Ramallah and al-Bireh before the Nakba: Life and Refuge



This article is part of the Palestine before the Nakba series.

Before the Nakba, Ramallah and al-Bireh were neighbouring towns in the central Palestinian highlands north of Jerusalem, each with its own old core and fields. Their people lived from vineyards, olives, grain and livestock; Ramallah also knew early schools, summer visitors and emigration to the Americas, while al-Bireh remained a farming town on the Jerusalem–Nablus road. [1][2]

Then came the Nakba. Zionist forces did not take the two towns in 1948, but they received thousands of families whose members those forces had killed and whom they drove out of Lydda, Ramla, Jaffa and their villages; Amari camp was set up on al-Bireh's land and Jalazone camp north of Ramallah, and the names of the home towns and the right of return have stayed alive in both. [3][4][5]

Contents

1. Ramallah and al-Bireh before the Nakba at a glance
2. Location: two towns in the highlands
3. The names
4. The towns’ roots
5. Population and homes
6. Farming: vines, olives and livestock
7. Crafts: from the loom to pottery
8. Trade, the road and emigration
9. Ramallah as a summer resort
10. Education: from the Friends schools to a teachers’ college
11. Health and medical care
12. Women: work, learning and embroidery
13. Food and weddings
14. Under the British Mandate
15. The Nakba: two towns receive the uprooted
16. Amari and Jalazone camps
17. From the Nakba to occupation: after 1967
18. Timeline
19. Frequently asked questions about Ramallah and al-Bireh before the Nakba

Ramallah and al-Bireh before the Nakba at a glance

Item	Details
Location	Central highlands north of Jerusalem, on the Jerusalem–Nablus road
Population, 1945	About 5,080 in Ramallah and about 2,920 in al-Bireh
Ramallah municipality	Formed in 1908

Item	Details
Economy	Vineyards, olives, grain, livestock, crafts, trade and summer tourism
Education	Friends schools from 1869, the Rural Women’s Teacher Training College (1935), al-Bireh’s government schools
In the Nakba	Refugees received; Amari and Jalazone camps set up in 1949
Occupation of the towns	June 1967

Population figures are for the two towns alone, not the district or surrounding villages. [6][7][8][4][5]



Ramallah in 1945. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Location: two towns in the highlands

The two towns lie north of Jerusalem on the central highland ridge, near the watershed between the western slopes and the Jordan Valley. Winters are cold and wet and summers mild, and the land suits olives, vines, orchards and summer stays. [1]

Al-Bireh sat on the Jerusalem–Nablus axis, with Ramallah to its west; their built-up areas gradually merged, though each kept a history of its own. [1][9]



Ramallah in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

The names

Ramallah Municipality explains that “Ram” is an Aramaic word for a high place, to which the word for God (Allah) was added. [10]

The name al-Bireh is commonly linked to wells and water, and local sources also derive it from “Birta,” meaning a fort or citadel. [9][11]

The towns’ roots

Local tradition ties the founding of modern Ramallah to Rashid al-Haddadin and his sons, who came from east of the Jordan and settled there in the sixteenth century. The town grew in the nineteenth century, and its municipal council was formed in 1908. [7]

Al-Bireh has a historic centre around its mosque, church remains and old houses, to which schools, a local council and shops added new layers in the late Ottoman and Mandate periods. [9][11]



A house and guest room, around 1900. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Population and homes

In 1945 Ramallah had about 5,080 people and al-Bireh about 2,920, close to 8,000 for the two together. [6]

