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INTRODUCING OLIVE CULTURE IN PALESTINE

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Ph. D in History from the University of Lorraine- Nancy

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Synthesis

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About the EU Funded Project “My Heritage! My Identity!”

In 2018, the European Union provided a grant to fund a project titled, “My Heritage! My Identity!”¹ in Palestine. The project is being jointly implemented by four partners: AFRAT - France (www.afrat.com), Bethlehem University / Institute for Community Partnership - Palestine (www.bethlehem.edu), Palestinian Center for Rapprochement between People - Palestine (www.pcr.ps) and TÉTRAKTYS - France (www.tetraktys-association.org).

It aims to contribute to preserving and promoting cultural heritage located along the community-based walking Masār Ibrāhīm (trail) in Palestine, in an effort to enhance Palestinian citizenship and identity.

What’s more, the project offers activities that will contribute to the cohesiveness of the Palestinian people. It promotes inclusion and trust and aims to create a sense of belonging in order to positively influence relations among the diverse groups in Palestinian society.

For more information on the project, please visit the project website at the following link: www.myheritage.ps and the Facebook page at: www.facebook.com/myheritagemyidentity

¹ The original title of the EU project was “Promoting Governance and Citizenship in Palestine”. EU project reference: ENI/2017/390-692.

About the research process

The present research project has been developed within the framework of the EU funded project “My Heritage! My Identity!”.

The four project partners collaborated with academic experts from Palestine and France to identify six topics related to Palestinian cultural heritage. A scientific committee was established at the beginning of 2018 to select relevant topics.

The scientific committee is composed of the following scholars:

Palestinian researchers :



Omar Abed Rabo
Research fellow and lecturer of History & archaeology at Bethlehem University



Nazmi Amin Jubeh
Department of History and Archaeology, Birzeit University. Expert of Cultural Heritage

Jamil Khader, Ph.D.
Dean of Research at Bethlehem University

Zahraa Zawawi
Assistant Professor at An-Najah National University, Head, Urban Planning Engineering Department

Wael Hamareh
Scientific Committee Director – MOTA

French researchers:



Manoël Pénicaud
Research fellow and lecturer of Anthropology (Institute of mediterranean, european and comparative ethnology)



NajlaNakhlé- Cerruti
Research fellow in Arts &Litterature (French Institute for the Near East)



Pauline Bosredon
Research fellow and lecturer of Geography & Urban planning (Lille University)



Kevin Trehuedic
Research fellow and lecturer of History & Archaeology (Paris Est- Créteil University)



Jacques Barou
Research fellow and lecturer in Ethnology & sociology (Political Sciences Institute of Grenoble)

The scientific committee identified six topics, five of which were selected for completion:

- The maqāmāt as a place of popular practices: evolution and diversity
- From terraces to settlements: the testimony of Masār Ibrāhīm landscapes
- “The one who has olive oil will never be poor”. Material and political aspects of a Palestinian symbol.
- Architecture and ways of living: traditional and modern Palestinian villages and cities
- Hikāyāt Palestine through the Masār Ibrāhīm: dialects, oral memories and histories

Furthermore, the members of the committee have been involved throughout the research process to support the researchers.

Finally, three Palestinian members of the committee, Dr. Al Jubeh, Dr. Abed Rabo and Dr. Khader, were in charge of the final proof reading and copy editing of the research projects.

To discover the five researches, please visit the project website: www.myheritage.ps²

About the Author

Maissoun Sharkawi, a researcher and lecturer, holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of Lorraine- Nancy. Her thesis explores the social, historical and economic environment in which the concept of Palestinian cultural heritage has been formulated throughout the past two centuries. Her research focuses on the material archive that documents the economy of the village in 19th century Palestine.

She taught a course on Introducing cultural heritage in the Arab world in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Aix-Marseille University.

² To quote this report: Sharkawi M., 2019. “Introducing Olive culture in Palestine”, EU funded project “My Heritage! My Identity!” (ENI/2017/390-692), available at: www.myheritage.ps



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Sharkawi holds an MA in Cultural Heritage Studies on Conservation and Development of Cultural Industrial and Economic Heritage from the University of Nantes.

