

Ajloun Through the Journey of Ages: A narrative of Place and Man



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Naming and Location:

Researchers hold varied opinions regarding the origin of naming the city of Ajloun, with multiple interpretations found in historical sources. One of which suggests that the name is derived from the Aramaic word *Ajāl*, meaning “a rounded sloping place.”. Furthermore, the Arabic root *Ajal* similarly conveys the same meaning of “a rounded sloping place.”

Ajloun (pronounced *Ajlūn*) is mentioned in the Bible, referring to the name of one of the villages in the lands of Canaan. The Bible also references Ajloun in “Debir, the king of Eglon.” Another mention of Ajloun (pronounced *Ejlūn*) is in reference to one of the kings of the Moab kingdom who occupied and controlled lands to the west of the Jordan River in the 9th century BCE.

As for the Byzantine period (324-636 CE), the name Ajloun was mentioned in reference to the name of one of the priests who resided in the monastery located on the summit of Mount ‘Auf. The site where Ajloun Castle was later built is thought to be the same location of the monastery, as noted by the historian Ibn Shaddad (d. 684 AH / 1285 AD). Supporting Ibn Shaddan’s account, the restoration work carried

out in one of the castle's halls in 1999 uncovered a mosaic floor featuring a Greek inscription composed of two words; diakon Aryano (or deacon Aryano), meaning "the deacon who served the church," whose name was Aryano. Within the nave and the altar of the newly discovered church, an image depicting a bird was found, of which only its legs remain visible and intact. The church's floor is adorned with decorations featuring five circular designs resembling loaves of bread, surrounded by two fish, which is a symbolic imagery of Jesus Christ's miracles in Cana*, as narrated in the Gospels. This widely accepted circulating narrative supports the claim that the name of Ajloun city might indeed be attributed to the priest Ajloun himself.

Historically, in ancient times, Ajloun was known as Gilead, with the earliest recorded mention of this name dating back to the 9th century BCE. The northern hills of Ajloun extended to the borders of the Aramean Kingdom of Damascus near the Yarmouk River. Several other names for the region were recorded before the advent of Islam, during the Greek and Roman periods, including:

1. Batanaea or Bethania
2. Sawad al-Urdunn (the arable land of the Jordan River)
3. Perea or Al-Barriyya

*** Qana, or Qana of Galilee, is a village in southern Lebanon which is located 95 kilometers south of Beirut in the Tyre District of the South Governorate.**

Islamic sources from the 3rd century AH / 9th century AD referenced the region of Batanaea in early books of the Islamic conquests and expansion as a district of Damascus, bordering Houran (pronounced Hawrān) and the land of Balqa. In the Roman era, the area known as Perea or Al-Bariyya was a district east of the Jordan River, encompassing Jerash, Ajloun, and As-Salt.

Arabic sources later referred to this region as the "Wilderness of Jordan," which contained monasteries inhabited by early Christians who had fled Roman imperial persecution. Early Islamic accounts of the conquest of the area also mentioned "Sawad al-Urdunn" describing it as the territory between Lake Tiberias (Sea of Galilee) in the west, the Yarmouk River in the north, and the Zarqa River in the south, or alternatively, the area located south of the Golan subdistrict. The historian Al-Baladhuri (d. 279 AH / 892 AD) extended the boundaries of Sawad al-Urdunn during the Umayyad era to include the Golan. It is worth noting that Arabs often used the term "sawad" to describe regions predominantly covered with greenery due to the density of the trees.

Location and Geography of Ajloun Governorate:

The location of Ajloun Governorate holds particular significance due to its strategic connections with neighboring areas. To the north, it borders Irbid Governorate; to the south, it borders the Balqa Governorate; to the east, it shares a boundary with Jerash; and to the west, it overlooks the central Jordan Valley. Ajloun is also situated 76 kilometers north of the capital Amman.

Administratively, Ajloun consists of the following districts: Ajloun District (Liwaa), Kufranjah district, Sakhras subdistrict (qadaa), and Arjan subdistrict. The governorate covers an area of 420 square kilometers, with its land distributed as follows:

1. 60% of the land is arable/cultivable.
2. 34% consists of forests and pastures.
3. 6% is urbanized residential land.

The governorate's topography is predominantly dominated by mountain highlands, with elevations ranging between 1023 meters and 1247 meters above sea level. Among its most famous mountains are Mount Um al-Daraj, which is 1247 meters high, Ras Munif at 1198 meters, and Ajloun Castle Mountain (historically known as Mount 'Auf), which stands at 1023 meters. Additionally, Jabal al-Qa'eda rises to 1127 meters above sea level.

This range of mountains descends from the western highlands toward the Jordan Valley, reaching some areas as low as 80 meters below sea level, particularly in the region known as (Maghr al-Hamam) between Rajeb Valley and Kufranjah Valley. The mountains are covered with dense forests of oak, pine, Atlantic mastic, Palestinian mastic trees, and carobs. They are also rich in fruit-bearing trees, predominantly wild olive and pistachio. In the highlands, the annual average rainfall is about 600 mm during the rainy season, while it is approximately 400 mm in the Shafa-Ghouria areas.

Three main valleys run through these mountains from east to west, sharply descending into the Jordan River. The first, al-Rayan Valley (also known as Wadi al-Yabis/ Wadi Jabesh), is 27 kilometers long and lies north of Ajloun, serving as a natural boundary between Ajloun and Irbid Governorates. The second is Kufranjah Valley (also known as al-Tawahin Valley), which extends through the central slopes of Ajloun and spans 30 kilometers. The third is Rajeb Valley, one of the longest Valleys in Ajloun, which runs through the southern slopes of Ajloun and marks the natural boundary separating Ajloun and Balqa' Governorates.

The climate of Ajloun reflects the eastern Mediterranean basin's, characterized by mild, pleasant summers yet harshly cold and rainy winters which is ideal for agriculture. This is especially evident in the diversity of its soil, including red, pink, and brown kinds. The presence of red soil in particular indicates the availability of iron. This is proven in studies from the last century that revealed that the Warda Cave, located on the southern slopes of Ajloun, approximately 15 kilometers south of the city, was historically a source of iron production throughout the Ages.