Town	Population, 1945
Ramallah	5,080

Town	Population, 1945
Al-Bireh	2,920
Total	8,000

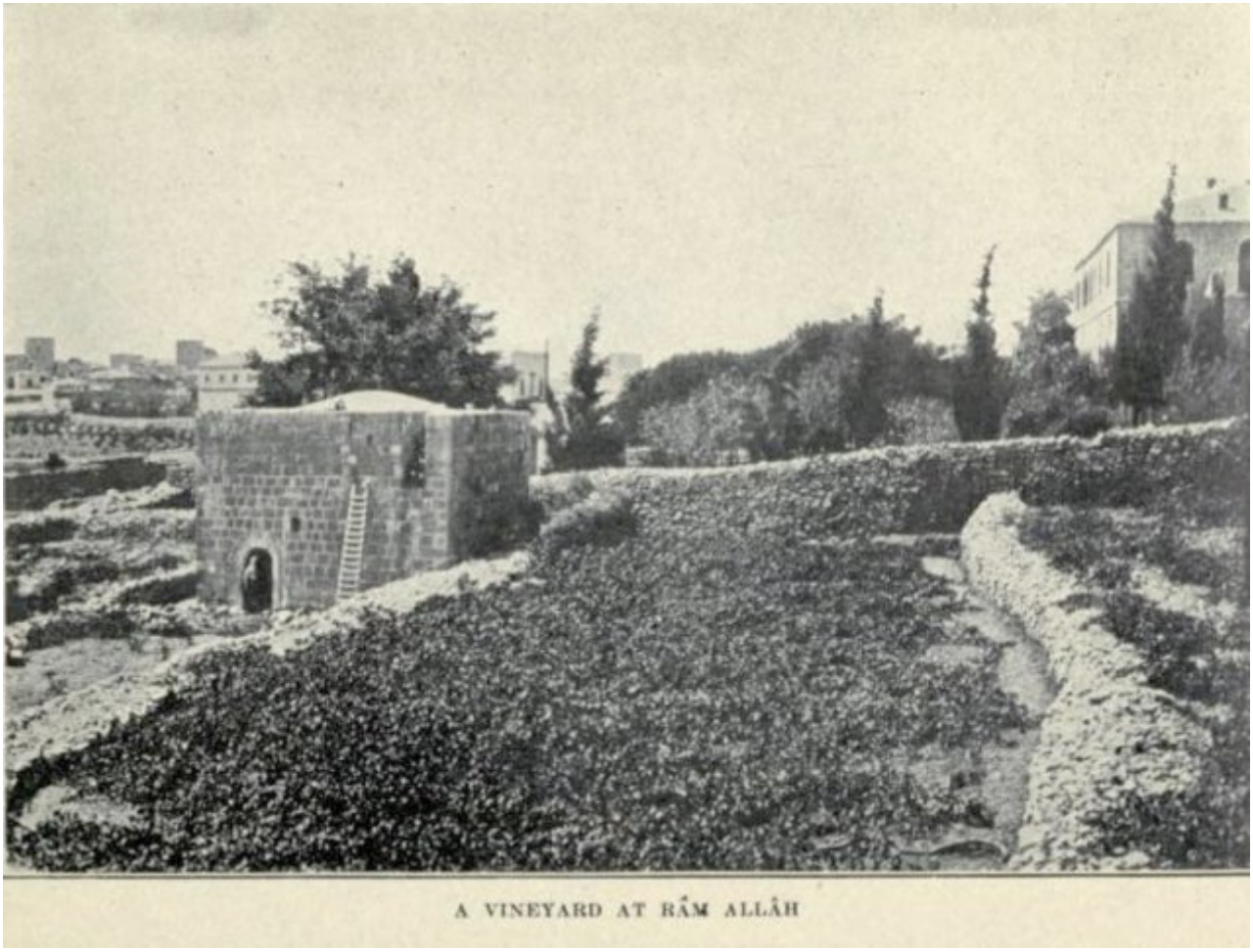
In Ramallah, courtyards, lanes and adjoining houses bear witness to the town’s rural roots, while detached houses with gardens and institutional buildings reflect a gradual move to town life. [12]



Building a house in the Ramallah area, early twentieth century. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Farming: vines, olives and livestock

Archival photographs show vineyards on Ramallah’s stone terraces and olives being picked and pressed in the area. [13]



