and is cooked traditionally with rice, garlic cloves, broth, and chickpeas in a brass pot with turmeric, black pepper, cinnamon, and allspice. The ingredients are then combined and put into a wood stove where it cooks for three hours. It is usually served with plain yogurt, cucumber yogurt salad, or Arabic salad, and garnished with chopped parsley and sautéed almonds or pine nuts.

area of the Hebron hills. The impact of cult and religion in Hebron is as old as the city itself and is illustrated not only by the importance of the prophet Ibrahim/Abraham for the three monotheistic religions but also by the ancient pagan cults prior to



# Palestinian Dresses

## The Hebron Region (Beit Jibreen)

Hebron boasts two beautiful bridal dresses – the *Jalayah* and the *Jana wa Nar*.

The *Jalayah* is distinguished by its rich-colored embroidery, mainly deep brownish-red, and beautiful decorations such as the moon and the stars, Cypress trees, the Pasha's tent, feathers, and other decorations. The center of the dress is known for its silk- and gold-thread embroidery and colored silk fabrics.

The headdress is known as *wekayet al-darahem*, which is a unique piece that is decorated with gold and silver coins and chains of beads and silver, topped with a beautiful thick scarf called a *shambar*.



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

the religions. As the burial place of the prophets Ibrahim, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives was in Hebron, Herod the Great (73–4 BC) built a massive wall during the Roman period to enclose the cave of the prophets' tombs. The façade was made of stones cut from hard chalk, and hewn and polished with great effort. Many of the stones are enormous, five to eight feet in length and each weighing a couple of tons.

During the early Islamic period, a mosque that was erected and dedicated to the prophet Ibrahim/Abraham became the fourth sacred place of Islam after Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem. Muslim scholars and pilgrims visited and venerated the city, especially following the Hajj to Mecca. The city of Hebron and the mosque were honored and sanctified by the rulers of successive Muslim states and leaders, as well as by the public.

The Crusaders (1099) converted the mosque into a Gothic-style church. Subsequently, after Saladin's retaking of the city in 1187, the place was turned into a mosque, and Saladin brought from Askalan a unique carved walnut-wood minbar (pulpit), which stands near the

prayer niche. The minbar was prepared in the Damascus style by order of Badr al-Din al-Jamali, the army prince of the Fatimid Caliph Al-Mustansir. During Mamluk rule (1250–1516 AD), Hebron flourished and became a famous Sufi center. Hundreds of Islamic religious and historical monuments were built within the old town of Hebron.

In 2005, Hebron was listed on the Palestinian Inventory of Cultural and Natural Heritage Sites of Potential Outstanding Universal Value. In 2012, a nomination file was prepared by the Municipality of Hebron, in cooperation with Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, and other community organizations. During the 41st session of the World Heritage Committee held in Krakow, Poland, from July 2–12, 2017, Hebron was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger.

*Dr. Issa Sarie' is an anthropologist and archaeologist. He is the director of the High Institute of Archaeology at Al-Quds University. Dr. Sarie' can be reached at [isarie@staff.alquds.edu](mailto:isarie@staff.alquds.edu) or [isarie63@gmail.com](mailto:isarie63@gmail.com).*