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The recovery of historical paths for tourism as tool for social and territorial development: the Palestinian case of Battir

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“A man who goes on a sarha¹ wanders aimlessly, not restricted by time and place, going where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself. »
(Raja Shehadeh. *Palestinian Walks*, Paperback, 2008)

Historical background of the enclavisation of the study area

Prior to 1948, Battir and its surrounding villages looked to Jerusalem –culturally, economically and from the point of view of spatial practices. The inhabitants of the area, particularly known for its cultivation of vegetables, used to sell their produce at the town markets. Battir, Nahalin, Wadi Fukin and Al Walajeh are in fact characterized by a widespread system of irrigated terraces where vegetables are cultivated. Significantly, in the past these villages were known as “the basket [of vegetables] of Jerusalem”. The system of irrigated terraces -with its Roman channels of irrigation- played an important role not only in the economic life of the area, but also in determining the mobility of its inhabitants, who travelled daily to the markets in the District of Jerusalem.

During the Ottoman period Battir and its closest villages were connected to Jerusalem by an abundant series of valleys. A path which could be walked led the people from the village through these valleys directly to the Old City of Jerusalem and this was the main route to the Holy City until 1890, when the Ottoman administration built a railway line not far from the

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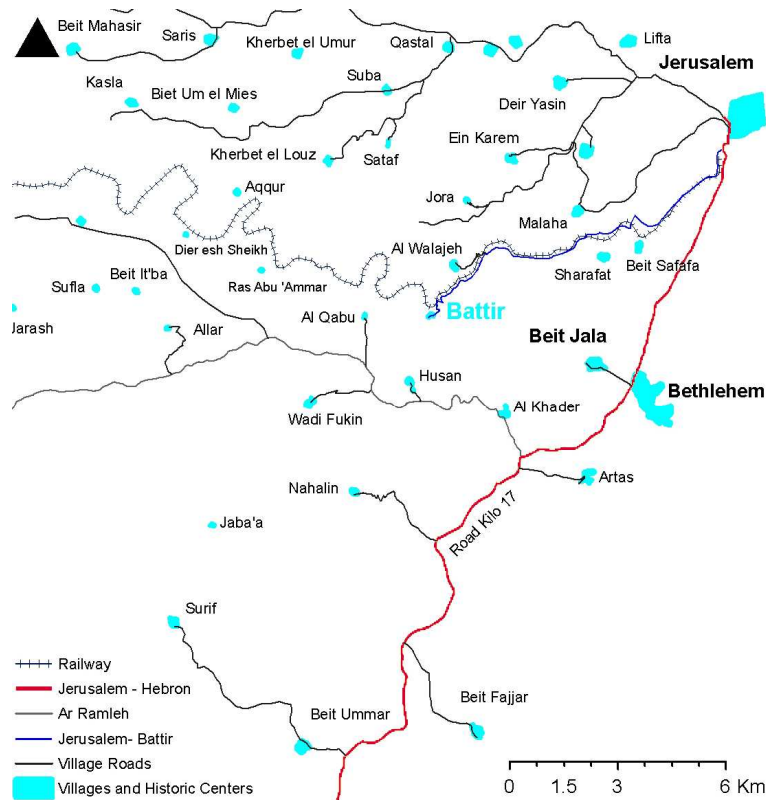
¹ Word from the classical Arabic language, meaning a pathway

path, which would connect the “basket” to Jerusalem and Jaffa. The new station, situated at the bottom of the Battir valley, provided an important element of change in the mobility of the inhabitants of the village and its surrounding areas, attracting the farmers from the other sub-districts in the Jerusalem and Bethlehem zones. What is more, after the construction of the railway and its connection to the main centres of the Arab world –Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Mecca– the train became an opportunity for travel and for new experiences –mostly for study and commerce– in the major Arab sites of culture.

Immediately after 1948, a patent process of fragmentation began to afflict the area of Battir and the surrounding villages situated south-east of Jerusalem. After the Rhodes agreement of 1949 between King Abdullah of Jordan and the first Israeli government –represented at Amman by Moshe Dayan– the Ottoman railway was renovated by the Israeli state administration, which subsequently decided to close the station of Battir and effectively eliminate the village’s railway stop, preventing the local inhabitants from using the train.