She currently works as a lecturer in the Department of Applied Arts at the Palestinian Technical University-Kadoori in Ramallah.





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Synthesis

The evergreen olive tree, *shajarat al-zaytūn*, and its oil, *zeit al-zaytūn*, have been symbolic to Mediterranean societies for centuries, as the most important zones of olive cultivation are situated around the Mediterranean Basin. The olive tree has been cultivated in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Basin along the entire coastal area from modern Syria to Palestine, mainly for its oil. The rural zones of the Mediterranean with their agricultural social structure and unique climatic environment have allowed the development of olive cultivation throughout history. Olive oil has been the most important crop since ancient times, it has contributed to the creation of the Mediterranean diet that is mostly based on olive oil.

Perhaps there is no tree anywhere that is loaded with as much meaning as the olive tree in Palestine. In fact, the olive tree in the Palestinian context is not simply a generously-fruitful, ever-green, long-standing tree. It is much more than that. Besides being a holy tree mentioned in the three holy books, it occupies a special status in the collective consciousness of the Palestinians and bears unique cultural significance that is equal to, if not higher than, its importance in the agricultural and economic domains. Since the Nakba, and long years of Palestinians resisting the Israeli occupation of their land have charged this tree with an abundance of meaning and have rendered it as a symbolic icon. Therefore, the tree, its branches and groves figure prominently in Palestinian artistic and literary works, whether they are produced in Palestine or in the diaspora. By successive generations of artists and writers, the tree has been rendered a symbol to represent the connection of Palestinians to their land.

The names of many Palestinian villages are associated with olive culture and either related to the cultivation of the tree or to the extraction of its oil. Furthermore, many villages and towns in Palestine are established on the ruins of older sites known as *khirab* (sing. *khirba*) that often contain ancient remains of olive oil extraction installations, villages and towns such as ad-Dahiriyya and Dura, in the Hebron area.

Olea Europa L. Stavia, is the scientific name given to the cultivable olive tree that in colloquial Palestinian Arabic is called *zeitūn jawī*. There are four hundred species of the tree, and *Syringa* (lilacs) and *Jasminum* (jasmynes) are other members of the *Oleaceae* family. Within natural landscapes, it is very common to observe wild olive trees whose scientific name is *Olea Europa L. Oleastre*, called *zeitūn barrī* in colloquial Arabic. They are the ancestors of the cultivable olive trees *zeitūn jawī*. Olives are stone fruits, like cherries, with seeds covered by a fleshy fruit.



The olive is a thermophilic tree that tolerates poor soils, arid climate, and long periods without rain – which is why it is the perfect tree for Mediterranean villages.

Historically, as documented by archaeological remains show that olive culture was mostly known for olive oil extracting. Olive oil can be regarded as the petroleum of antiquity, its production is among the oldest and most important trade industries.

In Palestine the traditional techniques show that the production of olive oil started in the Neolithic Period (8300 to 4500 BCE) and continued until the oleo-culture sector was mechanized by the introduction of semi-mechanical machines, notably the manual-iron-screw press in the middle of the 19th century. According to statistics published by the British administration in Palestine, 523 pressing installations and plants were counted between 1928 and 1941. Still today, the olive tree industry is considered one of the most important agricultural sectors and constitutes a source of substitutability for many villages. Since olive oil was a commercial crop, Palestinian villages paid their taxes in olive oil.

Olives were mainly cultivated for their oil that was utilized daily for lighting and for dietary consumption. Olive oil has been used to light dwellings and for offerings when lamps were lit in churches and mosques.

Since ancient times, olive oil has furthermore been an important ingredient for beauty treatment and body care, and it has been used as a basic ingredient for folk medicine, to treat health ailments and skin irritation.

