

Latrun and Its Monastery: A Sanctuary

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Abstract

The Latrun area is known for its rich history and natural beauty. This paper explores the scenic and historical significance of Latrun, tracing its evolution from Roman times to its current state. The study highlights the area's strategic importance, the transformation of the Latrun Monastery, and the impact of historical conflicts on the local population and landscape. Through interviews and personal reflections, the paper delves into the enduring legacy of the region and the lives of its inhabitants, particularly focusing on Father Louis Wehbe and the displaced residents of 'Imwas.

Keywords:

Latrun; historical significance; Latrun Monastery; Palestinian villages; Father Louis Wehbe; 'Imwas; displacement; strategic importance.

Spring is the most beautiful season for hiking and walking in Palestine, both in the mountains and along the coast. I often spend time contemplating in nature during this season, especially on weekends. Green dominates vast swaths of land, while distinct colors and scents of flowers, lilies, almond orchards, green corn, wheat fields, and the like, fill the air.

The Latrun area is one of the most beautiful places in Palestine, with a history extending over two millennia, from the Roman period onward. It is the site of a strategic convergence of roads, from Gaza in the south, from Jaffa in the west, from Bab al-Wad in the east, and from Ramallah in the northeast. The region has been strategically important since

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Roman times; its hilltop location is midway between coastal Jaffa and Jerusalem, and overlooks the main east-west land route (the ancient Roman east-west road lies just to the north).

History of Latrun

The name Latrun may originate from either the Latin (*Latro*) or Old French (*La Toron*) names given the twelfth-century Crusader fortress built on the site, with ruins visible to this day.¹ In the late nineteenth century, under Ottoman rule, a small Palestinian hamlet was built by peasants from 'Imwas village, consisting of mud brick houses within the walls of the fortress and on nearby lands of less than four dunums. In 1890, encouraged by the Latin Patriarchate in Jerusalem, French Trappist monks purchased land from 'Imwas Christians, established a monastery a short distance from the ruins and began cultivating the area.² By 1922, fifty-nine Palestinians lived in the al-Latrun hamlet, and by 1945, the village's population had reached 190.³ According to Khalidi, the monks bought the villagers' old houses within the fortress walls and their land (al-Latrun al-Qadima) and compensated them by building twenty new houses for the villagers in an area to the south (al-Latrun al-Jadida).⁴



Figure 1. Ruins of the headquarters of the Arab Jordanian Army and the embrasure openings. Photo by author.

The location of al-Latrun village on a high hill overlooking all sides gave it strategic and military importance. In the 1948 war, the Jordanian army evacuated the residents of al-Latrun to the village of ‘Imwas, set up its headquarters inside the walls of the fortress and built trenches and defensive embrasures in the walls, still visible today. In that year, the Zionist militia Haganah made six attempts to overtake Latrun and seize control of the road to Jerusalem from the Jordanian army.⁵ The Jordanian army’s fortifications, however, remained strong on all sides (and included the abandoned British army “Tegart” headquarters)⁶ and the Haganah had heavy casualties. In the end, the Zionist forces made a makeshift dirt bypass road to the south of the Latrun area, called the “Burma Road,” to access Jerusalem.

The village of Latrun is located northwest of Jerusalem. Neve Shalom/Wahat Salam (Oasis of Peace) village was built in 1969 on lands belonging to the Latrun Monastery. After the Nakba in 1948, Latrun remained under the control of the Jordanian army within the Restricted Zone,⁷ until the area was occupied by Israel in 1967 and its three villages – ‘Imwas, Yalu, and Bayt Nuba – were depopulated and destroyed.⁸

Latrun Monastery

In recent years, I began to visit the area of the Latrun Monastery often, not only for its stunning beauty, but also to buy seasonal olive oil from the monastery store. The monks produce it from the olive trees cultivated on its vast expanses of land and press it in their own olive press. They also produce and sell red and white wines and vinegar from their large vineyards and can olives, turnips and other types of pickles. On Saturdays, special stalls dot the olive fields selling various items to local and foreign tourists.

The Latrun Monastery is built on the lands of the village of ‘Imwas, west of Jerusalem. Its entrance was on a steep Ottoman road connecting the cities of Jaffa and Jerusalem, which opened in 1869 but by 1888 was replaced by an easier-to-navigate bypass road built south of the monastery.⁹ During the British colonial period, it was the main road to Jerusalem and continued to be until 1978 when a new road was built.