Water Resources:

Ajloun relies heavily on springs as its primary water sources, with approximately sixty active springs distributed across different areas. Some of the more notable springs with substantial water output and capacity include: al-Tannur spring in Arjan, al-Zeqiq spring in Halawah, Ras'oon spring, al-Qantara spring in Ajloun, and the recently discovered Kufranjah spring, which serves as a primary drinking water source for the residents of Kufranjah. Other important springs include 'Ain al-Baraka, al-Zughdiyeh, al-Bustan, al-Aqda, Abu al-Joud, al-Fawwar, Ain al-Tayyis in 'Ain Jana, Ain Um al-Julud, Ain Sarabis, Ain al-Hanesh, al-Salus in Anjara, and the many springs in Wadi Rajeb, such as Ain al-Ruwaija, Heddala, Bayda, Hisha, Hanna, and al-Kursi. These springs constitute the primary source for drinking and some use them for crops irrigation in the governorate. The current population of Ajloun is around 208,000 people, distributed across the cities, towns, villages, farms, and residential communities.

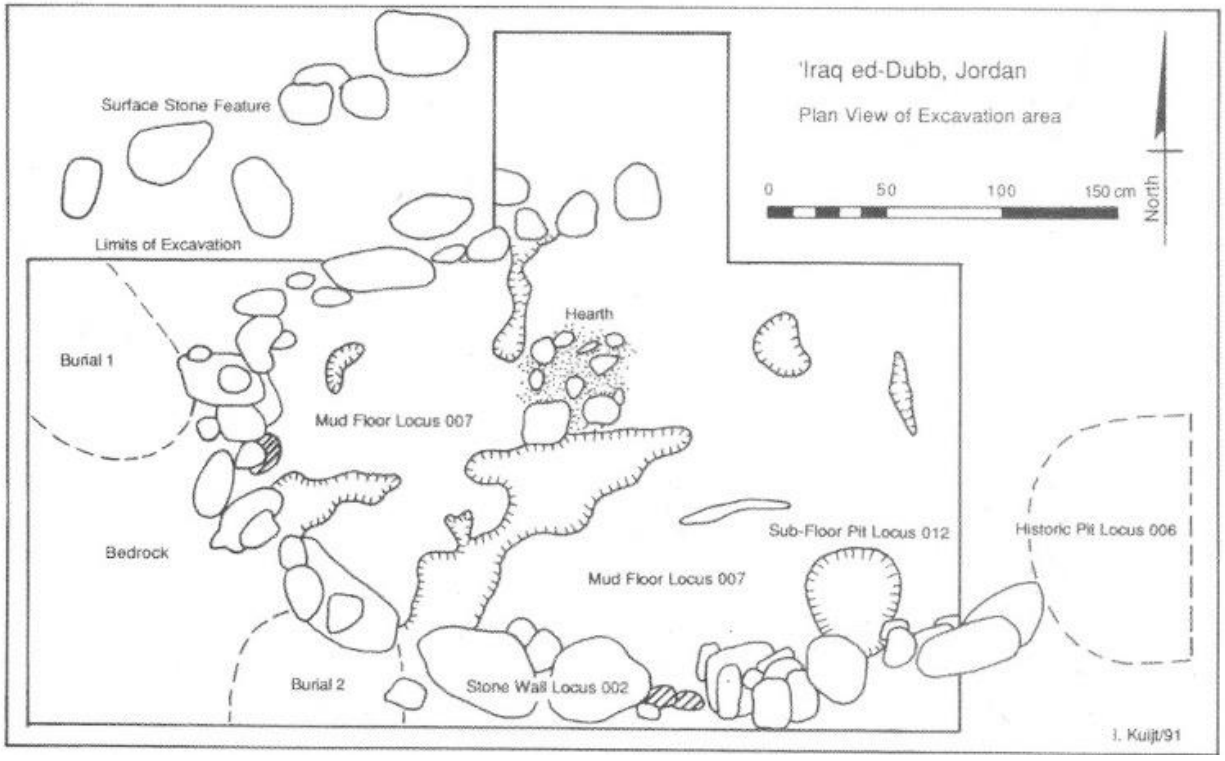
The Historical Narrative of Ajloun

The main sources for Ajloun's narrative and history are provided by Archaeological field studies, original historical texts, and supported by accounts of travelers who have visited the region through the ages. Archaeological research have concluded that this area has been inhabited for nearly 40.000 years. The oldest traces of human presence on Jordanian soil, identified through flint tools found in geological formations, were first found in the Zarqa River Basin (in areas like Duwaqarah and As-Sukhnah). In Ajloun specifically, the earliest traces were located on the northern edge of a small valley nestled between Kufranjah valley to the north and Rajeb valley to the south, in an area known as "Maghr al-Hamam." This site comprises five caves, the largest of which extends 12 meters deep, with a maximum height of 10 meters and an entrance width of 7 meters. These caves served as habitable zones for human groups who settled there nearly 40.000 years ago.

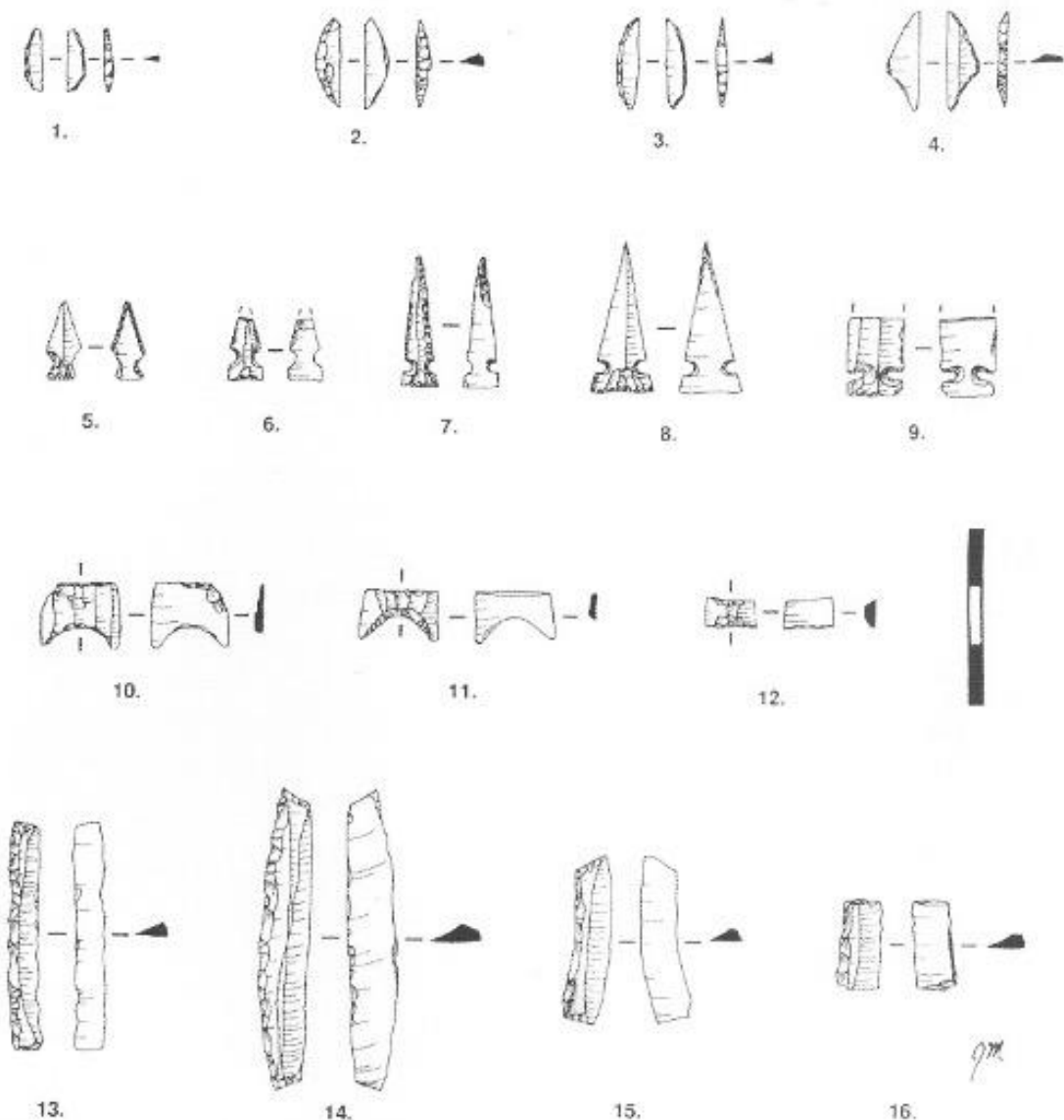
An archaeological expedition from **Emory University** in the United States conducted a detailed investigation of these caves, revealing that these caves indeed housed migratory groups who relied on hunting and gathering between 40,000 and 20,000 years ago. Among the archaeological remains, they discovered flint/stone tools and the bones of wild animals, including wild gazelles that once inhabited and roamed the region, along with remains of some livestock, like birds, and fish.