A vineyard on terraces, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

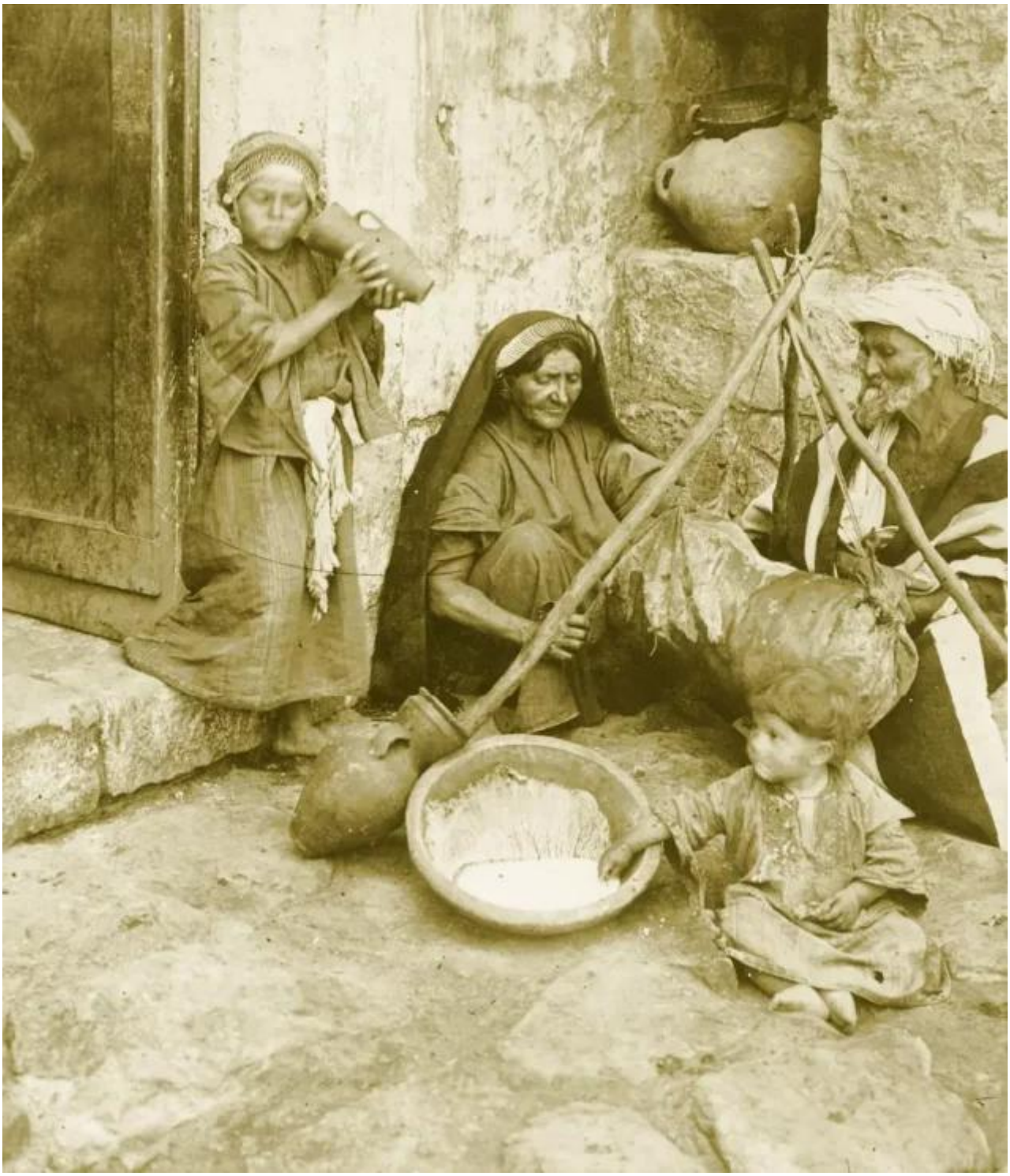


Olive picking in the Ramallah area, around the 1920s. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.