In 1927, the new Latrun Monastery that we know and visit today was constructed. Designed and supervised by the first abbot of the monastery, Abbot Paul Couvreur, its construction was carried out by men from the village of ‘Imwas. An underground tunnel was built, connecting the old monastery to the modern monastery, to facilitate the movement of monks between the monasteries. Latrun Monastery consists of a church and residences for monks, while the front section is designated for visitors to the monastery.¹⁰ It contains an olive press, a winery, a carpentry workshop, a metal workshop and some warehouses. In the past, the monastery also included a hospital that operated until 1967, and a boarding school and an orphanage until 1963.

To learn more about the story of the Latrun Monastery, and its relationship with the people of the village of ‘Imwas, I interviewed a longtime monk at the monastery, Father Louis Wehbe.¹¹



Figure 2. The old monastery building, built in 1890. Photo by author.

Father Louis Wehbe and the Life of the Monks

Father Louis Wehbe was born in 1938 in the village of Bcha'leh, in Batroun in Lebanon, and spent his early childhood in the village with his four brothers. At the age of eleven and a half, it became clear to him that he wanted to devote his life to serving the Lord through monastic life. Father Louis told me about Saint Cherbel, whose miracles the people of the village used to speak about, and said that this drew him closer to the Lord.

One day, he went with his father to visit the tomb of Saint Cherbel. When they returned home, his father jokingly said to him: "What do you think about becoming a saint or a monk like Saint Cherbel?" Father Wehbe recounted: "It was like an arrow of love had entered my heart and it brought me great joy and a desire for monasticism." When he took up the matter seriously, his relatives and family at first boycotted him. He describes what happened as a battle that lasted a year and a half, and resulted in two camps: one that included all of his family and relatives, and another that was him alone, "under the care of the Lord Jesus." Their rejection and opposition strengthened his determination to take the path of monasticism and in the face of his stubbornness, his family eventually relented.

In 1951, at the age of thirteen years and three months, Father Louis arrived at Latrun Monastery where, he says, he found true happiness: "Although monastic life is difficult, love and inner calm overcome the difficulties that are like tests for the inner person." Fortunately for him, there was a school at the monastery that accommodated him, and

he studied there until he was eighteen years old, the age when he was allowed to enter the monastic order and receive monastic education.

When he first arrived at the monastery, he used to correspond with his family. In 1960, his mother, father and one of his brothers traveled from Lebanon to visit him at the monastery. They came to appreciate their son's way of life and to understand his noble mission in life. Father Louis recalls that the letters his father sent after his visit had a positive effect on his morale. His father wrote to him, "You are my treasure," after he had been sad because his father, at

the beginning of his journey, rejected his path and preferred his brothers over him. He studied philosophy at the monastery and in addition to his mother tongue, Arabic, he became fluent in French, Latin, Italian, English, Greek, Syriac, and Hebrew. In 1963, the monastery sent him on a mission to study theology in France for four years.

There are sixteen monks in the monastery today, a decline from previous times when more than thirty-five monks were in residence at any given time. According to Father Louis, it is mainly due to "the changes of the modern world. People are more interested in materialism than in spirituality, more attracted to worldly pleasures than religious devotion."

The daily life of a monk is a fixed routine. It begins at four or even three in the morning with prayer. Every day they perform seven prayers, between meals. During meals there is also reading from books. Their food is modest, based on vegetables and grains. They do not eat meat, and they live a life of austerity and simplicity. They