As humanity transitioned from a nomadic life of hunting and gathering to a more settled lifestyle centered on food production, the region saw its earliest indications of agriculture and livestock domestication by these human groups over 10,000 years ago. The first signs of this stage were evident in Ajloun; as it appears by discoveries that a human group settled inside a large cave called Iraq Ed-Dubb (Or the cave of the bear) overlooking Al-Rayyan valley. Furthermore, accessing this cave is challenging and requires the installation of chisels into the rock to reach its entrance.

Excavators discovered huts within the caves, with foundations of unhewn/unknapped stones arranged in semicircular shapes. The clay floors of these huts were coated with a layer of stucco plaster, and oval shaped holes were found in them to install supports to raise the hut roofs. Additionally, two graves were discovered along with a collection of flint tools characterized by their small size attributed to the Natufian culture, dating back approximately 12,000 to 15,500 years ago. Flint arrowheads from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period (circa 8,500 – 7,500 BCE) were also found. It was observed that burials of individuals within these caves were interred in a distinctive crouching position. The excavators analyzed samples taken from the site using radiocarbon dating.



Hut remains inside Iraq ed-Dubb (the cave of the bear)



A collection of flint tools found within the cave

In addition to the site of Iraq al-Dubb, further excavations at the site of "Tell al-Rahib," situated west of the town of Arjan, revealed a variety of flint tools, especially arrowheads. In addition, fragments of transparent volcanic tools crafted from **obsidian*** material (currently found in Turkey) were discovered. The discovery of such sites in the governorate of Ajloun suggests the region's early shift towards stability and agriculture as early as the ninth millennium BCE, paralleling the developments seen across the Levant.

(* **Obsidian: a volcanic stone derived from black lava**

The Early Farmers and Olive Cultivation (5th Millennium to Mid-4th Century BCE)

Archaeological field surveys and excavations in Ajloun have yet to reveal early villages and towns like 'Ain Ghazal or Tell Abu es-Sawwan. However, small sites and fields of stone menhir (also known as dolmens) have been identified in the areas around Kufranjah valley and al-Rayan valley. Notable examples include "W'urat az-Zuqaq," located west of the az Zughdīyah spring and south of Iraq al-Ifqami in Kufranjah, also between the towns of Kufrabeel and Halawah. An Australian expedition found pottery fragments in al-Rayan valley collected from the sites of "Kharaj" and "Jalmat al-Shari'ah" indicating that olive cultivation and oil extraction began here by the end of the 5th millennium BCE, marking the oldest evidence of olive cultivation found to date.

The First Cities (3500 – 1200 BCE)

In Ajloun, no large cities from the 3rd millennium BCE have been discovered, contrasting with other regions of Jordan. Instead, the remains of villages and burials of farmers have been identified. At Khirbet Umm Zaytunah in Kufranjah, in the al-Houtah area, a group of shaft tombs dating to the Early Bronze Age IV (circa 2400–2000 BCE) and the Middle Bronze Age (circa 2000–1550 BCE) were found. Those tombs included funerary goods including bronze daggers, swords, spears, as well as pottery vessels like jugs and oil lamps. Despite archaeological field surveys in the valleys of Rajeb, Kufranjah, and al-Rayan, full-scale excavations have not been conducted. Here we only note what has been found around the site of Al-Haydamous east of Ishtafina village including buildings, storage jars, and pottery dated via tephrochronology radiocarbon analysis to approximately 2,750 years ago. Perhaps the most prominent site of this period is "Mugharet Wardeh" (Or Rose Cave) where iron ore was extracted.

Ajloun During the Hellenistic Rule (332 – 63 BCE)

Alexander the Great conquered the Levant in 333/332 BCE, after defeating the Persians armies. Consequently, several Hellenistic cities were established throughout Jordan. However, archaeological surveys have yet to uncover any of those significant Hellenistic sites within Ajloun, except for some finds in al-Rayan valley and certain sites and the Kufranjah valley.

The Roman Era (63 BCE – 342 CE)

Following the Roman general Pompey's conquest of Greater Syria in 63 BCE, Ajloun became part of the Roman province. The Decapolis ten-city Greco-

Roman federation was established, yet it did not include areas in Ajloun Governorate, despite its proximity to the city of Gerasa (now known as Jerash). Nevertheless, Ajloun areas played a vital role as a connective region between Roman regions in Syria. It is known that the Romans excelled in constructing paved roads and water infrastructure; one notable Roman road linked Pella (Ṭabaqat Fahl in Arabic) through the areas of Ba'oon, Ishtafina, 'Ain Janna (Janna spring), Mount Umm al-Daraj, and Souf, leading to Gerasa. Along this route, milestones were discovered in Ishtafina, one of which engraved with the Latin inscription "162 CE" indicating its date. Another Roman road connected Tabaqat Fahl and Jerash, passing through Kufranjah and Anjarah. In 'Anjarah, two mile stones were found; the first confirms its dating to the reign of Emperor Trajan (98–117 CE), while the second dates to the time of Emperor Marcus Augustus (161–180 CE). Both are now preserved in the Ajloun Museum.

