Bayt Mahsir

Bayt Mahsir: A Depopulated Palestinian Village in the Jerusalem District

Bayt Mahsir was a Palestinian village in the Jerusalem District, situated on the upper slopes of a mountain approximately 26 kilometres west of Jerusalem, at an average elevation of about 588 metres above sea level. Its population reached 2,400 in the 1944/1945 statistics. The village resisted attempts to occupy it during the spring of 1948, before intense fighting took place between 9 and 12 May during Operation Makkabi. Forces of the Palmach's Harel Brigade eventually secured control of Bayt Mahsir, and its Palestinian inhabitants were displaced

during the Nakba and the occupation of Palestine in 1948.

Item	Information
Subdistrict	Jerusalem
Distance from district center	26 km from Jerusalem
Average Elevation	588 m above sea level
Population in 1931	1,920
Number of Houses in 1931	445
Population in 1944/1945	2,400
Estimated Population in 1948	About 2,784 – a later demographic estimate, not an official census
Total Land Area in 1945	16,268 dunams
Attack and Depopulation	The village was targeted during Operation Nachshon in early April 1948 but was not occupied; Palmach forces then attacked it during Operation Makkabi, beginning with tentative thrusts on 9 May 1948, and the History of the Haganah states that it was attacked for three nights and not occupied until the morning of 11 May. According to Qawuqji's reports, Zionist forces entered it on 12 May and the Arab Liberation Army recovered it the same day, but Zionist forces soon occupied it and levelled it, according to Benny Morris as cited by Khalidi.
Final Israeli Control	First half of May 1948, with no specific day given by the sources: the History of the Haganah states that it was occupied on the morning of 11 May, while Qawuqji reports that Arab forces recovered it on 12 May, and Khalidi considers that this recovery was probably short-lived
Military Operation	Operation Makkabi
Military Unit	The Palmach's Harel Brigade; according to the New York Times, as cited by Khalidi, two Palmach commando battalions took part in the battle, and the Sixth Palmach Battalion (some 400–500 men) seized strong points around the village on the night of 9 May 1948

Item	Information
Cause of Depopulation	Direct military assault by Zionist forces (the Palmach), followed by the levelling of the village after its occupation, according to Benny Morris as cited by Khalidi; the History of the Haganah account does not mention what happened to the inhabitants
Settlements Documented on Village Lands	Beyt Me'ir, on the ruins and lands of the village: Morris, as cited by Khalidi, states that it was established as Lehagshama on 27 September 1948, while other sources state that it was founded on village lands in February 1950; and Mesillat Tziyyon, founded in 1950 northwest of the village site, which Khalidi lists among the Israeli settlements on village lands

Location

Bayt Mahsir was built on the upper part of a mountain slope overlooking a wide section of the Palestinian coastal plain to the west.

It lay approximately 26 kilometres west of Jerusalem at an average elevation of about 588 metres above sea level.

Secondary roads connected it with the Jerusalem–Jaffa highway and neighbouring villages, particularly Saris. Nearby villages included Dayr Ayyub, Bayt Thul, Bayt Susin, Ishwa', Dayr al-Hawa, and Kasla.

The villagers obtained water from a spring northeast of the village.

Architecture

Bayt Mahsir had a roughly trapezoidal layout, with stone and adobe houses grouped into four separate quarters.

The village expanded along roads leading toward neighbouring villages, while a main street crossed its centre from east to west.

Shops and public buildings, including the village mosque, stood along both sides of

this street.

The built-up area covered approximately 77 dunams in the 1944/1945 statistics.

The Mosque and Shrines

The population of Bayt Mahsir was Muslim, and the village contained a mosque and two shrines.

The villagers took pride in the fact that the last imam of the mosque, Shaykh Khalil As'ad, had graduated from al-Azhar University in Cairo.

The principal sources confirm the presence of two shrines. One was known as Maqam al-'Ajami, or the shrine of Ahmad al-'Ajami, whose grave remained visible among the trees at the village site after the Nakba.

Local traditions give additional names and genealogies for the second shrine, but these details are not consistently confirmed by the principal reference sources and are therefore not presented as established historical facts.

Education

Bayt Mahsir had three educational institutions.

An elementary boys' school stood in the western part of the village, a secondary school in the east, and a girls' school operated in a building that had originally served as the village infirmary.

Population

Bayt Mahsir had 1,367 inhabitants in the 1922 census, all Muslims.

By the 1931 census, the population had increased to 1,920, living in 445 houses.

According to the 1944/1945 statistics, the population reached 2,400.

The estimates of approximately 2,784 inhabitants in 1948 and 17,097 refugees and descendants in 1998 published by Palestine Remembered are later estimates rather than official British Mandate census figures.