Subsequent to Battir’s transformation into a border village after 1949, and after the administrative changes that excluded Battir from the District of Jerusalem, in the 1950s and 60s this small rural town gradually began to look –for its social, economic and cultural relations– to Bethlehem city; a new road through the present municipality of Khader was opened to facilitate transport and travel to Bethlehem.

Fig.1 – Battir and the system of connections between villages and towns before 1948



The non-reification of the Green Line² into a boundary that separates Israelis and Palestinians, its gradual “selective porosity”, the Israeli army’s campaign to occupy the West Bank and the building of civil colonial structures and infrastructures -the colonies-subsequent to 1967 until nowadays, are all factors that have further altered the geography, the landscape and the territorial-jurisdictional order of the area under analysis. Importantly, the colonization of the area resulted into a further contraction and fragmentation of the Palestinian landscape and spaces of life and movement. Basically, this process led to the expansion of the inhabited areas and the spaces used by the Israeli settlers, with the consequent *enclavisation* of the Palestinians of Battir and its surrounding villages.

This trend has been further exacerbated and has gone through a process of increasing sophistication after the Oslo Accords of the Nineties: the majority of the territory of Battir - around 90%- has been declared Area C and kept under the Israeli military control and “security”. A system of by-pass roads – for Jews only – has been constantly implemented by the Israeli government and Civil administration, “canalising” the Palestinian movements in a system of tunnels and separated roads. Today Battir is facing a process of isolation from the rest of the West Bank, after decades of loss and expropriation of lands, after the disconnection from Jerusalem and the enormous restriction₇ for its inhabitants₇ of the paths of movement and access to their natural and cultural landscape.

The recovery of historical paths as acupunctural practice of territorial reconstruction

Infrastructures, which are generally considered as connective elements, clearly reveal within this context their side effect of barrier and tangible territorial cuts, able to play a fundamental role into the process of *enclavisation* of a region. The strategy of progressive fragmentation is carried out by exploiting infrastructures combined with administrative measures: to overlap tangible structures implies, in fact, to stratify rules on physical space. Routes and connections embody strategic elements capable to *cut and sew*, connect but also disconnect and re-orientate practices and flows, create or deconstruct polarities and influence this way economical and social dynamics, driving and re-arranging this way territorial hierarchies and relations.

The situation where Battir is framed in -a regime of military occupation capable to impose a set of elements of pressure and fragmentation, combined with the *de facto* lack of a Palestinian government able to administrate and intervene on its territory- is leading to the progressive abandon of cultivated land and decay of social and productive structures. The main effects of political and military conflict reflects on historical and environmental heritage, biodiversity, soil stability, natural resources and, what is most important, capability of regeneration and evolution; furthermore, it progressively erodes the physical and social landscape, by intervening on emigration flows and social cohesion in general, which means the loss of traditions, theoretical and material culture, productive know-how and, finally, relationship between human and territory.

The context here described highlights an existing distinction between the concept of *road* and *path*, which seems here right and proper to briefly clarify.

The term *road* intrinsically emphasizes the initial and final nibs of a track. The act it is possible to relate to this concept could be “*crossing*”, which implies to connect directly in the most efficient way a certain point to another.

² The Green Line is the armistice line established by the Israelis and the Jordanian administration as “temporary border” after the foundation of the State of Israel. The line has over the years become increasingly less permeable in the relations between Palestinians and Israelis. It has never become a real border and, as a result, it is subject to change, to political calculations, dreams of “territorial exchanges” in the so-called peace negotiations and to constant administrative and territorial amendment.