Ajloun in the Byzantine Era (324 – 636 CE):

Christianity appears to have spread widely across Ajloun during the Byzantine era, catalyzed by the endorsement of Christianity by Emperor Constantine the Great from Constantinople. This is evidenced by the discovery of numerous churches on the highlands and along valley slopes, indicating that the local population had embraced the Christian faith. Furthermore, Ajloun's proximity to Palestine further contributed to this spread. Jesus Christ crossed the Jordan River and traversed the wilderness, reaching Beit Eidis. There are several Byzantine-era churches in Ajloun, including: The Upper Mar Elias Church constructed in 622 CE and a smaller church located below the hill. Both of these churches were constructed in honor of St. Elijah (Or Elias in Arabic), who was born in the nearby town of Listib (or El-Istib), situated north of the archaeological site and one kilometer from his birthplace. Tishbe, the birthplace of St. Elijah (Mar Elias) is also mentioned in the Bible. It is important to mention that the Vatican calendar recognizes the church of **Mar Elias** and **Lady of the Mount** monastery in Anjara as Christian pilgrimage sites, making these locations important international pilgrimage destinations. Additionally, it is noted that **al-Maqataa Church** whose mosaic floor features Greek inscriptions, dates back to 482 CE and includes the names of Arab figures like "The priest Ayoub." In addition, Al-Tantur church was discovered in Zqaiyaq valley in the area of Halawah, where inscriptions reference both Priest Ayoub and the ancient Greek name of Halawah village.



Mar Elias Church

Rajeb Churches:

Some mosaic tiles were discovered during the training of the Jordanian Armed Forces in the Rajeb area, led by His Majesty King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein, who was then a prince and a commander of the Special Forces. Subsequently, His Majesty summoned the Minister of Tourism at the time, Aqel Biltaji, and directed the Department of Antiquities to carry out archaeological surveys. These surveys led to the discovery of two churches in Deir Mismar in Rajeb Valley. The first church, located on the southern bank of the valley, has a floor decorated with mosaic and inscribed in Syriac script, its Aramaic language dates back to the 6th century AD. The second church is located on the northern bank of the valley, with its floor adorned with mosaic featuring a dedication inscription written in Greek.



Inscription of the Rajeb church written in Syriac script

The governorate of Ajloun witnessed successive civilizations, evidenced in inscriptions that document the remains still bearing witness to these civilizations. Inscriptions have been found in the following languages:

1. Latin: Found on mile stones along ancient Roman roads, these are guide plaques that indicate distances between cities and villages.

2. Greek: Found on mosaic floors in church inscriptions, the oldest of which is in the **al-Maqataa Church**, dating back to 482 AD, and in the northern Rajeb Church, dating to the 6th century AD. It also appears in the Tantour Church in the Zqaiyaq area in the village of Halawah, dating to the years 625 AD and 642 AD.

3. Syriac: Found in the southern Rajeb Church.

4. Arabic: Dating back to the Ayyubid and Mamluk eras, these inscriptions are written in Naskh script on stone plaques encompassing record inscriptions on historic buildings, including the fronts of the Ajloun Mosque, the castle, and on water facilities such as ponds and canals, and on **maqāms*** such as the Ba'aj **maqām** and stations like the Station of Ali.

(*) maqām: It is a Muslim shrine (funeral construction) at a site linked to a religious figure. It is commonly found in the Levant.

The Ajloun Region in the Early Islamic Era:

Since the earliest days of the Islamic conquests, the Ajloun region became part of the military district system known as Ajnad. This region witnessed pivotal military events that ultimately determined the fate of the Byzantine Empire. The battles began under the leadership of Shurahbil ibn Hasana and resulted in the Muslims peacefully conquering many cities of Jordan without fighting. The cities include: Bisan, Susiyah, Aphek, Jerash, the mountains of Ajloun, Beit-Ras, Quds, and Golan. A significant battle occurred on the soil of Ajloun was the Battle of Fahl in 13 AH / 635 CE, under the joint leadership of Amer ibn al-Jarrah (Abu Obeidah), Khalid ibn al-Walid, and Shurahbil ibn Hasana. The battle resulted in the defeat of the Roman army. However, the most decisive military defeat in the region was for the Roman army at the Battle of Yarmouk in 15 AH / 636 CE. This battle marked the final expulsion of Roman armies from the Levant and the beginning of the region's Arabicization. Given that several significant military operations during the muslim conquest of the Levant took place in Ajloun, the land witnessed the martyrdom of numerous Companions of the Prophet. Among them were Abu Obeidah ibn al-Jarrah, 'Amer ibn Abi Waqqas (after whom the village of Waqqas is named), Ikrimah ibn Abi Jahl, Mu'adh ibn Jabal, and Yazid ibn Abi Sufyan.

Despite the participation of the people of Ajloun in the Islamic conquests, like others in the Levant, historical records of the region during the early Islamic period are sparse. This is likely because historians focused on larger administrative centers such as Damascus, disregarding Ajloun as it did not have an administrative role. They concentrated their accounts on the conquests and the construction of major cities outside of the Levant.

Under the Caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattab, the Levant was administratively divided into military districts (ajnads): Jund Dimashq (centered in Damascus, encompassing Ma'ab, Jibal, and the al-Sharah), Jund Filastin (centered in Lydda and Ramla), Jund al-Urdunn (centered in Tiberias, which included the subdistricts (kourah) of Zughar and Lajjun), and Jund Hims. The subdistricts within Jund al-Urdunn, including Ajloun, were adjusted according to administrative needs and status. Jund al-Urdunn, encompassing Ajloun, first fell under the authority of 'Amr ibn al-As and later Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan. The historian Ibn Asakir (571 AH / 1175 CE) records that Mu'awiyah resided in Beit-Ras, where his son Yazid was born in 27 AH / 648 CE during the Rashidun Caliphate.