There is a particularity in olive oil which makes it essential to soap production and much more suitable than other oils. Olive oil was the main raw material used for artisanal production of soap. The abundance of olive oil was a major factor facilitating population growth in Syrian villages, and in order to increase their income and improve livelihoods farmers were forced to be creative in their productions and created a form of “rural proto-industrial practices.” They transformed soap manufacture from artisanal to industrial production, particularly in the central area of *Jabal Nablus* where villages were producing most of the olive oil produced in Palestine from the mid-18th century up to today.

During the Ottoman rule (1517, 1918 CE), in order to control the olive oil industry and increase production, the Ottoman administration applied strict laws that forbade peasants to leave their villages and live elsewhere without the permission of their local administrators. The cultivation of

the olive tree was a local specialty for this province (*Jabal Nablus*) of the Ottoman Empire which focused on the monoculture of olive cultivation.

Olive oil was mainly produced for commercial uses, and foreign trade was the main factor in the development of the olive oil production and in soap manufacture sectors. As in any pre-industrial society, trade at this time was a form of capitalism or a social formation of pre-capitalism. This pre-system of capitalism, similar to practices in rural Europe during the rise of the industrial era, increasingly made merchants richer and peasants poorer.

Due to an increase in the export of olive oil from the main Palestinian portal cities (Jaffa, Haifa, and Acre) during the second half of the 19th century, urban merchants were encouraged to increase their efforts to secure this valuable commodity from peasants. They needed large quantities of olive oil to be available every year, even though its agricultural production alternates between productive and less productive years.

The Palestinian agricultural year is divided into seven cycles. These divisions are carried out and adjusted to the Eastern Christian calendar and adopted by farmers *fellaḥīn* in most villages until this day. Each cycle consists of fifty days called *khamasīnāt*. There are several proverbs that have been collectively memorized and show the strong attachment of Palestinians to agriculture and particularly olive culture.

The olive season, *mawsem az-zaytūn*, is not a constant, since it depends on the climatic conditions, mainly rain and the Sirocco winds, that touch the region. This wind is good for grains but dries the earth and thus dries certain crops, especially olive trees. Therefore, in most Mediterranean olive-producing countries, the olive season is known to be a biannual crop. In fact, it has been known since antiquity that the olive yield occurs biennially.

The olive picking season, *mawasem lijdād*, is announced immediately after the Rain of the Cross. During the olive picking season, many initiatives take place that aim to help and support Palestinian families in their groves. This is necessary because many Palestinian families need special permits to reach their lands and pick their olives during the season.

Today, in most Palestinian villages, old olive trees are referred to as *zeitūn rumi*, Roman olives. This designation does not necessarily mean that the tree dates to the Roman Period; rather, it is a way to express that the tree is very old and likely dates back to ancient times. Ex. Tel Rumeida

features old olive trees that are surmised to date back to the Roman Period; it lies on a top of a hill that dominates the city and overlooks the second-best known and disputed cultural heritage site in Palestine, Al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi.

My contribution to the project titled “My Heritage! My Identity!” is about the description of olive culture through Masār Ibrāhīm. I am proposing a path that starts from the area south of Hebron, namely from the town of **al-Dhahiriyya**. The main remarkable sites **al-Dhahiriyya**, **Rujum al-Jurayda**, and **Khirbet Umm-Dumeina** are related to special techniques that were used for olive oil extraction during the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. Currently, however, this small area of the southern Hebron district is hardly recognized for olive oil production, certainly not when compared with the present central zone and, more particularly, with the northern part of the country.

This paper suggests that for the “Olive tree path” to become part of Masār Ibrāhīm it has first to run in parallel to the path for 20 kilometres before it reaches the ancient city of Hebron, where the “**Roman**” olive trees that grow in a grove on **Tel Rumeida** overlook the well-known and heavily disputed site **al-Haram Al-Ibrahimi (The Sanctuary of Abraham)**. Hebron and the Ibrahimi Mosque have recently been registered as **World Cultural Heritage sites** under the category “**Hebron/AI-Khalil Old Town.**”

Two museums that document the history of olive oil production are now open to the public in Hebron’s old city and can be included in the program of visits to be arranged for hikers. The **Badd al-Natsheh Museum** includes an olive oil press that dates back to the 19th century, at which time the famous Victor Coq imported a manual iron screw press from France. It is worth mentioning here that some members of the al-Natsheh family still own olive trees at Tel Rumeida. The **Shajaret Eddorr Museum** includes a semi-mechanical olive press that was built by the Palestinian Iron and Brass Foundry at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as other interesting machinery that was imported from London to improve the quality and quantity of olive oil produced in the city.