Population of Bayt Mahsir

Year	Population	Nature of Figure
1875	About 450	Historical estimate
1922	1,367	Official census
1931	1,920	Official census
1944/1945	2,400	Government of Palestine statistics
1948	About 2,784	Later estimate
1998	17,097	Estimate of refugees and their descendants

Number of Houses

The 1931 census recorded 445 houses in Bayt Mahsir.

The figure of approximately 645 houses for 1948 is a later estimate rather than an official census count.

Land of Bayt Mahsir

According to the 1944/1945 statistics, Bayt Mahsir had a total land area of 16,268 dunams.

Arab ownership amounted to 15,428 dunams, while 840 dunams were classified as public land. No Jewish-owned land was recorded within the village's statistical unit.

Total	16,268
Ownership Category	**Area in Dunams**
Arab ownership	15,428

Total	16,268
Ownership Category	**Area in Dunams**
Jewish ownership	0
Public land	840

Agriculture and Economic Life

The inhabitants of Bayt Mahsir depended primarily on rain-fed agriculture, cultivating cereals, fruit trees, olives, and grape vines.

Woodlands and forests covered substantial areas surrounding the village.

According to the 1944/1945 statistics, 6,225 dunams were devoted to cereals, while 1,348 dunams were irrigated or used for plantations.

Palestine Remembered records approximately 1,340 dunams planted with olive trees. This figure represents a crop category within cultivated land and should not be added separately to the overall land-use totals.

The village also had an olive press and flour mills.

Total	15,428	840	16,268
Type of Use	**Arab**	**Public**	**Total**
Cereals	6,225	0	6,225
Irrigated and plantation land	1,348	0	1,348
Built-up area	77	0	77
Uncultivable land	7,778	840	8,618

Archaeological Sites

Several archaeological ruins and sites lay around Bayt Mahsir, including Khirbat al-Huwaytiyya, Khirbat al-Masi, Khirbat Khatula, and Khirbat al-Sallam.

These sites contained remains of walls and buildings, rock-cut cisterns, caves, presses, and other architectural remains.

The principal sources do not provide a definitive date for all of these remains, and they should therefore not be assigned collectively to a single historical period without additional archaeological evidence.

Bayt Mahsir Before the May 1948 Battle

Bayt Mahsir occupied an important strategic position near the Jerusalem–Jaffa road and Bab al-Wad.

In late March 1948, British forces briefly entered the village during fighting that followed an Arab attack on the nearby Jewish settlement of Hartuv.

In early April, Bayt Mahsir was targeted during Operation Nachshon, which sought to open the road to Jerusalem, but the village was not occupied during that operation.

After Nachshon, the Haganah continued military operations intended to widen the corridor toward Jerusalem and seize strategic positions around Bab al-Wad and al-Latrun.

Operation Makkabi

Operation Makkabi began on 8 May 1948 and formed part of a series of offensives intended to secure the Jerusalem road and strategic positions around al-Latrun and Bab al-Wad.

PalQuest lists the Harel, Giv'ati, and Sheva' brigades among the forces involved in the operation as a whole.

In the specific battle for Bayt Mahsir, however, the village entry identifies the **Palmach's Harel Brigade** as the force responsible for the assault and occupation.

The **Qadisiyya Regiment of the Arab Liberation Army**, together with local fighters, participated in the defence of the village.

The Battle and Occupation of Bayt Mahsir

Bayt Mahsir was not captured in a single, uncontested assault. Several days of fighting and changes in control took place.

Palmach forces began probing attacks on 9 May 1948. The **Sixth Palmach Battalion**, numbering approximately 400–500 men according to the account transmitted by Walid Khalidi, secured strong positions around the village that night.

The account transmitted through Khalidi and PalQuest states that Palmach troops attacked Bayt Mahsir over three nights and succeeded in entering the village on the morning of **11 May 1948**.

The battle did not end there. According to Arab Liberation Army commander Fawzi al-Qawuqji's reports, Arab forces continued fighting, and Zionist forces again entered Bayt Mahsir on 12 May after receiving substantial reinforcements.

The Arab account states that the Arab Liberation Army recaptured the village later that day after artillery fire and a frontal counterattack, but this recovery proved short-lived.

Harel Brigade forces subsequently regained and consolidated control of Bayt Mahsir.

For this reason, published summary dates differ. Palestine Remembered lists 10 May as the occupation date, while the detailed narrative records entry on the morning of 11 May and renewed fighting and changes of control on 12 May. The more accurate formulation is therefore that Bayt Mahsir was occupied through fighting during **9–12 May and the period immediately following**.

Israeli military information is cited here only as transmitted through Walid Khalidi

and PalQuest and not through direct reliance on Israeli sources.