As for the Umayyad period (40 AH – 132 AH / 660–749 CE), eastern Jordan, including Ajloun, gained special significance. Local tribes supported Mu'awiyah ibn

Abi Sufyan and backed the Marwanid branch. The Umayyad caliphs established their palaces in the Jordanian desert, and the cities of Amman and Jerash became centers for minting Umayyad coins. Due to Yazid ibn Abd al-Malik's interest in poetry and literature, poets such as Jarir, al-Farazdaq, al-Akhtal, and Kuthayyir 'Azzah frequented the areas of Zizia, al-Muwaqqar, and al-Qastal. Yazid himself spent part of his caliphate in Beit-Ras and Irbid, where he eventually passed away. Some accounts suggest that the Umayyad prince Muhammad ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan chose the village of Rasoun in Ajloun as his residence. The Umayyads' interest in cultivating land and establishing estates likely motivated their presence in Ajloun, as it is a fertile area. The geographical proximity of Ajloun to the Umayyad capital Damascus reinforces their interest.

Little historical documentation exists for Ajloun in the early Islamic and Abbasid periods, when the seat of the caliphal center shifted eastward and Baghdad became the capital and attention turned away from the Levant. Still, Ajloun maintained its significance. This is due to its strategic role in connecting southern Levant to Damascus and its location along the Hajj (pilgrimage) route from the Levant to the Hejaz. Ajloun also served as a key transit point for international trade routes linking Damascus, Palestine, and Egypt.

Throughout the Abbasid period and during the stage of city-states, Ajloun was subjected to the political, administrative, and economic conditions that prevailed in all of the Levant.. Although detailed records of Ajloun during the the city-states control over the Levant remain rare, the region gained renewed importance with the decline of the Fatimid state in Egypt and the rise of the Ayyubids, especially with the increasing intensity of the conflict with the invading forces of the Levant like the Mongols and Crusaders.

Ajloun in the Era of Struggle against Invaders

During the period of the Atabegs, the Seljuks of Damascus took control of Ajloun. In Fatimid sources, the region was referred to as "Jabal Bani Auf." (Mount Bani Auf). Several tribes, including those from Quda'a and Banu Wahran, had settled in the mountain of Ajloun during the Fatimid Caliphate (297–567 AH / 909–1171 AD).

The Bani Auf tribe eventually dominated the mountain, and the region came to bear their name due to their strength and control over trade routes. The eastern mountains overlook the fertile and resource-rich Jordan Valley, abundant in water

resources, extending to the Yarmouk River in the north and the Zarqa River in the south. This fertile region, known as the "Sawad al-Urdunn" was famous for its production of olives, grains, grapes, and wine. The historian Al-Sam'ani (d. 562 AH / 1166 AD) described the land of Sawad as a critical source of food and grain for the people of Damascus. Furthermore, this region was intersected by major international trade routes and the pilgrimage road to the Hijaz, making it a constant target for invaders/conquerors, including the Mongols and the Crusaders. Though the Mongols did not destroy Ajloun, many inhabitants of Levant cities, including Damascus, fled to Ajloun in fear of the Mongol advance, as indicated by sources from this period.

The Struggle Between the Seljuks of Damascus and the Crusaders Over Ajloun:

This conflict was directly linked to the Crusaders's invasion of the area, driven by their desire for the rich resources of the Sawad al-Urdunn and control over the caravan routes between the Levant, Hauran, to Palestine. Historical sources record that the Crusaders attacked the Hauran plain in 500 AH / 1107 AD, reaching Mount Auf. In response, the Emir of Damascus, Toghtekin, advanced to the Sawad region up to the mountains of Salt. Due to the growing pressure of the Crusaders, a truce was reached between King Baldwin I of Jerusalem and Toghtekin, the Emir of Damascus to divide and share the revenues of Mount Bani Auf and the Sawad. This system divided the region's revenues into three parts: one-third for the Crusaders, one-third for Toghtekin, and the remaining third for the local inhabitants. It seems that the Crusaders expanded their control over the caravan routes from Damascus to Palestine, passing through Hauran and the Sawad, eventually increasing their share of resources from Mount Auf and the Sawad region to half. The administration of this area became a shared effort between the Muslims and the Crusaders within the shared regions. Control over the region fluctuated between the Crusaders and the Seljuks of Damascus from 508 AH / 1114 AD until the arrival of Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi in 554 AH / 1159 AD, with Emir Nur al-Din Zangi also participating in the battles against the Crusaders in Mount Auf.

Ajloun in the Ayyubid Period:

Ajloun reached its golden age under the Ayyubid (567–648 AH / 1171–1250 AD) and Mamluk (1250–1517 AD) periods in Islamic history. Its strategic importance stemmed from its proximity to the holy lands. Sultan Salah ad-Din al-Ayyubi instructed one of his commanders, Izz al-Din Usama, to build Ajloun Castle in 580 AH / 1184 AD for the purpose of defending the region from Crusader attacks.

It was also built to establish a link between Damascus and Cairo as a counter to the Crusader's Belvoir Castle near Bisan.

Despite the short duration of the Ayyubid dynasty, it was a transformative period for the region. It witnessed a shift in power dynamics, particularly after the decisive Battle of Hattin in 583 AH / 1187 AD. Due to Mount Bani Auf's strategic position linking Damascus and Cairo, the Ayyubids expanded and completed a series of Castles which were considered the first line of defense for the state against the Crusaders. Constructing the Ajloun Castle in 580 AH / 1184 AD under the command of Emir Izz al-Din Usama al-Jabali to attack the Crusaders' fortified castles. Although Arab tribes in Ajloun initially resisted the construction of the castle out of fear of losing their authority and power, they eventually submitted to Ayyubid's control under significant pressure from Emir Izz al-Din. Thus, the Ajloun Castle came to oversee crucial routes, including those in the Jordan Valley from Kufranjah to Ajloun and Jerash, as well as the roads of Rajeb, Khirbat al-Wahadneh, and Faara (currently al-Hashimiyya) and Ishtafina to Ajloun. The castle also served to protect the routes leading to al-Balqa and prevented the Crusaders' expansion and control over the region's routes.

In Ajloun Castle's initial phase of construction, the design of the castle took a square layout. It is a courtyard surrounded by massive stone walls forming the castle's outer walls with square towers protruding from each corner. This resembles the design of Roman forts built in Jordan during the Roman period such as al-Azraq Castle and Bashir Castle. In the rule of Sultan al-Adil in 611 AH / 1214 AD, two additional square towers and one shaped in a reversed "L" were added. Renovations were also carried out during the rule of Sultan Salah al-Din Yusuf in 1250 AD, with further additions under the Mamluk Sultan al-Zahir Baybars in 662 AH / 1263 AD.

Parts of the castle, especially its upper sections, suffered damage during the earthquakes of 1837 and 1927. The Jordanian government has undertaken continuous restoration and preservation efforts since its establishment and until the present day.

