Our Palestine — Depopulated village — Gaza — 04 November 1948

Ni'ilya

Ni'ilya: A Depopulated Palestinian Village in the Gaza District

Ni'ilya was a Palestinian village in the Gaza District, located approximately 19 km northeast of Gaza city and about 3 km south-southwest of al-Majdal. Its inhabitants were displaced during the Nakba and the occupation of Palestine in 1948. The village was most probably occupied on 4–5 November 1948, during the final stage or immediate aftermath of Operation Yoav.

Location of Ni'ilya

Ni'ilya was built on flat ground in the coastal plain, at an average elevation of

approximately 25 metres above sea level. It stood north of an earlier settlement site that had been engulfed by sand dunes.

As dunes began to encroach upon the village from the south, residents attempted to halt their advance by planting fruit trees. Secondary roads connected Ni'ilya with al-Majdal, approximately 3 km to its north-northeast, and with the main coastal highway a short distance to the east.

Nearby villages and towns included al-Jura, al-Majdal, Julis, al-Khisas, Hiribya, Barbara, and al-Jiyya.

Ni'ilya during the Ottoman Period

Ni'ilya appears in the Ottoman tax records of 1596 as a village in the nahiya of Gaza, within the liwa of Gaza. Its population at the time has been estimated at approximately 440.

The village paid taxes on crops including wheat, barley, sesame, and fruit, as well as on goats, beehives, vineyards, and other forms of agricultural production.

Architecture of Ni'ilya

By the late nineteenth century, Ni'ilya was surrounded by fruit orchards and olive groves that extended toward al-Majdal. Cactus hedges were used to help stop the advance of coastal sand dunes.

The village had a roughly trapezoidal layout whose long base extended toward the northeast. Narrow alleys separated the houses, some of which were constructed of adobe brick and others of cement. Some homes were also built among the fruit orchards, and the village expanded along the road leading toward al-Majdal.

The Mosque and Burial Places of Ni'ilya

A mosque decorated with inscriptions stood on the southern side of the village,

surrounded by remains of older buildings and several burial places. The Muslim inhabitants of Ni'ilya believed that these tombs contained the remains of people who had died in fighting against the Crusaders. This is recorded as a local belief rather than as an independently verified archaeological conclusion.

Education in Ni'ilya

Children from Ni'ilya attended school in al-Majdal. A school building for the village itself was completed during the winter of 1948, but it never opened because of the Nakba and the occupation of Palestine in 1948.

Economic Life in Ni'ilya

The village contained several small shops, although agriculture provided the principal livelihood for most inhabitants.

Residents cultivated rainfed cereals as well as citrus fruit, grapes, figs, apricots, and other fruits. The fruit orchards were irrigated with water drawn from artesian wells.

In the 1944/45 statistics, 1,084 dunums were devoted to citrus and bananas, 2,215 dunums to cereals, and 1,436 dunums were irrigated or used for plantations.

Land Ownership in Ni'ilya

The total land area of Ni'ilya was 5,233 dunums. Palestine Remembered describes 304 dunums as communal/public land, while PalQuest classifies the same area as public land.

Total	**5,233**
Ownership category	**Area in dunums**
Palestinian	4,929
Transferred to Zionists	0

Total	5,233
Ownership category	**Area in dunums**
Public / communal	304

Land Use in Ni'ilya

Land use in Ni'ilya, 1944/45

Land use	Area in dunums
Citrus and bananas	1,084
Plantations and irrigable land	1,436
Cereals	2,215
Built-up area	29
Cultivated / cultivable land	4,735
Non-cultivable land	469
Note: Palestine Remembered currently lists the built-up area as 19 dunums, whereas PalQuest gives 29. The figure of 29 is used here because it is consistent with the totals in the land ownership and land-use tables.	

Population of Ni'ilya

Population of Ni'ilya in selected years

Year	Population	Nature of figure
1596	440	Estimate derived from Ottoman tax records
1922	687	Official British Mandate census
1931	863	Official British Mandate census
1944/45	1,310	Official statistics
1948	1,520	Later estimate published by Palestine Remembered

Year	Population	Nature of figure
Estimated refugees in 1998	9,332	Later estimate published by Palestine Remembered
The 1948 and 1998 figures should not be treated as official British Mandate statistics.		

Number of Houses in Ni'ilya

Number of houses in Ni'ilya

Year	Number of houses	Nature of figure
1931	169	Official census figure
1948	297	Later estimate published by Palestine Remembered
The 1948 figure is a later estimate rather than an official British Mandate census figure.		

Occupation and Depopulation of Ni'ilya during the Nakba

Ni'ilya was among the last Palestinian villages in the south to be occupied by Israeli occupation forces. Walid Khalidi, as reproduced by PalQuest, considers it most likely that the village was occupied around the time al-Majdal and a number of its surrounding villages fell on 4–5 November 1948.

The occupation of the area was connected with Operation Yoav, which began on 15 October and ended on 4 November 1948. PalQuest describes the entry of Israeli occupation forces into al-Majdal and neighbouring villages on 4–5 November as occurring in the immediate aftermath of the operation, while Palestine Remembered gives 4 November as the occupation date for Ni'ilya and categorizes it under Operation Yoav.

- Date of occupation and depopulation: most probably 4–5 November 1948; Palestine Remembered specifies 4 November.
- Military operation: Operation Yoav, or its final stage and immediate aftermath, depending on the wording of the source.
- Attacking unit: Palestine Remembered states that the attack was

possibly carried out by a combined force from the Givati and Negev brigades. Walid Khalidi's dedicated entry does not identify a specific brigade for Ni'ilya.

- Defenders: Palestine Remembered identifies the Egyptian Army as the defending force. Egyptian forces were the principal Arab military force opposing Operation Yoav in this sector.
- Fate of the population: Ni'ilya's inhabitants were displaced during the Nakba. Khalidi's dedicated village entry does not provide a documented route or destination for the entire population after displacement.
- Fate of the buildings: the overwhelming majority of the village's structures were destroyed, although at least one house was subsequently documented as still standing.

Settlement and Urban Expansion on the Lands of Ni'ilya

According to Walid Khalidi and PalQuest, the centre of the city of Ashkelon, established in 1948, lies northwest of the former village site. The city subsequently expanded onto lands that had belonged to Ni'ilya.

Ni'ilya Today

According to the field description published in Walid Khalidi's *All That Remains* in 1992, the village had largely disappeared and its site was covered with wild vegetation and several sycamore trees. One house, probably originally built among the fruit orchards, was still standing at the time and was inhabited by a Palestinian family. It had a flat roof and rectangular doors and windows. Nearby land was being cultivated.

Palestine Remembered also contains more recent photographs and contributions concerning the site, including material added in June 2025 describing Ni'ilya as almost completely obliterated apart from a small number of surviving remains. Because this material is a contributed photographic record rather than a comprehensive independent field survey, neither the 1992 description nor the

newer photographs should be treated as a complete verification of the condition of every part of the village site in 2026.

Sources

- PalQuest – Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question: Ni'ilya
- PalQuest – Operation Yoav
- Palestine Remembered – Ni'ilya, Gaza District
- Institute for Palestine Studies – All That Remains, Walid Khalidi