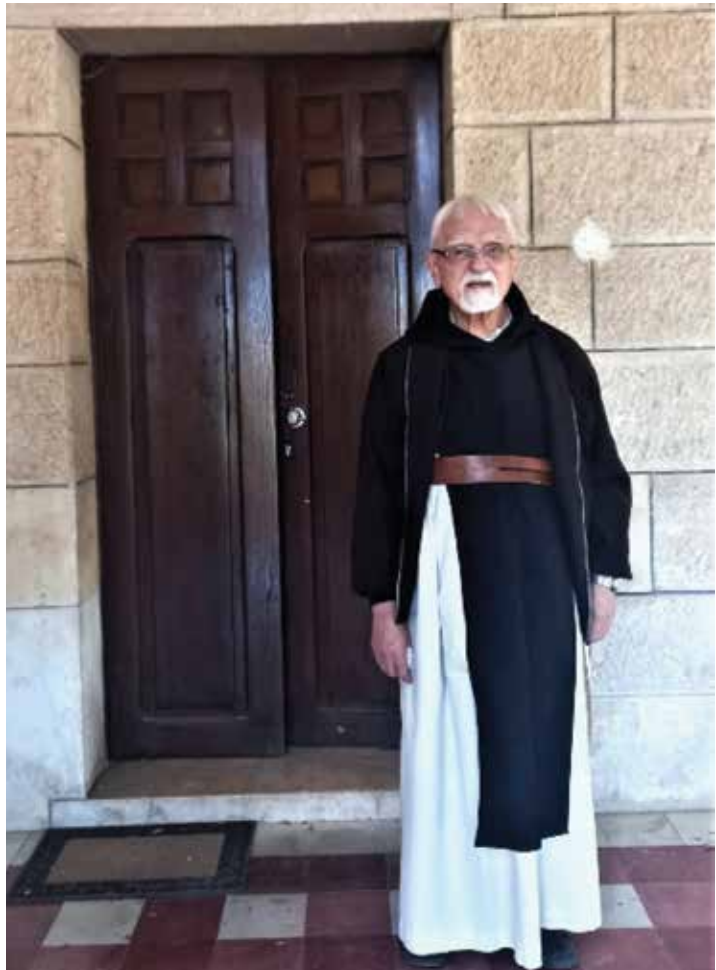


Figure 3. Father Louis Wehbe outside the visitors' room, Latrun Monastery. Photo by author.

dedicate time to studying, reading, retreating, contemplating and doing manual work in the monastery. The monastery's library contains more than 30,000 books in French, Arabic, English, Latin and other languages.

The monks are considered temporary residents of the monastery because they live in Area C, according to the Oslo accords' designation.¹² Anyone who came to the monastery before 1945 is subject to a temporary residency regime by Israel, and must renew their residency year by year, which is what Father Louis does after paying a renewal fee.

The June War ... A Return to Empty Villages

When Father Louis finished his studies in France, and days before his scheduled return, the 1967 war broke out. He was scheduled to return on 12 June 1967, but geopolitical changes after the war made it difficult for him to return because he was a Lebanese citizen. After negotiations, his return was agreed, but it was a sad return for him.

He recounts that when he returned, he went to inspect the village of 'Imwas to see what had happened to it. He remembers: "The great wound and shock remain with me to this day, and I have not recovered from it." He was deeply saddened by what happened to his neighbors in the village. When he left, he had said goodbye to them, leaving the village full of its people, but when he returned, he found it destroyed and empty. In one day, an entire village ceased to exist, and Father Louis was the only monk remaining out of those who came to the monastery before 1967.



Figure 4. Al-Hilu Well in 'Imwas. Photo by author.

Father Louis says that the monastery hospital operated until 5 June 1967. The people of 'Imwas and the neighboring villages received treatment there. The hospital

building faces the monastery's storeroom and is now used as a private space for the monks. Until 5 June, patients treated in the hospital were recorded, and hospital records are kept in the monastery archives. After that date, no patient was registered in the hospital records. They no longer exist at all. For some, graves have become their homes, while others are displaced inside Palestine and abroad.

In 1967, during the June war, the Jordanian army was defeated, and the Israeli occupation army took over the West Bank. The monastery fell into a disputed zone east of the Green Line, which Israel then took over. They immediately began issuing orders to expel the people of the villages, including the village of 'Imwas, where some of its residents took shelter in the monastery tunnel. After the village was evacuated, its homes were destroyed. But to this day, there is communication between the displaced people of 'Imwas who reside in Baytuniya, Ramallah, and Jerusalem, and in Jordan.

Father Louis showed me the memoirs of the Lebanese monk Guy Khoury, one of the monks who lived at the monastery between 1936 and 2005. He wrote about the 1967 war in the Latrun region, and the destruction of its three villages. He described how the people of 'Imwas resorted to the monastery for shelter and how the monks provided assistance to them, how the Israelis then displaced them from the monastery and the relationship of the people of 'Imwas with the monks.¹³ The Israeli army expelled everyone and declared the area a military zone. Before demolishing the houses in the village, they ordered them to be evacuated, but a few of the elderly were unable to leave, so their homes were demolished on top of them. The monks had snuck into 'Imwas after the demolition to rescue whomever they could, and they saw with their own eyes the elderly people under the rubble. Father Louis keeps the names of thirteen elderly people who died during the demolition operations.