The construction of the castle weakened the influence of local powers, strengthening the Ayyubid state and securing military communication routes and trade caravans between the two ends of the empire in Damascus and Cairo. During this period, Ajloun Castle served as a secure storage site for storing grain for the army and safeguarding military weapons. Salah ad-Din granted Izz al-Din Usama administrative control over the Ajloun area, giving him a private fiefdom, which he

maintained without the area formally becoming an Ayyubid district. The death of Salah ad-Din, liberator of lands from the Crusaders, however, weakened the Ayyubid state due to the ensuing struggle for power among his heirs. This began with a power dispute between his two sons: al-Afdal Nur al-Din, ruler of Damascus, and al-Aziz, ruler of Egypt. Ajloun consequently separated from the Sawad region, which became a fief under Emir Sarim al-Din Qaymaz.

Although al-Mu'azzam Isa (615–624 AH / 1218–1227 AD) tried to reinforce his authority over Ajloun by appointing Emir Izz al-Din Aybak al-Mu'azzami and instructing him to add a new tower to the castle, the region still did not experience administrative stability throughout the Ayyubid period. This was mainly due to family disputes and Crusader threats. Nevertheless, Ajloun witnessed significant developments towards the end of the Ayyubid era with the construction of the Grand Mosque of Ajloun in 645 AH / 1247 AD during the ruling of al-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub. This mosque is considered a cultural landmark that endures to this day.

Sultan al-Nasir Salah ad-Din Yusuf also renovated the castle's northeastern tower, commemorating the restoration with an inscription on a stone plaque on the southern wall of the tower. The Mongol threat spread across the region and they attacked Damascus in 658 AH / 1260 AD. As a result, Sultan al-Nasir Yusuf fled Damascus, seeking refuge in Ajloun Castle with his family and entourage, and later escaping to Karak Castle. The Mongols followed him, capturing him and bringing him back to Ajloun Castle after destroying the castles of Amman, as-Salt, and Zizia. The Mongols forced Sultan al-Nasir to instruct the garrison at Ajloun Castle to open the gates. Upon entering, the Mongols ruined the castle, destroying its towers, as recorded by the historian Ibn Shaddad. Then, Sultan al-Nasir was imprisoned, and the area fell under Mongol control. However, the Mamluks' victory at the Battle of "Ain Jalut" in 658 AH / 1260 AD ended the period of destruction inflicted upon the Levant, bringing the region under Mamluk rule. Emir Qutuz entered Ajloun and restored the castle. He established a new administration and he initiated organized rebuilding efforts, as well as paying close attention to both domestic and international trade.

To the southwest of Anjara, roughly 5 kilometers away, lies the site of Khirbat al-Badiyya, named after "al-Badd" which is a cylindrical stone structure. In 1997, Yarmouk University's Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology conducted excavations there in collaboration with the Department of Antiquities. They uncovered several Byzantine churches, the largest of which was constructed in the basilica style. Its mosaic floors are adorned with geometric, animal, and plant designs, along with a Greek inscription indicating the construction date to 632 AD.

Additionally, the excavations revealed an early Umayyad mosque with a small, square layout, featuring a three-step minbar (pulpit) and a semi-circular arched mihrab (niche/squinch). This is considered one of the oldest mosques in Ajloun. Other finds included structures, water tanks, and rock-cut tombs from various historical periods.

Ajloun During the Mamluk Period (684–923 AH / 1250–1517 AD)

From the beginning of their rule, the Mamluks prioritized administrative organization to restore areas destroyed by the Mongol invasion and to prepare the region for the revitalization of trade. In addition they aimed to protect both local and international trade caravans, securing the Levantine and Egyptian Hajj routes. Recognizing Ajloun's strategic and significant position as a link between Egypt, Syria, and the Hijaz, the Mamluks designated Ajloun as a district connected to Damascus. Historians and geographers of the period documented its borders, which represent the borders of Mount Auf. Its boundaries were defined by the Zarqa River to the south, the Jordan Valley to the west, and the lands of al-Hayyaniya to the east (part of Ajloun's domain). To the north, the district extended to the region of al-Sawad and to al-Bariyya to the east. One geographer even described the borders of Ajloun's territory as lying east of Mount Amil, which was a **two days' travel*** from al-Salt, with the Yarmouk River serving as the dividing boundary between Ajloun and Damascus, while the Zarqa River separated Ajloun from Salt.

The Mamluks divided the governorship into smaller administrative units, or **a'mal** including Ajloun itself, which served as the capital and center and hosted the Castle. The traveler Ibn Battuta (d. 779 AH / 1377 AD) visited Ajloun and described it as an organized city with abundant markets and an impressive castle, bisected by a river with fresh water. This suggests the existence of bridges and aqueducts supporting the city's expansion, which included **qaysariyyas* (Caesarea; marketplace)**, various other marketplaces, and a bazaar mentioned in historical sources of the period. Due to its commercial importance, Ajloun was connected by a network of roads/paths, including the Sultan's path, the Rabadh path, and the King's path.

The main administrative divisions of the Ajloun governorship included al-Suwayt, Hubrass, Maru, al-Ba'uthah, and al-Hayyaniya, along with the provinces of Jerash and Beit-Ras. This administrative division improved security and gave the Mamluk state/sultanate the chance to organize internal domestic trade and oversee external trade effectively. Ajloun consequently flourished, and several ancient cities, such as Irbid, experienced commercial growth with its main **bazaar (known as the**

“Great Market”)* and its postal station along the route between Damascus and Cairo. This bustling trade also stimulated agricultural development, which is essential to the region’s stability. During the Mamluk period, numerous villages focused on agriculture, including Aydoun, al-Barha, Tibnah, Jamha, Habka, Hakamah, Ramtha, Zahar, Sum, Arjan, Taybah, Kafr Al-Maa’, Malka, and Ham.

According to historian **Abu al-‘Abbas al-Qalqashandi****, these agriculturally productive areas constituted (the livelihoods of the army and the passage to the Sultanate gates), meaning that the state relied on agricultural production in the region to provide food for the military. Thus, Mamluk sultans placed special importance on the Ajloun, visiting the area themselves, as Sultan al-Zahir Baybars did. Baybars, who resided at Ajloun’s castle before becoming sultan, ordered the transfer of catapults and siege engines to both Ajloun and Karak Castles. He ensured the upkeep of postal stations to secure the trade routes and Hajj caravans between Damascus and Cairo through Irbid and Zahar. This attention to postal routes facilitated secure trade lines, Hajj caravans, and overall security. The Mamluks took additional measures to secure the Hajj caravan route by assigning “Aal Marra” family of the Rabi’a to protect caravans traveling between Hauran and al-Balqa. Later, this responsibility is passed to the al-Ghazzawyyah family from the village of Sakhray, who continued doing so until the Ottoman period. The Syrian Hajj route passed from Ramtha through **Fudayn (now Mafraq)****, al-Dhlail, Zarqa, Amman, al-Jizah, and Ma’an. Protecting this route involved safeguarding its water reservoirs and preventing Bedouin attacks along the way.