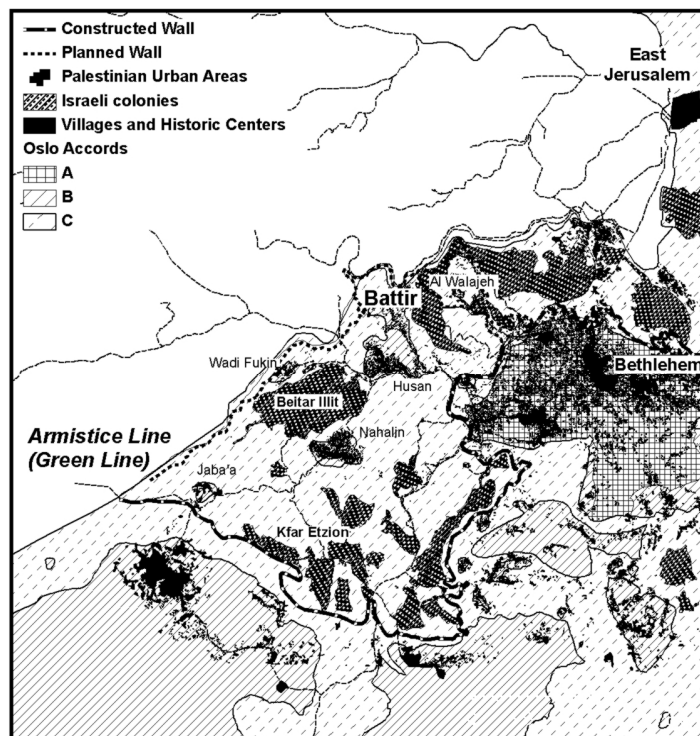
On the complementary side, the term *path* focuses much more on the track itself and the possible relative predicate “to roam” -in French: *flâner*- means to choose freely a track in virtue of the possibility it gives to relate and get to know a specific space, land and landscape. The mind disposition in the act of *roaming* on a path pushes to explore, to investigate and acquire the conscience about a place as unique and unrepeatable entity, which is identified by typical physiognomy and intrinsic structural rules: in one word, it aims to build a knowledge of a territory inside a conscience. In light of this, the walk covers a very strong social and economical potential.

The frame of political and administrative conditions for the study case of Battir calls now for the formulation of a strategy capable to re-gain and reconnect fragments, *conditio sine qua non* for the preservation and development of territorial features.

The lack of unitary, actual and effective territorial policy and the fragmentation of spatial and social continuity due to the occupation clearly point out how a successful strategy must be based on strong engagement with the local reality, pursued by very simple and punctual, low cost, low profile actions.

The *path* and the *walk* embody in this case the most basic -which doesn't mean simple or banal- structural *diade* “tool-plus-action” on which it is possible to fund a territorial plan that enables local inhabitants to interfere with the externally imposed territorial apparatus: establishing the track of the path compels, in fact, to recognize nodal points into territory, to arrange them into a logic of territorial hierarchy through the assignment of a priority in light of the balance between potentials and degree of influence on the surrounding area, to chose critically to tie them physically and conceptually together in a certain sequence -which should not be casual- with the aim of reactivate or at least point them out at the visitors and local attention.

Fig.2. Transformation of the jurisdictional-territorial order from 1967 to the post-Oslo period on Battir's area



Consequently, walking and roaming on the path means to employ oneself's body as critical device, using it into a process of investigation exploiting the *laboratory method* in order to test, measure, experiment geographies and landscapes. This leads to ponder the singular situations as parts of a wider and constantly developing frame, recovering and rebuilding the conceptual awareness of territory as organic entity first.

The experience of crossing a land and personally witnessing the gradual change of environmental and social landscape, encourages this way a critical interpretation of the space and the acquisition of a knowledge of its intrinsic features, such as elasticity of spaces and borders, stability of natural and human structures, spatial fractures and links, elements in expansion or shrinkage, which are responsible of positive, negative, increasing and decreasing pressure on geography, local behaviours and, in fine, productive and touristic realities and potentials.

Within a landscape framework that is split into territorial fragments, seeking a solution to reconnect the discontinuous enclaves -through a counter system of mobility based on a deep understanding of both the existing traditional landscape system and the ongoing process of transformation- appears essential to increase the Palestinian human activity flow inside and outside the village-enclaves. This can be achieved by revalorizing the cultural landscape and territorial elements in the area, within an ecological and sustainable system that could promote interactive dynamics between community and territory. In this sense, landscape pathways are central for this process of revalorisation and re-functionalisation, because they constitute an device to reconnect the inhabitants with the unique tangible and intangible dominant cultural elements of territory and landscape.

One of the paths that has been considered for centuries the main mobility connection between Battir village and the holy city of Bethlehem, the *Al-Makhrou* path, could become one of the main targets of these interventions of revitalization and promotion of walks at local-national-international levels.

