

Bayt Jibrin



Subdistrict: Hebron

Estimated population of Bayt Jibrin in 1948: 2,820

Date of occupation and depopulation: 27 October 1948

Military operation: Operation Yoav

Military unit: Giv'ati Brigade

Israeli settlement established on village land after 1948: Beyt Guvrin

Bayt Jibrin was located approximately 21 kilometres northwest of Hebron.

Bayt Jibrin was a prominent Palestinian village in the Hebron Subdistrict. It stood in the western foothills of the Hebron Mountains at an average elevation of approximately 275 metres above sea level. With a registered area of 56,185 dunams, it possessed the largest landholding of any village in the Hebron Subdistrict.

The Arabic name Bayt Jibrin means “house of the powerful” and probably preserves an older Aramaic place-name. The popular association of the name with giants belongs to local tradition and should not be treated as a verified historical derivation.

The village stood on relatively level ground south of Wadi Bayt Jibrin. In the late nineteenth century, its houses were described as being constructed mainly of stone and mud in a sheltered position along the slope of the valley. Olive groves extended northwards across the valley.

During the British Mandate, Bayt Jibrin served as an important commercial and administrative centre for the surrounding villages. Its population was entirely Muslim. The village contained two schools, a medical clinic, a bus stop, a police station, a mosque, and a weekly market. Its inhabitants cultivated cereals, olives, fruit, and other crops.

The surrounding archaeological landscape includes extensive cave complexes, ancient burial chambers, cisterns, pigeon towers, and mosaic floors from churches dating to the fourth and sixth centuries CE.

Boundaries of Bayt Jibrin

Bayt Jibrin lay amid the following Palestinian villages and localities:

- To the north: [Kudna](#).
- To the northwest: [Zayta](#).
- To the southwest: [al-Qubayba](#).
- To the south: [al-Dawayima](#).
- To the southeast: Idhna.

- To the northeast: Dayr al-Nakhkhas.



The depopulated Palestinian village of Bayt Jibrin

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Education in Bayt Jibrin

Bayt Jibrin had two elementary schools, one for boys and another for girls. The boys' school offered instruction through the seventh elementary grade, making it one of the more advanced rural schools in the district. It also admitted pupils from neighbouring villages.

Population of Bayt Jibrin

Ottoman tax records indicate that Bayt Jibrin had approximately 275 inhabitants in 1596. By the late nineteenth century, its population was estimated at between 900 and 1,000. Another estimate placed its population at approximately 1,278 in 1896, while a travel handbook recorded around 1,000 inhabitants in 1912. Estimates for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries therefore vary between sources.

The British Mandate census of 1922 recorded 1,420 residents. The population increased to 1,804 in 1931, when 369 occupied houses were recorded. The official 1945 village statistics listed 2,430 inhabitants, all of whom were Muslims. Based on demographic projections, the population reached approximately 2,820 in 1948.

The refugee population originating from Bayt Jibrin, including descendants of the displaced villagers, was estimated at 17,310 in 1998. Many live in al-'Azza refugee camp, which is also known as Bayt Jibrin camp, and al-Fawwar refugee camp in the southern West Bank.

Economic Life in Bayt Jibrin

The economy of Bayt Jibrin was based primarily on agriculture, commerce, and services. The villagers cultivated cereals and fruit, while olive trees were planted across the hills surrounding the village. Most cultivation depended on rainfall.

According to the official statistics for 1944/45, 31,616 dunams were devoted to cereal cultivation, of which 30,613 dunams were under Palestinian ownership, 815 dunams under Jewish ownership, and 188 dunams were public land. A further 2,477 dunams under

Palestinian ownership were irrigated or used for orchards.

Some Palestinian local histories estimate that olive groves covered approximately 3,500 dunams. The official 1945 land-use tables, however, did not list olive groves as a separate category for Bayt Jibrin, and this figure should therefore be understood as an estimate overlapping with the broader agricultural classifications.

Population of Bayt Jibrin by Year

Year	Population*
1596	Approximately 275
Late nineteenth century	Approximately 900–1,000
1912	Approximately 1,000
1922	1,420
1931	1,804
1945	2,430
1948	Approximately 2,820
Estimated refugee population in 1998	17,310

* The figures for 1596, the late nineteenth century, 1912, 1948, and the refugee population in 1998 are estimates rather than contemporary census counts.

Number of Houses in Bayt Jibrin

Year	Number of houses
1931	369
1948	Approximately 576

* The 1948 figure is an estimate rather than a contemporary housing census.

Land of Bayt Jibrin

In 1945, the registered land area of Bayt Jibrin amounted to 56,185 dunams, or approximately 56.2 square kilometres. The village's built-up area covered 287 dunams—not 287 square metres. Cultivable land amounted to 34,093 dunams, while 21,805 dunams were classified as uncultivated. The built-up area was recorded separately.

Land Ownership in Bayt Jibrin

Ownership category	Land area in dunams*
Palestinian ownership	54,962
Jewish ownership	1,008
Public land	215
Total	56,185

* One dunam equals approximately 1,000 square metres.