'Imwas ... and the Invaders' Fear of Memories

Before 1967, the Latrun region included three Palestinian villages: 'Imwas, Yalu and Bayt Nuba. The history of 'Imwas, located southeast of Ramla, goes back thousands of years. It is an ancient town whose name in the Roman period was "Nicomopolis," meaning "city of victory."¹⁴ Among the antiquities in the village are a Byzantine church, mosaics, rock tomb vaults, a Roman bath,¹⁵ al-Hilu Well and water spring, the village cemetery and the shrine of the Companion [of the Prophet] Mu'az bin Jabal. In 1922, the population of 'Imwas was 824, and in 1931 it rose to 1,021, living in 224 houses. In 1945, its population rose to 1,450. By 1961, its population was 1,955.¹⁶

I conducted a telephone interview with Haydar Ibrahim Abu Ghosh, who was born in 'Imwas in 1953 and now lives in Jerusalem. He told me about the 1967 war, and how they left the village. Haydar said that when the war began, the Jordanian army commander came to the village and told the village mayor: "We will withdraw, and you have to manage your situation." He said how chaos and terror prevailed during that period, and the villagers got on a bus headed to the Latrun Monastery to seek shelter and refuge. In the morning, the Israeli army told them to leave the monastery for Ramallah. Haydar was fourteen years old at the time. He told me about

a report published in an Israeli newspaper on 14 June 2022, about the displacement and destruction of the three villages of the Latrun region in 1967.¹⁷ The newspaper published several photos showing the displacement of the people of the villages and Haydar discovered he was in one of the photos.



Figure 5. The displacement of the residents of ‘Imwas in 1967. Haydar Abu Ghosh is in the center of the photo. *Haaretz*, 14 June 2022. Photo by Benaya Ben-Nun.¹⁸

Haydar left the village for Ramallah, leaving behind his dreams and memories. He had studied at the boys’ school in ‘Imwas, which taught up to the ninth grade of middle school, after which the students completed their secondary education in the city of Ramallah. There was also a girls’ school in the village, teaching up to the sixth grade of primary school. Haydar recalls that there were several shops in the village, two bakeries, traditional taboon ovens, a café owned by Saleh al-Hajj, and al-Hilu spring.¹⁹

Today, Haydar accompanies foreign and local teams to the village of ‘Imwas and tells them its story. Since 1967, the lands of Latrun and ‘Imwas are considered West Bank lands. But in real terms, they are under the jurisdiction of the State of Israel, administered illegally. Despite the land being occupied, “Ayalon Canada Park” was established in 1973 on the lands of ‘Imwas, with the support of a Canadian Jewish fund, and in cooperation with the Jewish National Fund, which forested it to hide the war crimes committed against this beautiful village.

While I was finishing this article, I visited the village, and there I met a family from the village of Abu Ghosh, but their origins go back to Imwas before 1948. We talked about the village and past times, and we parted ways. They walked toward al-Hilu Well, and I walked toward the cemetery. Demolition is an agony created by colonialism to erase the features of a place and deprive its owner, not only of returning to it but, perhaps even more difficult, of their memories and visual recollections of the place.

Rawda Ghnayem lives in Haifa where she is a researcher and writer of Palestinian social history, documenting oral history, and leading narrative historical tours of the city. She is the author of Haifa fi al-dhakira al-shafawiyya: Ahya' wa buyut wa nas (Haifa in oral memory: neighborhoods, houses, and people), published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Qatar/Beirut, in 2022, and has written articles across various platforms.

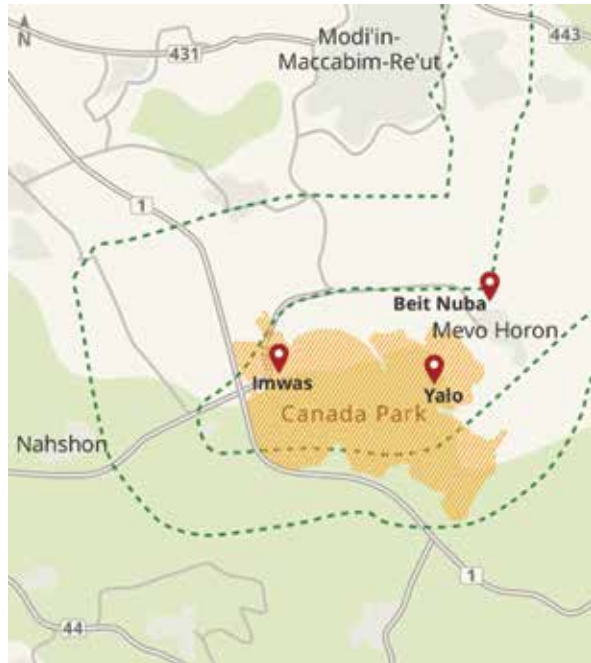


Figure 6. Map of Latrun area showing location of the three destroyed villages and Israeli settlements established since 1967. *Haaretz*, 14 June 2022.