The path could then continue towards the area south-west of Jerusalem and visit the terraced hills of **Battir Village** (listed on the **World Heritage List** as “**Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir**”), lead through **Makhrou Valley**, and climb up to the lands of **Cremisan Monastery**. Tourists can discover beautiful hills, valleys, and

terraces that are in danger of being annexed by the settlements of this area. The old olive trees at the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem, for those who have the chance.

In **al-Walaja Village** hikers can find one of the oldest olive trees in the world (supposedly 5,000 years old). It grows in the area named **shajret al-badawi**, which is believed to be blessed by the wise *wali* who more than 200 years ago used to live near this olive tree.

In Bethlehem's old city, hikers can visit another two very important sites related to olive culture. **Badd Giacaman Museum**, known as **Mathaf al-Badd**, is open to the public and documents the history of Bethlehem.³ At this site during the olive picking season (October to November), tourists and school children can engage in activities related to olive oil production because all the necessary equipment for olive oil extraction still exists and can be reactivated. It is also important to note that this site will be included in the valorising project planned by Bethlehem Municipality. *Badd Giacaman Museum* furthermore includes an olive crushing installation that features a manual iron-screw press that was built in Jaffa at the end of the 19th century. The story of this machine illustrates the history of the colonial project in Palestine around the end of the 19th century as outlined in my research. Only a five-minute walk away, another remarkable building **Badd al-Bandak**, hosts a lever-and-screw weight press that exist intact in situ. The entire and beautiful area around Bethlehem and Beit-Jala furthermore offers unique tracks that **document the history of olive oil production as practiced for centuries**. Hikers can be made familiar with stories and documents from the late 18th and 19th century which illustrate how the rural and urban bourgeoisie utilized olive oil production to exert control over the local peasantry.

Moving on north towards the villages surrounding **Salfit**, mainly towards **Iskaka village**, hikers can visit the area that is most famous for olive oil production in Palestine. It should be noted that most of the rural areas in this locality are very much in danger of being annexed by settlements; agricultural lands suffer constant violation of their very old olive trees, and farmers are not allowed to reach their lands during most months of the year. Bringing hikers to this area can help assert Palestinian ownership of the land, preserve olive-related heritage, and secure the livelihoods of local farmers.

³ The building was restored in 2014 by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Finally, the **old city of Nablus**, as the most important centre for olive oil production, marks another important olive culture-related milestone. In the late 18th century, soap manufacture in Nablus expanded and adopted industrial production methods. *Nabulsi* soap became the most profitable among Palestinian exported goods and was exported to Egypt and Anatolia. Hikers can visit the **Tuqan Soap Factory** that still practices the traditional methods of soap production. It is one of the around 30 soap factories that were once located in the old city; only a few of them still manufacture small amounts of soap that are produced mostly from imported Spanish olive oil. Masār Ibrāhīm passes through numerous villages most of which are related to olive culture. The trail that I propose shall lead from southern Hebron to Bethlehem and then towards Salfit and Nablus, in order to raise awareness and enrich the visual memory that documents olive culture in Palestine.

The suggested hiking trail can offer unique observations that document the history of olive oil extraction, as well as the contemporary obstacles that olive culture in Palestine is facing, that are interrelated with the problems associated with cultural heritage within the Palestinian context.