Land Use in Bayt Jibrin, 1944/45

Land-use category	Palestinian ownership (dunams)*	Jewish ownership (dunams)*	Public land (dunams)*	Total (dunams)*
Irrigated land and orchards	2,477	0	0	2,477
Cereal cultivation	30,613	815	188	31,616
Built-up area	287	0	0	287
Cultivable land	33,090	815	188	34,093
Uncultivated land	21,585	193	27	21,805

* One dunam equals approximately 1,000 square metres.

Institutions and Public Services in Bayt Jibrin

Bayt Jibrin's location, extensive lands, long history, and importance to neighbouring villages made it a regional centre with several institutions and public services:

1. **Government and police centre:** The British Mandate administration maintained a police station and government facilities in the village.
2. **Medical clinic:** The clinic had a resident health official and was periodically visited by a physician. It also served inhabitants of neighbouring villages.
3. **Schools:** Bayt Jibrin had an elementary school for boys and another for girls. The boys' school offered instruction through the seventh grade and admitted pupils from surrounding villages.
4. **Administrative centre:** Approval was reportedly granted shortly before the village's occupation in 1948 for the establishment of a local administrative office. Available sources provide limited information about whether it became fully operational.
5. **Weekly market:** The market was held every Tuesday and attracted merchants and customers from surrounding villages.
6. **Mosque:** The village mosque was known as al-Jami' al-'Umari. Despite its name, there is no firm evidence that it dated to the reign of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab.
7. **Guesthouses:** Each major extended family maintained a madafa where family affairs, relations with other families, and local disputes were discussed. These guesthouses also served as spaces in which younger generations learned from village elders.
8. **Kuttab:** Traditional Qur'anic schools continued to operate alongside the formal boys' school. One of the best known was the kuttab of Shaykh Ali, where pupils studied the Qur'an and Arabic.

Archaeological Heritage of Bayt Jibrin

The archaeological landscape surrounding Bayt Jibrin contains a large network of artificial caves cut into the soft limestone. Many are bell-shaped, with narrow openings at the top and

chambers that widen towards the bottom. These underground complexes include rooms, corridors, cisterns, burial chambers, refuges, quarries, and installations associated with raising pigeons.

Published descriptions differ considerably regarding the number of caves. Claims ranging from approximately 1,000 documented caves to tens of thousands across the wider region should not be presented as a definitive archaeological count. What is firmly established is that the area contains an exceptionally extensive and historically significant system of caves and underground structures.

The archaeological landscape encompasses remains associated with ancient Maresha and the later urban centre known as Eleutheropolis. The older settlement of Maresha was destroyed during the first century BCE, while Bayt Jibrin continued to develop through the Roman, Byzantine, early Islamic, Crusader, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods. The destruction attributed to the Parthians occurred around 40 BCE and relates primarily to ancient Maresha rather than to the modern Palestinian village in its later form.

Archaeologists working in the area uncovered mosaic floors belonging to churches dated to the fourth and sixth centuries CE, together with inhabited caves, burial places, cisterns, and pigeon towers.

Occupation and Depopulation of Bayt Jibrin

During the second half of May 1948, the First Battalion of the Egyptian army took up positions in the Bayt Jibrin area, which lay near the front separating Egyptian and Israeli forces. The village also received displaced Palestinians from Yafa and other areas, some of whom temporarily sheltered in its caves.

Bayt Jibrin was subjected to aerial bombing and strafing during Operation Yoav. Sources differ on the precise beginning of the bombardment: some place the first attacks on 15–16 October, while contemporary reporting indicates that particularly heavy air raids began on the night of 18–19 October and continued over the following days.

The bombing, continued military pressure, and preliminary raids caused many residents to leave the village. Israeli forces attacked the surrounding area again between 24 and 26 October. The Giv'ati Brigade occupied Bayt Jibrin on 27 October 1948 during the final stage of Operation Yoav, completing the village's depopulation during Israel's occupation of Palestine—the Nakba.

The village was not entirely demolished immediately after its occupation. A number of houses, the mosque, and an unidentified shrine remained standing, although much of the village was subsequently destroyed or repurposed.

Israeli Settlement on the Land of Bayt Jibrin

In 1949, the Israeli settlement of Beyt Guvrin was established on land belonging to Bayt Jibrin, north of the Palestinian village site. It was not built directly over the central built-up area of the former village.

Bayt Jibrin Today

A mosque, an unidentified shrine, and several Palestinian houses remain at the village site. The stone mosque has a flat roof, high round-arched windows and doors, and a domed rear porch. It is surrounded by wild vegetation.

Some surviving houses have been occupied or repurposed, while others remain deserted. One two-storey Palestinian stone house was converted into a restaurant and outdoor café. Prefabricated buildings were later erected near the abandoned shrine.

Tall grasses, shrubs, cactus plants, and eucalyptus trees cover parts of the village site. The surrounding archaeological area, renowned for its caves and antiquities, has been developed as a tourist destination, while the Palestinian history and displacement associated with the village remain integral to the site's modern history.

Sources

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