(*) Two ways travel or, a “stage” (marhala) is an old Arabic unit of distance, defined as the distance a traveler could cover on foot or on an animal over a single day’s journey (around 24 miles). For Hanafis and Malikis, it is 44.520 kilometers, while for Hanbalis and Shafi’is, it is 89.04 kilometers

(**) Shihab al-Din Ahmad ibn Ali ibn Ahmad al-Qalqashandi, known as Abu al-‘Abbas al-Qalqashandi, was a significant Arab historian noted for his expertise in writing, literature, eloquence, and Shafi’i jurisprudence.

The Mamluk sultans closely monitored the deputies of Ajloun, and received complaints from the local populace, to which they responded by issuing royal decrees to enforce justice. When grievances arose, residents of Ajloun would sometimes appeal directly to the Deputy of Damascus. Historical sources from the Mamluk era highlight the close connections between Ajloun’s inhabitants and the major cities (metropolis) of the Mamluks, particularly Damascus and Jerusalem. Many influential figures from Ajloun villages, including those active in education, schools, as well as the management of Awqaf (or religious endowment), served in

these two cities. To elaborate, individuals from villages such as Aydoun, al-Husn, Jamha, Ba'oon, Duwakara, and Irbid worked as judges, teachers, and awqaf advisors. This highlights the significant contribution of Ajloun's people to the intellectual and cultural life of the Mamluk era, alongside residents of places like as-Salt, al-Karak, and Shobak.

The Mamluks and their high-ranking senior officials also made efforts to secure the routes leading to the Jordan Valley near Ajloun, as they controlled the cultivation, processing, and sale of sugarcane. The Mamluk sultans sought to expand their global trade network, establishing commercial treaties with European states, which in turn encouraged the development of **qaysariyyas** (Caesarea, central commercial and artisan establishments) and markets throughout the Levant and Egypt. Ajloun's **qaysariyya** attracted merchants from outside the Levant as a result.

Ajloun witnessed the rise of the Ghazzawiyyah family's local leadership and power, centered in the village of Sakhrāh. Ibn Qadi Shuhbah recounts that the Emir of southern Ajloun and Jerash traveled to Damascus alongside local tribal leaders and they swore an oath of obedience to Sultan al-Nasir Barquq in 791 AH / 1388 AD. However, the relationship between Ajloun's local leaders and the Mamluk sultans in Cairo alternated between loyalty and defiance. In his book *Flowers in the Chronicles of the Ages* (Bada'i' al-Zuhur), Ibn Iyas records that Muhammad ibn Sa'id al-Ghazzawy traveled to Cairo during the reign of Sultan Qansuh al-Ghuri, presenting him with gifts and horses. This was a few years before the Mamluk Sultanate's fall. However, this loyalty endured even as the Mamluks faced their final years in the Levant after the Ottomans defeated them in 922 AH / 1516 AD. This loyalty, however, prompted the Ottomans to send a punitive expedition against Ibn Sa'id al-Ghazzawy.

In the Mamluk period's later and final years, the region suffered numerous natural disasters and epidemics, including earthquakes in 702 AH / 1302 AD, 716 AH / 1316 AD, and 886 AH / 1481 AD, inflicting damage on both the population and buildings. Ajloun was struck by a severe flood from heavy rain and accumulated snow, destroying homes and markets, with water levels rising to the roof of the Ajloun mosque. Several epidemics and plagues also spread through Ajloun, the most dangerous of which was the Black Death in 748 AH / 1347 AD and another in 795 AH / 1392 AD. Droughts and locust infestations also afflicted the villages and farmlands, forcing residents to abandon their villages and farms in search of safety.

In the final years of the Mamluks, the Mongols attacked Damascus in 803 AH / 1400 AD, killing many residents and pillaging the city. Fleeing this invasion, many

sought refuge in Ajloun. The historian **Ibn Hajji***, a native of Ajloun, detailed the atrocities committed by Timur's forces in Ajloun, recounting that many people in the village of Hubrass perished while hiding in shelters. These crises of epidemics, natural disasters, and the Mongol threat ultimately weakened the region and local population, paving the way for Sultan Selim I's conquest of the Levant in 922 AH / 1516 AD.

(*) **Ibn Hajji: Shihab al-Din Abu al-Abbas, Ahmad ibn Haji ibn Musa ibn Ahmad al-Sa'di al-Hasbani al-Dimashqi (originally from Husban)**

Ajloun District during the Ottoman Era (16th–19th Centuries)

Following the Ottoman conquest of the Levant after the Battle of Marj Dabiq in 922 AH / 1516 AD, Ajloun and the regions of East Jordan became part of the Ottoman Empire. Ajloun was established as a **Sanjak (district) within the Levant Eyalet***, comprising various subdistricts (Nahiya, nawahi), including, Bani 'Alwan, al-Koura, Jerusalem (al-Quds), Salt (As-Salt), al-Karak, Western and Eastern Golan, al-Kafarat, Bani Kinanah, Bani Jahama, Bani Atiya, Bani al-As'ar, and Jedour. Ajloun encompassed what is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, as well as parts of Palestine and southern Syria (Hauran).

Ajloun was characterized by its large number of villages. Records indicate that there were 145 inhabited villages and 229 farms within the district, including 75 villages and 53 farms in the subdistrict (nahiyah) of Ajloun alone. Ajloun became densely populated due to its strategic location, fertile soil, and abundant water resources. Interestingly, many of the village names and locations referenced in 16th-century documents have retained their names and continue to exist to this day.

The Ottoman administration entrusted the governance of Ajloun to Bedouin tribal sheikhs and feudal leadership, who were responsible for collecting taxes and maintaining security. Among the prominent leaderships of the 16th century was al-Ghazzawiyah family leadership. The Ottoman administration allocated a portion of tax revenues for various purposes: supporting the annual pilgrimage (Hajj) caravan to Mecca (Hajj al-Shami), building forts and water cisterns, funding the military forces accompanying the caravan to ensure its protection, and paying Bedouin tribes residing along the Hajj route to provide further protection for the caravan .

Contemporary documents indicate that Ajloun was prosperous and populated during this period. In the 16th century, it comprised four quarters (neighborhoods/harat), with a population composed of both Muslims and Christians

in Ajloun and surrounding villages. However, Muslims formed the majority of the population.

