

Preserving Nature and Heritage

The Significance of Wadi al-Makhrou and its Surroundings



By Roubina Bassous Ghattas

Palestine – including the South Jerusalem hills with their ancient villages and valleys – is part of the Fertile Crescent, the area where humans first settled and developed agricultural practices, including the domestication of plants and animals. The valleys of Al-Makhrou, Battir, Husan, and Cremisan are prime examples of this because you can find agricultural models that have been practiced over thousands of years in these valleys that are famous for their rich faunal and floral biodiversity. Thus, the Palestinian cultural heritage related to nature and agriculture is very extensive in this area. To preserve the knowledge and use of this cultural heritage, ecosystem services must be provided and biodiversity conservation is crucial. The protection of the natural and cultural elements of this landscape is critical and ideal for conservation efforts within the Mediterranean Basin biodiversity hotspot. Consequently, the area was

listed, on an emergency basis, as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2014,¹ and the Environment Quality Authority (EQA) designated it as a category VI protected area (protected with sustainable use of natural resources). The management of protected areas in Palestine follows the new National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2023–2030 that is in line with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Wadi al-Makhrou is a particularly picturesque site with deep valleys, some of which have been terraced for hundreds or thousands of years, covered by typical Mediterranean vegetation. It comprises a series of hills and a main valley that leads from Beit Jala city to Husan village, enclaving Battir village along the

“**Wadi Al-Makhrou entails 2.6 square kilometers of natural areas interspersed with agricultural lands that belong to the villages Battir and Husan, and a buffer zone (an area that surrounds the heritage site and separates it from the agricultural lands) of more than 5 square kilometers.**”

The typical Mediterranean vegetation cover found in the valleys around Bethlehem and in the Jerusalem Wilderness.





Cyclamen are common in Palestine's mountainous areas.



Terraces, here in *Wadi al-Makhrou*, are used throughout Palestine to prevent erosion and ensure that trees and crops are better irrigated.



Beautiful vistas and a relaxing atmosphere make *Wadi al-Makhrou* an ideal tourism destination.

way. The hills feature terraces (natural and manmade), *qanateer* (castles), cisterns, and grottos, bounding the deep valley. Complex patterns result from different soil conditions, the local topography, the exposure to wind and sun, fire and other disturbances, and land-use histories. Natural and manmade patches interweave with one another, forming a heterogenous mosaic.

Excavations in the valley have shown that humans have taken advantage of its bounty since the

Middle Bronze and Iron ages and throughout the Persian, Hellenistic, and early Islamic periods, up until today. Thus, human intervention has helped create the diverse habitats that exist along the valley, including plentiful agricultural lands (fallow lands), abundant olive groves that are lovingly tended to by their owners, grass- and shrub lands that feature new wild plant covers each season, the *maquis* Mediterranean forest that is dominated by oak trees (*Sclerophyllous* oak forests), and areas planted with pine and cypress trees and others (manmade coniferous forest).

The availability of water springs, fertile land, and the mild climate in the area enrich the site's landscapes and the complex ecosystem of unique flora and fauna that has characterized the area since antiquity and enabled human settlement. Well-known springs and water ponds include Ein Amdan and Kabryanos springs. These resources and



Qanateer (castles) are stone structures built by farmers who lived in the nearby village. They stored their tools here and inhabited these dwellings places during planting and harvest seasons.

physical characteristics of the site support the locals through the many ecosystem services that it provides for free, including many food, medicinal, and aromatic plants such as olive, almond, pear, asparagus, white beet, chicory, rocket, purslane, mushrooms, thyme, germander, sage, mint, fenugreek, *summaq* (sumac), pine, and more. The farmlands provide residents with sources for a decent living and wellbeing. Many landraces and wild relatives are cultivated season after season. Among the well-preserved landraces are *baladi* zucchini, pumpkin, calabash gourds, *Battiri* eggplants, *baladi* green beans, *baladi* cauliflower, and thyme. They are all valuable forms of germplasm that need to be preserved and regularly grown by local farmers.

Al-Makhrou Valley is an important eco-touristic asset in the area, as it provides beautiful green scenery, clean air, shade and humidity, soil

Wadi al-Makhrou is located in the Mediterranean climatic zone, and local elevations range from 710 to 920 meters above sea level. The mean annual temperature is 15-18° C, and the annual precipitation ranges between 501 mm and 688 mm.ⁱⁱ

stability and fertility, and, most importantly, a unique recreational site. Its potential for environmental, cultural and historic education is great because it is close to Palestinian urban centers and



Wadi al-Makhrou is rich in cultural heritage and contains, among other monuments, Roman tombs and wells and Palestinian watchtowers from the Ottoman era.

villages. Many local and foreign tourists come specifically to visit this attractive, indispensable, scenic destination. In addition to the valleys and the agricultural lands and terraces, tourists can visit an eco-tourism farm. After a hike through the enchanting valley or a stroll through the scenic village, they can refresh themselves by hanging out near the springs and pools or visit a restaurant to enjoy the local culture and food. Camping is possible anywhere in the valley, especially on the slopes of the hills. The wind's gentle breeze and the relaxing sounds of birdsong and flowing water make *Wadi al-Makhrou* a peaceful and enchanting place to spend time away from the chaos of the urban centers.

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ⁱ "Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines—Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir," UNESCO, 2014, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/4044>; see also, "Factors Affecting the Property in 2021: Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines—Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir," UNESCO, 2021, available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/4044>.

ⁱⁱ Meteorological Data 2009-2018, Meteorological Department, Ramallah, Palestine