Hypothesizing the refunctionalization of the historical pathway Battir al-Makhrou

Al - Makhrou valley contains a rich variety of cultural landscape sub-systems. The anthropic structures are distributed along the valley, which represents the product of a continuous human interaction with the surrounding territory. The cultivation practices in the valley are characterized by the local agricultural system of olive fields, orchards, vineyards and irrigated terraces, integrated by several elements of vernacular architecture, and embodying a unique typology of dry stone works, which are composed by different kinds of sub-typologies- in particular: dry stone retaining walls, which constitute the system of terraced agriculture mattress; the dry stone agricultural watch towers (*Mentar*), which are considered a significant element of the vernacular architecture related and complementary to the system of cultivation-. The *Al-Makhrou* valley is also characterized by a series of springs connected to an irrigation system that supplies the contiguous terraces with water, which have historically represented a central source of income for the villagers of Battir: in these structures used several types of vegetables -especially a particular specie of eggplant, local production of excellence- used to be cultivated in the past, but nowadays the village is facing a patent decrease in its local production³. Moreover, *Al Makhrou* valley contains a set

³ Due to the abandonment of the local agriculture, the majority of the vegetables are now imported from Israel or from the Jewish settlements of the West Bank. against the Romans. But, however, several strata were identified (coins, pottery sherds), dating the Iron Age, Hellenistic and Roman periods.

of ritual and symbolic landscape elements such as a set of historical rock-cut tombs, monumental trees, shrines, and caves.

Another point of relevance which raises Battir as a local polarity worthy to be involved into a touristic and historical path refers to the peculiarity of its ancient core as example of traditional typology of urban organism, which records into its *forma urbis* the historical development of the dialogue between social and natural environment. The singular and complex combination of elements and resources –the articulated net of water springs, soil composition and geological structures, variety biotic heritage, etc.- in this area, make the old core of Battir a unique testimony, whom continuity can be attested by archaeological heritage such as the *Al-Kherbeh*⁴ case. The presence of a touristic route touching archaeological areas is moreover able to benefit the development and conservation of the heritage, which would have the chance to enter the economical circle as out-and-out capital, whom maintenance and restoration become tools finalized at the conservation of its economical potential.

Fig.3 - The *Al-Makhrour* valley's pathway



⁴ Several excavations have been conducted on the archeological site.; the major project was conducted by the Israeli archeologist Ussishkin, who, accompanied by the Army and the archeologists of the Israeli colonial administration in the West Bank, carried out excavations and claimed that these were a response to the "intensive building" in the site, though the site was not menaced by the village urban expansion. Ussishkin –Tel Aviv University- claimed that the excavations confirmed that the site was located in the area in which the Jewish revolt of Bar Kochba took place against the Romans. But, however, several strata were identified (coins, pottery sherds), dating the Iron Age, Hellenistic and Roman periods.

The dynamic offered by the activation of the pathways would influence different life aspects of Battir's villagers: the visitor's flow would bring an opening for farmers to opportunities of selling directly their agricultural products, increasing and expanding job opportunities, stimulating enterprise initiatives and experimenting for the first time on this area the current practice of the "0 kilometres economy". This would outline a chance to react to the process of dismission taking place since several decades from the Jerusalem market and to the slow vanishing from the Bethlehem one.

Moreover, irrigated terraces would be this way recovered and preserved as productive structures and, in the mean time, re-functionalized by leaning on architectural pre-existences, which could host touristic facilities, like reversible receptive structures related to catering and hosting, able to sustain and be sustained by local productions directly coming from the field.

These facilities would contemporarily provide public spaces for the inhabitants of the surrounding villages and the city of Bethlehem, which would imply to give the local community locations for developing recreational and didactic activities in contact with their natural and historical landscape and occasions to experience how to manage public areas, promoting this way social cohesion and awareness of public space as shared resource. At last, the recovery of traditional and historical agricultural structures and architectures along this valley would embody a fundamental step in view of constituting a green lung and an ecological corridor for the area of Bethlehem, which would be complimentary and essential for reinforcing and protecting territorial structures and environmental features—fauna, flora, animal migration paths, soil stability.

The reconstruction of this consciousness embody the real foundations which make possible and justify any kind of further and more complex economical and urban plan.

Moreover, the pathways will act as an instrument to break the political *enclavisation*, through the articulation in of alternative flows of visitor through the valley, which would open a wider opportunity for visitor and local inhabitants to communicate and interact, protecting the land from further colonial pressures.