

# Al-Bariyah – a Unique Habitat Zone

A Potential World Heritage Site

By Hamdan Taha



**A**l-Bariyah, identified with the wilderness, is a semi-arid zone that extends east of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the Hebron central hills to the west to the shore of the Dead Sea.

Most of the al-Bariyah area is classified as Irano-Turanian in climate, with a mountainous desert habitat. Essentially a treeless, thin-soiled, arid, and dramatically eroding limestone plateau, it is dissected by wadis that drain towards the Dead Sea. This region lies in the rain-shadow of the central highlands, classified as a hot area that receives very low annual rainfall, varying between 400 mm and 150 mm from west to east, respectively. Its unique geological formation and biogeographic location, as well as the abundance of water from flash

Today, al-Bariyah is one of twenty sites that have been nominated to be enlisted as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. It is proposed as an important cultural landscape due to its strategic location. It is also notably associated with Jesus and the early Christian era and has a significant number of monasteries and Islamic *maqams* (shrines).



Mar Saba. Photo courtesy of Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

floods and permanent springs, help to create a natural diversity of the desert habitat in this region. Accordingly, al-Bariyah is classified as one of the most important bird areas, according to the criteria of Birdlife International. Birds increasingly concentrate here in considerable numbers during breeding and in passage. In winter, especially, al-Bariyah is one of the major migration routes for many bird species worldwide.

Al-Bariyah is rich in cultural heritage features as well. Archaeological investigations have shown continuous occupation in different parts of the area, extending from the Lower Palaeolithic period to modern times. Prehistoric remains were uncovered at 'Iraq al-Ahmar, Umm Qal'a, and Umm Qatafa on the north side of Wadi Khareiton. However, the prehistoric cave of Qatafa

has a particular significance since it provides the earliest archaeological evidence of domestication of fire in Palestine and the whole Middle East. Evidence of human settlement was attested in several sites during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, showing early evidence of copper industry. The Palestinian Department of Antiquities recently excavated a series of tombs from the Early Bronze Age and Middle Bronze Age at the cemetery of Khamlet al-Bad, near Al-Obayyat, east of Bethlehem and five kilometres west of Tell al-Fureidis.

During the early Roman era, Tell al-Fureidis was identified with the ancient Herodian fortress, located five kilometres southeast of Bethlehem city. Herod the Great built it between 24 and 15 BC as a castle-palace complex. It

Tell el Fureidis (Herodion).  
Photo from Palestine Image Bank.



Tell el Fureidis (Herodion). Photo courtesy of Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.



Wadi Khareiton. Photo courtesy of Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

dominates the landscape of al-Bariyah as well as overlooks Wadi Khareiton immediately to the south. The complex was built on a conical hill shaped and secured by the erection of massive retaining walls. This artificial mound was equipped with a sophisticated fortification system, including an elaborate water-supply technique. Subsequently, Byzantine monks turned

the fortress into a monastery in the sixth to seventh century AD, and built churches around its base. Water was brought to the site from Ain al-Balad in Artas, ten kilometres to the west of Tell al-Fureidis. This area was inhabited by the Ta'amera and Rashida tribes, who preserved an ancient mode of life based on pastoral economy.

Throughout the history of Palestine, whenever people fled civilisation, al-Bariyah became the ideal place to hide. After the growth of Christianity, hermits began to inhabit the caves of al-Bariyah and build a series of monasteries that subsequently formed a monastic centre. These monasteries are outstanding features of a prosperous monastic life, and some are associated with events related to Jesus. Many of these monks, such as Saint Chariton and Saint Saba, played a crucial role in the development of the monastic movement. Some of the monasteries have been rebuilt and include St. George Monastery, Deir Mar Saba, and Deir Theodosius.

During the Islamic period a series of shrines, *maqams*, were established in al-Bariyah, such as Khan al-Ahmar and Maqam an-Nabi Musa. These sites are important places since they are on the Muslim pilgrimage route to Mecca. Maqam an-Nabi Musa dominates the cultural landscape of al-Bariyah on the main historical route between Jericho and Jerusalem.

Al-Bariyah, as a mixed cultural and natural area, has become universally important due to its location, condition, and quality. In the natural context, its quality is based primarily on how well this area represents the targeted ecosystem that is mostly created by the semi arid climate, which leads to substantial variation in flora and fauna species, soils, geology, and landscape, including elevation, slopes, geological cliffs, and sections.

Nonetheless, in the cultural context, its exceptional significance stems from a number of factors. It is the place where the earliest evidence of the use of fire in Palestine was uncovered; it is associated with some events of Jesus' life; it is a

unique Byzantine monastic centre; and it is the place through which the Muslim pilgrimage route to Mecca passes.

This semi-arid zone was the home of a very special adaption system from the Neolithic period onward, linked with pastoralists who circulated between the mountainous area in summertime and the Jordan Valley in winter. The nomadic groups (Bedouins) are the last vestiges of this adaptation system in Palestine. In his visit to the area in 1806, the German scholar Ulrich Jasper Seetzen described the unique, unspoiled landscape of this semi-arid area, its flora, fauna, and mode of life. It was inhabited by the Kaabena, Abu Bahook, Banei Hatem, Jahaleen, Ta'amera, and Rashida tribes, who preserved an ancient mode of life based on pastoral economy. In the last decades, however, the area witnessed a substantial urban growth, especially around the small villages of Obeidiyya, Beit Taamar, Fruidis, and Teku. This mode of life was preserved for more than 5,000 years and is now endangered by the Israeli policy of land expropriation and the displacement of the Bedouins from their traditional habitation area. The case of the Jahaleen tribes east of Jerusalem is an illustrative example of this severe policy. In the last decades, however, substantial urban settlements have grown around the small villages of Obeidiyya, Beit Taamar, and Fruidis.

The conservation of the cultural and natural value of this habitat and assurances of its authenticity and integrity are key to its development as a tourist attraction. In 2005 al-Bariyah was listed on the Palestinian tentative list of cultural and natural heritage sites of potential outstanding universal value, and it has great potential to be inscribed on the World Heritage List.

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