Pressing olives, late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

The researcher Samih Hammouda describes al-Bireh's Mandate-era economy as resting largely on crops and livestock, with traditional crafts such as smithing and carpentry and shops for daily needs. A photograph of a woman from al-Bireh churning milk shows that produce being turned into food at home. [2][13]



A woman from al-Bireh churning milk. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Read also: Agriculture in Palestine before the Nakba.

Crafts: from the loom to pottery

The area knew weaving, embroidery, pottery, building, smithing and carpentry; the gallery preserves a weaver at his loom around 1900 and pottery-making in 1905. [2][13]



A weaver at the loom, around 1900. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

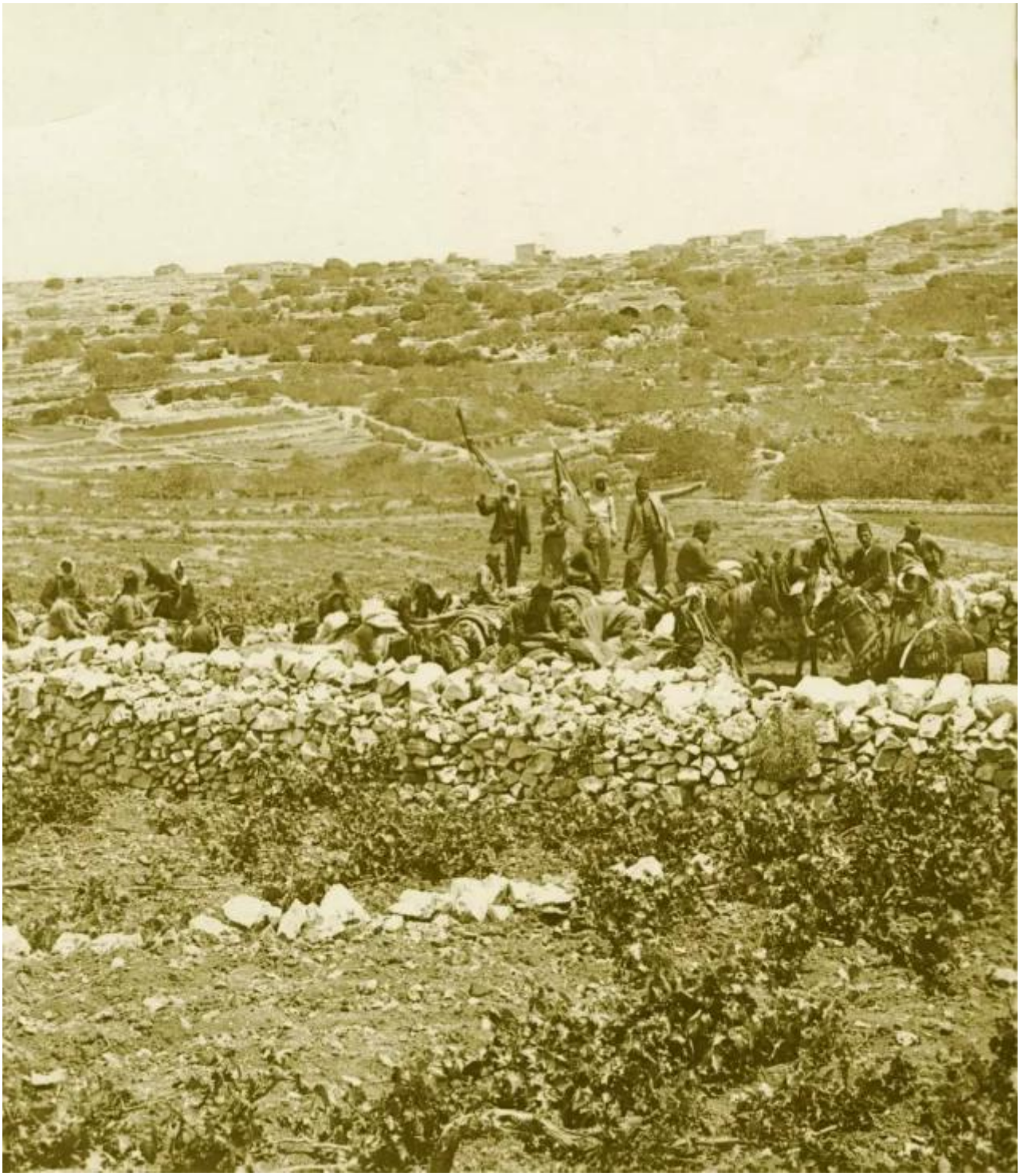


Making pottery, 1905. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Read also: Industry and crafts in Palestine before the Nakba.

Trade, the road and emigration

Closeness to Jerusalem and the Nablus road gave the towns a place in the movement of travellers and goods; a photograph of a caravan nearby shows pack animals carrying trade before the motor car. [1][13]



A caravan near Ramallah and al-Bireh. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Ramallah Municipality records journeys from the town to Brazil and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In al-Bireh, emigrants' remittances helped families build stone houses with gardens, and some returnees went into business, not always successfully. [14][2]

Read also: Trade before the Nakba; Palestinian banks and refugees' frozen funds.

Ramallah as a summer resort

Ramallah’s altitude and mild summers made it a known summer resort. One pre-Nakba landmark is al-Hamra Palace, built in 1926 and leased in 1945 by the Ramallah Summer Resorts Company, which turned it into a hotel. [15]

Festivals and Arab summer tourism peaked in the decades after the Nakba. [16]

Read also: Tourism and summer resorts in Palestine before the Nakba.

Education: from the Friends schools to a teachers’ college

Friends educational work in Ramallah began in 1869; a girls’ boarding school opened in 1889 and a boys’ school in 1901, teaching science, health and sport alongside reading and writing. [8]



The Friends Boys School, 1926. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna;

date as given in the gallery.

In al-Bireh, the government boys' school completed its elementary grades in the 1930s and added its first secondary class in 1945/46, and a government girls' school opened in 1935/36. In 1935 the Rural Women's Teacher Training College opened in Ramallah to prepare young women to teach in the villages. [6]



The government school in al-Bireh, 1937. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Nearby, the institution that became Birzeit University began as a girls' elementary school in 1924, founded by Nabiha Nasir, and took the name Birzeit College in 1942. [17]