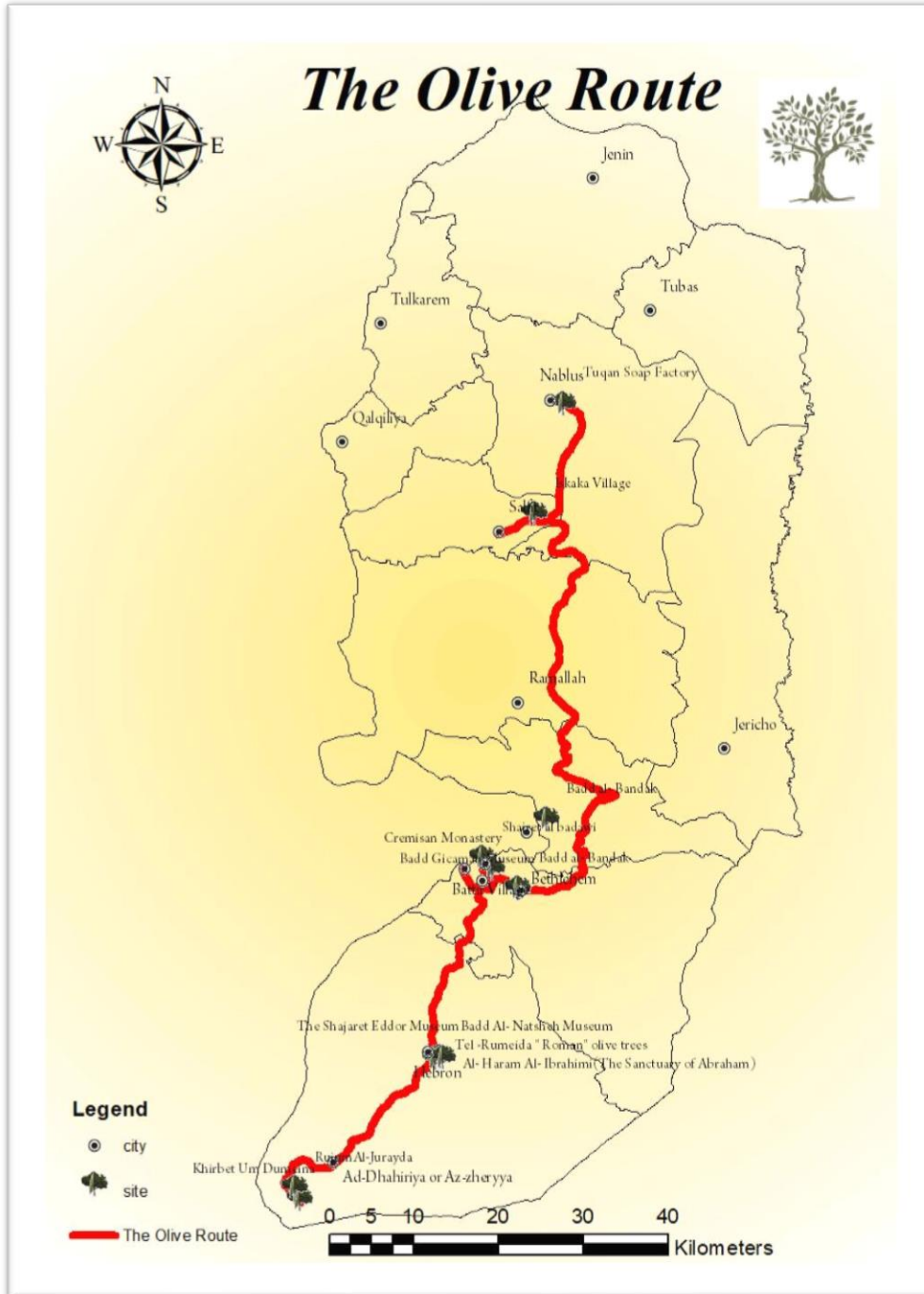


Figure (1) suggested olive Route illustrated by Ayman Rjoub

There are persistent violent practices towards the olive tree in the Palestinian territories exercised by the Israeli occupation apparatus, including the military forces and settlers. As Sonja Karkar states in the article *Heritage Uprooted*, “In more than forty years, Israel has uprooted over one million olive trees and hundreds of thousands of fruit trees in Palestine.”⁴

However, it is important to note that in the current political and geographical reality, the security measures that are being applied after the establishment of a settlement or the opening of a road, as well as on paths that lead to Palestinian-owned olive groves situated on the other side of the Separation Wall, frequently make these lands inaccessible for their owners during most of the year. This inaccessibility may easily exceed 4 years, which then ‘legalizes’ the confiscation and annexation of these lands by the Israeli state.