Occupation and Depopulation Chronology

Stage	Date	Details
Targeted in Operation Nachshon	Early April 1948	The village was targeted for occupation during Operation Nachshon (3–15 April 1948), but it was not taken until the first half of May.
Planning of a settlement on the village site	Mid-April 1948	Before the village fell, the head of the Haganah National Staff, Israel Galili, told the Jewish National Fund that it was important to establish a settlement at the site for “security” reasons, according to documents cited by Morris as quoted by Khalidi.
Beginning of the military operation	8 May 1948	Operation Makkabi (8–31 May 1948) began; it was one of several small operations aimed at occupying the strategic village of al-Latrun, and it resulted in the occupation of a number of other villages in the Jerusalem corridor.
Ground assault	9 May 1948	After “tentative thrusts”, the Sixth Palmach Battalion (some 400–500 men) seized strong points around the village at 11:00 p.m., according to the New York Times as cited by Khalidi. Qawuqji reported that on this day his forces repelled a violent Zionist attack on Bayt Mahsir aimed at opening the Jerusalem road.
Zionist forces enter the village	11 May 1948	According to the History of the Haganah, as cited by Khalidi, Palmach troops attacked the village for three nights and did not occupy it until the morning of 11 May. Qawuqji, however, reported that on this day the Zionist forces were withdrawing and that Arab Liberation Army units had captured the woods near the village.

Stage	Date	Details
Arab counterattack and temporary recovery	12 May 1948	Qawuqji informed the High Command that Zionist forces coming from Jerusalem and its outskirts had entered Bayt Mahsir thanks to large reinforcements, and that the village was recovered the same day after artillery bombardment and a frontal attack. Khalidi considers that this recovery was probably short-lived.
Final occupation and destruction of the village	Shortly after 12 May 1948	According to Israeli historian Benny Morris, as cited by Khalidi, Zionist forces soon occupied the village and systematically levelled it. The available sources give no specific day for the final occupation.
Settlement on village lands	27 September 1948 or February 1950	In August 1948 the Jewish National Fund proposed a settlement to be called Beyt Me'ir on the ruins of the village, and Morris, as cited by Khalidi, states that it was established as Lehagshama on 27 September 1948. Other sources, however, state that Beyt Me'ir was founded on village lands in February 1950 and that Lehagshama was the original name of Shoresh, established on the lands of Saris.
Settlement on village lands	1950	The settlement of Mesillat Tziyyon was founded northwest of the village site; Khalidi lists it among the Israeli settlements on village lands.

Displacement and Destruction

The fighting ultimately resulted in the displacement of Bayt Mahsir's Palestinian population, who were prevented from re-establishing their village community.

The military account transmitted by Walid Khalidi does not provide a detailed description of what happened to every inhabitant at the moment the village was entered.

The sources nevertheless establish that Bayt Mahsir was depopulated during the military operations and that a large part of its built environment was subsequently destroyed.

Khalidi, transmitting information through Benny Morris, states that the village was systematically levelled after Israeli forces consolidated control. This detail is included only as mediated through the Palestinian source.

Israeli Settlements on the Lands of Bayt Mahsir

Beyt Me'ir

Sources differ over the establishment date of Beyt Me'ir and its relationship to the name “Lehagshama.”

Walid Khalidi, citing documents discussed by Benny Morris, reports that a plan to establish a settlement on the ruins of Bayt Mahsir was proposed in August 1948 and that a settlement initially called Lehagshama was established on 27 September 1948 and later associated with the name Beyt Me'ir.

Other sources used by Khalidi, however, state that **Beyt Me'ir was founded on Bayt Mahsir's lands in February 1950** and that Lehagshama was instead the original name of Shoresh, established on the lands of Saris.

Because of this discrepancy, neither date should be presented as universally agreed upon.

Mesillat Tziyyon

Mesillat Tziyyon was established in 1950 northwest of the Bayt Mahsir village site and on its lands.

Israeli Settlements Associated with the Lands of Bayt Mahsir

Name	Year Established	Note
Beyt Me'ir	1948 or 1950, depending on the source	Established on the site or lands of Bayt Mahsir; sources differ over the date and the name “Lehagshama”
Mesillat Tziyyon	1950	Established northwest of the village site and on its lands

Bayt Mahsir After the Nakba

According to the field documentation relied upon by Walid Khalidi, several houses from Bayt Mahsir survived and became interspersed among the buildings of Beyt Me'ir.

Among the most prominent surviving structures were two large rectangular limestone houses with arched doors and windows.

Remains of a flour mill were also visible, together with ruins of stone houses, walls surrounding former orchards, cave entrances, and abandoned wells.

An old forest extended from the eastern edge of the village over the mountaintop. Several graves remained among the trees, including the grave of al-'Ajami.

Two abandoned houses also remained southwest of the village site, one with a water reservoir in its courtyard.

According to Khalidi's documentation, sections of the woodland around the village were later designated as a nature reserve.

This description reflects the condition of the site during the field documentation relied upon by Walid Khalidi and should not necessarily be interpreted as a comprehensive survey updated to 2026.

Sources

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- Government of Palestine, censuses of 1922 and 1931.
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