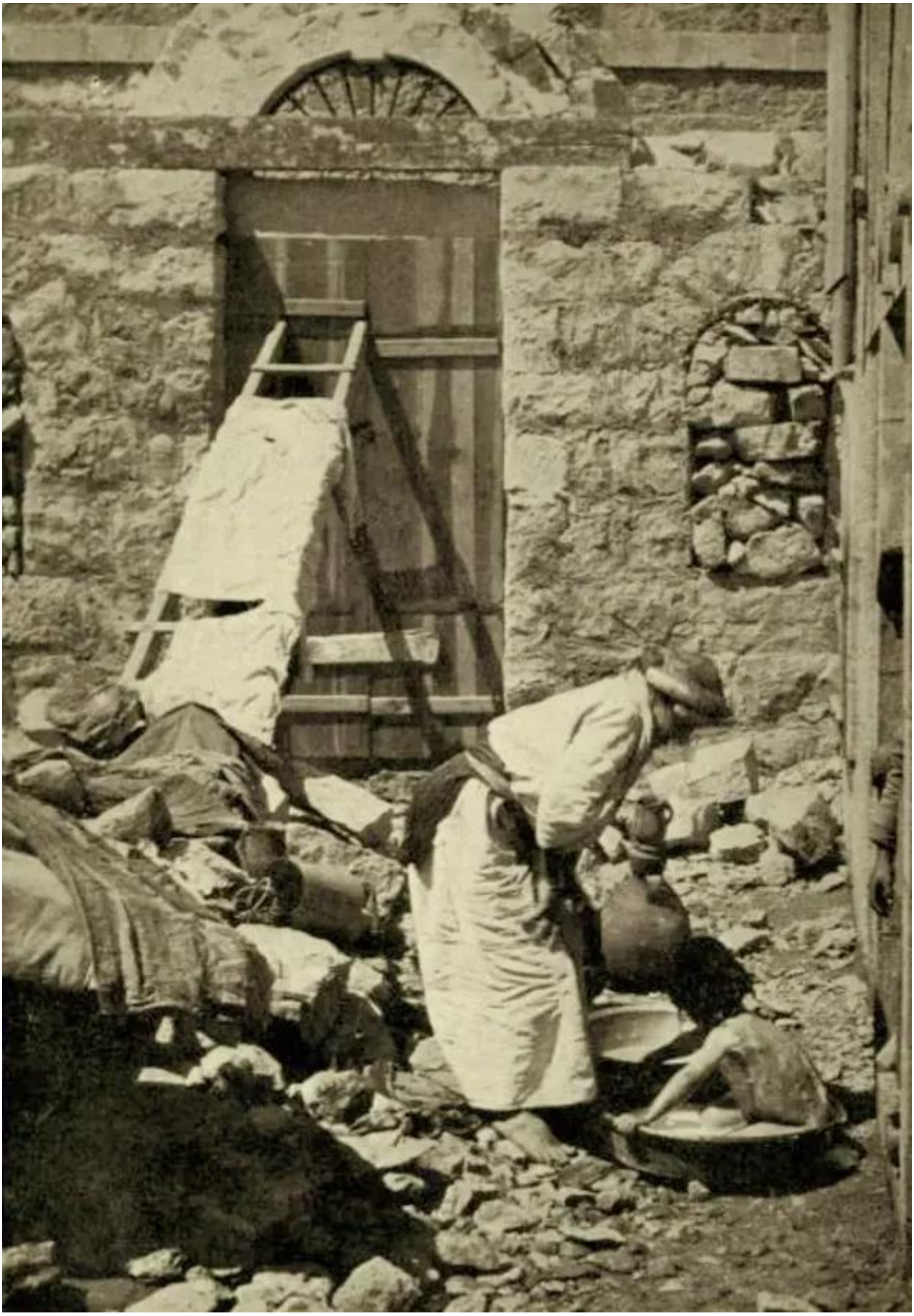
Friends School students, 1937. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Read also: Palestinian education before 1948.

Health and medical care

Ramallah had a clinic of the Sisters of St Joseph from 1873, a Friends clinic from 1883 and, from 1910, the clinic of Dr Nicola Shehadeh after his return from the United States. [18]

Under the Mandate a government department handled sanitation, prevention and treatment, and the study of al-Bireh's history records Dr Suleiman Ghannam of Ramallah treating wounded fighters of the revolt. Ramallah Government Hospital was founded later, in 1963. [2][19]



Caring for children, 1914. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Read also: Medicine and health in Palestine before the Nakba.

Women: work, learning and embroidery

Women appear in the gallery preparing food, weaving, making pottery, caring for children and at school. The Palestinian Museum holds a white rumi dress from the Ramallah area, of linen embroidered in cross-stitch with silk threads, mostly red. [13][20]



Embroidery, 1939–1945. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.