Most Palestinian villages and their surrounding rural areas are in a very complex geographical reality, since the Palestinian Authority (PA) does not have integral sovereignty over the entire geographical area of the eleven districts of the West Bank (WB). The WB is divided into four zones, and the great majority of villages that were visited during the fieldwork of this study – and are part of Masār Ibrāhīm – are in areas B or C. Area C represents 60% of the West Bank and is where most of the Palestinian villages are located. The area controlled by the PA, however, Area A, represents only 18% of the total area of the WB that covers 5655 square kilometres.

This reality leaves little room for urban expansion and has led to significant transformations of the landscape. Urban expansion must continue, however, as the population continues to grow, even though it remains restrained and concentrated in the very limited space of area A.

Today, the WB is witnessing a significant building boom. Its total population is of 2.86 million. According to an estimate carried out by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics and published by the United Nations, the population has doubled since 1997. In fact, the Palestinian population has increased significantly since 1950 when it counted 1 million inhabitants. It reached 3.8 million in 2005 (for the WB and Gaza), and is estimated to reach 10.3 million people in 2050. Because the population is concentrated in urban areas, significant changes will affect the overall landscape of the WB that is known for its rural character and growing of olives.

⁴ <https://electronicintifada.net/content/heritage-uprooted/7126>.

Moreover, as it is accompanied by a lack of governance and planning, urban expansion is putting many sites of natural, cultural, historical, and archaeological significance at risk.

The olive tree is the central cultural element in Palestine's rural areas. Olive oil production techniques are the important substance of this culture. Besides food production, these techniques were also used to produce olive oil for body care, perfumery, pharmacy, textile crafts, and lighting. The utilized methods and machinery represent remarkable instances of technical development and exemplify how Palestinian society and their ancestors have continuously accumulated know-how and adopted technological progress in order to foster economic development – ever since the Neolithic Period.

However, the oleo-culture sector has undergone a remarkable degradation since 1967 as the Israeli military and civil authorities control the laws applicable to Palestinians and exploit their agricultural lands. Continuous urbanization, rapid population increase in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, as well as the geopolitical context place immense burdens on the rural landscape and the oleo-cultural economy. One way in which these measures affect the oleo-culture is the continuous reduction of the number of olive trees, which stands as a major problem the sector is faced with. As noted by farmer from al-Walajeh “*Al- 'Ard zeghret wen-nas ketret./The land has shrunk and the population has increased*”⁵.

Another important reality that affects cultural heritage is the Israeli ‘legal’ land appropriation practices in both areas B and C. According to Article 4 of the Israeli Law of Antiquity, archaeological remains discovered in whichever zone they were found become property of the Israeli state. Military Law 418 is still applicable throughout area C and controls all urban planning and land use, including the elements that represent the natural and cultural heritage of the area. According to the Palestinian Database of Archaeological and Historical Sites, the occupied Palestinian territories (within the international boundaries of 1967) gather about 7000 sites of cultural importance, of which 53% are in Area C. But the 47% of the cultural and natural heritage sites that lie in areas A and B suffer from a lack of preservation and protection as well. The situation is aggravated by the challenges the Palestinian government is faced with in light of the

⁵ An interview with Abu Ali Alwalajeh, held by the author on 24. August, 2018.



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on-going rapid urban expansion and the lack of legislation and laws that would protect the land and the cultural heritage associated with this land.

By creating a hiking trail that highlights important elements of Palestinian oleo-culture, awareness of its historical and current economic and cultural importance can be raised and efforts to find solutions to the on-going challenges could be better supported.