Endnotes

- 1 Sixteenth-century writers referred to the fortress by the Latin *castellum boni latronis* (castle of the good thief), according to Edward Henry Palmer, *Survey of Western Palestine, Arabic and English Name Lists* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1881), 322. Other accounts mention the name's origin as Old French for Tower of the Knights, *Le Toron*. Its exact date of construction is also not clear; previously thought to be between 1150 and 1170 CE, recent research now puts its construction earlier, as 1137-41 CE.
- 2 See the official website for the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance at Latrun, online at ocso.org/monastery/latroun/ (accessed 7 July 2024).
- 3 Mustafa Murad al-Dabbagh, *Biladuna Filastin* [Palestine, our homeland] (Kafr Qar': Dar al-Huda, 2002), 515.
- 4 Walid Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948* (Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992), 392–93.
- 5 For more about the Battle of Latrun, see: Arie Itzhaki, *Latrun: ha-ma'arakah 'al ha-derekh li-Yerushalayim* [Latrun: the battle for the road to Jerusalem] (Jerusalem: Kanah, 1982); Khalidi, ed., *All That Remains*, 392–93.
- 6 During the Great Arab Revolt (1936–39), British Mandate police sent engineer and anti-insurgency expert Charles Tegart to design and supervise the building of fortified British police stations later known as “Tegart fortresses.” Sixty-two such buildings were

established throughout Palestine, one of which was in Latrun. Some are still in use today by Israel as police stations, for example, in 'Akka.

- 7 In the text of the Armistice Agreement between Jordan and Israel in 1949, four restricted zones were created; three in Jerusalem and the fourth was an agricultural plot of land in Latrun.
- 8 For an oral history of the events in 1967, see A Voice from Palestine, "The Tale of 3 Palestinian Villages," online at archive.org/details/youtube-5iViW5zh2hs (accessed 5 July 2024).
- 9 Benjamin Z. Keydar, *Mabat ve-'od mabat 'al Eretz-Yisra'el: tatslume-avir mi-yeme milhemet ha-'olam ha-rishonah mul tatslumim bene zemanenu* [A look and another look at the land of Israel: aerial photographs from World War I versus contemporary photographs] (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1991), 106.
- 10 The Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or Trappists, have ninety-two monasteries throughout the world.
- 11 Interview by author, Latrun Monastery, 11 March 2023.
- 12 From 1949 to 1967, the monastery was within a disputed zone between Israel and Jordan. After 1967, Israel took over the area where the monastery is located, along with the rest of the West Bank. In 1993, the Oslo accords categorized the area as within Area C, meaning that Israel has administrative, civil, and military control until a final peace agreement (which never came about). The monks in the monastery are considered as "temporary residents" because they now live in Area C. Anyone who came to the monastery before 1945 can obtain a temporary residence permit to be renewed annually. Father Louis every year renews his residency for a payment fee. They were also eligible for Israeli health insurance services until the early 1990s when it was stopped for the new monks. They are now insured through an insurance company in France, which is very expensive for them.
- 13 Father Guy Khoury's private memoirs, *The Private Memoirs of a Lebanese Monk of the Zionist Destruction of the Palestinian Villages of Latrun*, translated into Arabic from French in 2008, by Father James Connolly.
- 14 Al-Dabbagh, *Biladuna Filastin*, 510.
- 15 Three domes were added to the building (the Roman Bath), common in the Ottoman period to repurpose a place into an Islamic landmark. The people of the village believe and circulate the story that the bath is a shrine of the Prophet's Companion Abu 'Ubayda al-Jarrah, who fought in the region with his soldiers. The villagers believe that he died there along with a large number of his soldiers of the plague. However, while Abu 'Ubayda was known to have stayed in the Palestine province during the Islamic period, his actual tomb is in Jordan.
- 16 Al-Dabbagh, *Our Country Palestine*, 512.
- 17 Ofer Aderet, "55 Years Later: A Censored Kibbutz Decision about Arab Land Is Revealed," *Haaretz*, 14 June 2022; online at www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-06-14/ty-article-magazine/premium/55-years-later-a-censored-kibbutz-decision-about-arab-lands-is-revealed/00000181-6218-d76c-a7b9-679ce2990000 (accessed 7 July 2024).
- 18 Aderet, "55 Years Later."
- 19 Telephone interview by author, 8 March 2023.