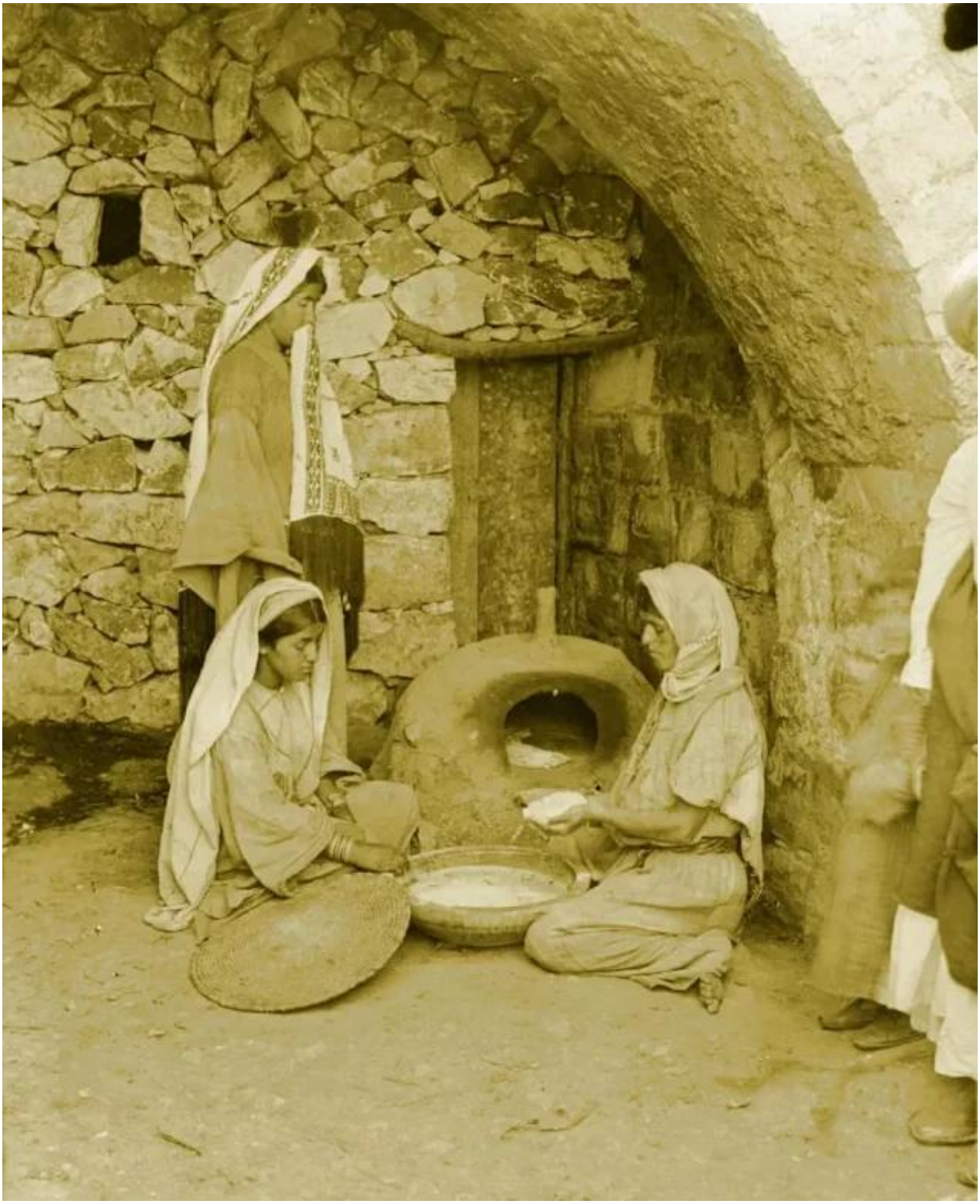
Women in Ramallah dress, early twentieth century. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

Girls’ schooling and teacher training opened new roles in education for women, alongside their work at home and on the land. [6][17]

Read also: Palestinian women before the Nakba.

Food and weddings

The gallery shows grain being ground and bread baked, and wedding photographs from around 1900 show women, the procession and food being carried, at an occasion shared by kin and neighbours. [13]



Baking bread. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.



Grinding grain, early twentieth century. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.



Wedding food, around 1900. Source: Ramallah photo gallery on Palestinuna; date as given in the gallery.

In houses with courtyards and guest rooms, receiving visitors and family gatherings had their place beside sleeping, storing provisions and work. [12]

Read also: Palestinian weddings before the Nakba; Palestinian seasonal festivals.

Under the British Mandate

The people of both towns lived under British rule that backed the Zionist project, and al-Bireh took part in the national movement while its civic institutions grew. [2]

During the 1936 strike, the difficulty of feeding boarding students forced the Friends schools to close for part of the school year. [8]

The Nakba: two towns receive the uprooted

Ramallah and al-Bireh stayed outside the control of Zionist forces in 1948, then came under Jordanian rule until Israel occupied them in 1967. [7][18]

In July 1948 Zionist forces committed a massacre in Lydda and expelled its people and those of Ramla and nearby villages such as Bayt Nabala; the expelled walked east, and many reached Ramallah and al-Bireh. [3]

The Friends School records school buildings in Ramallah being turned into medical facilities with the Red Cross, with wards, an operating room, a clinic and a maternity area. [8]

Read also: Lydda and Ramla before the Nakba.

Amari and Jalazone camps

Amari camp was set up in 1949 within al-Bireh's municipal boundaries for refugees from Lydda, Jaffa, Ramla and other villages. Jalazone camp was set up the same year north of Ramallah. [4][5]

Read also: Depopulated Palestinian villages; Massacres.

From the Nakba to occupation: after 1967

Israel occupied Ramallah and al-Bireh in 1967 as part of its occupation of the West Bank. [7]

The occupation then built the Beit El settlement in 1977 inside a Jordanian army camp on the lands of Beitin, Dura al-Qar’ and al-Bireh, and the Psagot settlement in 1981 on Jabal al-Tawil, al-Bireh land. By 2022 it had built 29 settlements in Ramallah and al-Bireh governorate, plus some 55 outposts. [21]

The seizures go on: in August 2026 al-Bireh’s mayor, Muneef Tarish, said the occupation was taking between 300 and 400 dunams near Beit El by military order to serve the settlers, land registered in the land registry since the Jordanian period. [22]

The two towns thus carry two memories: of vineyards, schools and stone houses, and of the refugees who brought to them the names of towns they have never given up the right to return to.

Timeline

Year	Event
Sixteenth century	Local tradition ties modern Ramallah’s founding to the Haddadin family
1869	Friends educational work begins in Ramallah
1901	The Friends Boys School opens
1908	Ramallah municipality formed
1924	Birzeit girls’ school founded
1935	Rural Women’s Teacher Training College opens in Ramallah
1945	About 5,080 people in Ramallah and 2,920 in al-Bireh
1948	Arrival of refugees expelled from Lydda, Ramla and their villages
1949	Amari and Jalazone camps set up

Year	Event
1967	Israel occupies Ramallah and al-Bireh
1977 and 1981	Beit El and Psagot settlements built on al-Bireh’s land and around it

Sources: [7][8][17][6][3][4][5][21]

Frequently asked questions about Ramallah and al-Bireh before the Nakba

What does the name Ramallah mean?

“Ram” is an Aramaic word for a high place, with the word for God (Allah) added. [10]

What does the name al-Bireh mean?

It is linked to wells and water; some sources derive it from “Birta,” a fort. [9][11]

What was the population of Ramallah and al-Bireh in 1945?

About 5,080 in Ramallah and 2,920 in al-Bireh. [6]

Was there schooling for girls before 1948?

Yes: the Friends Girls School from 1889, al-Bireh’s government girls’ school and the Rural Women’s Teacher Training College from 1935. [8][6]

When did emigration from Ramallah to the Americas begin?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. [14]

Were Ramallah and al-Bireh occupied in 1948?

No. They took in refugees in 1948 and were occupied by Israel in 1967. [18][7]

Which camps grew up in Ramallah and al-Bireh after the Nakba?

Amari camp within al-Bireh and Jalazone camp north of Ramallah, both set up in 1949. [4][5]

Read also on Palestinuna

- Ramallah and its photographs
- Amari camp
- Jalazone camp
- Lydda and Ramla before the Nakba
- The Lydda massacre
- Depopulated villages
- Palestine before the Nakba

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