The gradual weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the decline in its central authority negatively impacted its control over its provinces (Vilayet), including the Levant. This deterioration enabled the rise of local leaders, who gained power at the Ottoman state's expense. The implementation of the Iltizam system (tax-farming system) contributed to political and economic instability, as well as the hegemony of the Bedouin, which led to increased Bedouin attacks on agricultural villages. Consequently, economic activity declined, populations diminished, and local leaders solidified control over Ajloun. Some of those leaderships include: al-Ghazzawiyah leadership, and Bani Mahdi leadership in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Al-Azm family in Damascus during the 18th century, Zahir al-Umar al-Zaydani and his sons (1159–1189 AH / 1746–1775 AD), and Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar (1189–1219 AH / 1775–1804 AD). These tribal sheikhs effectively enjoyed relative autonomy in managing their regions while maintaining suzerainty under the Pasha of Damascus.

(* The primary administrative level in the Ottoman Empire from the 16th to the 19th centuries.
Note: In early and middle Islamic periods, the Ajloun area encompassed Irbid and its surrounding towns and villages.

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the boundaries of Ajloun District (liwaa) were limited to the northern regions of Jordan, lying between the Yarmouk River in the north and the Zarqa River in the south. The district included several subdistricts (Nahiyah, nawahi): Bani Jahamah (al-Batin) with its main village of Irbid; the Kafarat with its main village of Hubrass; as-Saru, with its main village being Fu'arah; Bani Obeid with Husn as its principal village; Koura with Tibnah as its central village; and Wasatiyya. Jabal Ajloun's (Mount Ajloun) center was al-Rabadh Castle, where the sheikh resided. Ma'rad (Jerash) had Souf as its main village, while **al-Suwayt (Ramtha)** subdistrict located to the east of Bani Obeid and extended northward to the route of the Hajj caravan (Hajj al-Shami).

Ajloun During Egyptian Rule (1247-1256 AH / 1831-1840 AD)

The period of Muhammad Ali Pasha and his son Ibrahim Pasha's rule marked a turning point in the history of the southern areas of the Levant, including eastern Jordan. They put an end to the Ottoman rule that had dominated the 17th and 18th centuries, characterized by feudal control, insecurity, and Bedouin tribal hegemony.

In addition to the return of direct Ottoman rule during the Tanzimat reforms, which introduced several significant reforms and legislation, including the **the Gülhane Hatt-ı Şerif in 1255 AH / 1839 AD (*)** and the **Islahat Hatt-i Humayunu in 1272 AH / 1856 AD**, followed by the **Vilayet Law (Provincial Law) of 1281 AH / 1864 AD** and the **Ottoman Constitution in 1293 AH / 1876 AD (**)**.

(*) An edict issued by Sultan Abdülmecid I, marking the beginning of the broad “Tanzimat” reforms.

() Organizational laws and regulations issued by the Ottoman Sultan.**

During their rule over the Levant, the Egyptians introduced numerous modern reforms and administrative concepts. They abolished the previous administrative divisions and organized the region into directorates, each headed by a director representing central authority. The directorates were further divided into **“mutasallimat”(*)**, each led by a **“mutasallim”** appointed by the governor-general (hukumdar) in Damascus. Each mutasallim was supported by a Sarraf (adjacent to a bank owner or banker in modern times) to handle financial affairs, an imperial tax collector, and a village inspector to manage local revenues. The Egyptians also began involving local populations in governance through administrative councils established to consult and address local issues for each mutasallimiyah. These reforms extended beyond administration, impacting the economy, dismantling feudal armies, enforcing compulsory conscription, and disarming the local population.

During this period, Ajloun was established as a mutasallimiyah and its administration was entrusted to Hasan Bey al-Yazji with Khawaja Musa Farhi serving as both accountant and tax collector. It was administratively connected to Damascus and came to be known as the Mutasallimiyah of Irbid and Ajloun, with the village of Irbid established as the center of governance. This administrative arrangement continued even after the return of direct Ottoman control, lasting until the end of Ottoman rule in the Levant in 1918.

(*) A regional administrative unit under Egyptian governance, with the term “mutasallim” referring to the official running the affairs of an area in the absence of a governor.

Several factors contributed to revolts and rebellions across the Levant, including in Hauran and Ajloun. Among these factors were foreign schemes and conspiracies, disarmament of the population, the imposition of burdensome tax requirements and oppressive collection methods, mandatory conscription, and forced labor practices. The rebellion included the mountains of Ajloun and the Bedouin tribes of the Jordan Valley and eastern regions.

In Mount Ajloun, the revolt was led by Sheikhs Barakat al-Ahmad and Salah al-Abd al-Rahman. The revolt did not subside until after Ibrahim Pasha extended security to Sheikh Mahmoud al-Rifai, leader of the Hauran and Ajloun revolts, as the government addressed local demands and grievance. This included replacing officials who had exploited the population with forced labor, excessive taxes, and unjust collection practices.

Ajloun During the Ottoman Tanzimat Period (1864-1918 AD)

With the collapse of Egyptian rule and the withdrawal of Egyptian forces from the Levant in July 1256 AH / 1840 AD, Ajloun reverted to Ottoman control. This shift, however, plunged the region into a state of chaos and insecurity from 1840 to 1864, marked by corrupt officials, Bedouin tribal dominance and their frequent assaults on farmers' villages. In addition to the hegemony of Local village sheikhs and feudal leaders who were appointed by the Pasha of Damascus of the task of maintaining order and collecting taxes. The history of Ajloun during this period became closely tied to neighboring regions in northern Palestine and Hauran, particularly under the leadership of the Bedouin chief Aqila Agha al-Hasi. Al-Hasi successfully filled the administrative void left by the Egyptians, a gap the Ottoman authorities struggled to address effectively.

During this period, the administrative center of Ajloun shifted to the village of Kufranjah, which became the stronghold of local authority, replacing the Ajloun village. Ajloun Castle, once a hub of leadership, lost its significance as the residence of the sheikh or afandi transferred to Kufranjah. Furthermore, this Sheikh from the al-Fraihat clan fell under the administrative authority of the Ottoman governor stationed in Irbid.

The Ottoman government began to take genuine interest in the southern parts of the Levant, including Ajloun, in 1267 AH / 1851 AD, when several military campaigns were launched by the commander of the Arabistan army. These campaigns aimed to send punitive expeditions against the increasingly powerful Bedouin tribes in Ajloun District. This is due to their increasing threat persistent assaults on settled villagers. Proposals were made to establish a new **subprefecture*** in the town of Alaal and to station permanent military forces to maintain security in Ajloun and Hauran. However, these proposals were never implemented, and Ajloun continued to be governed by Damascus-based officials with limited power, while local sheikhs held real authority and served as tax collectors for the agricultural villages.

The first indicators of administrative restructuring in Ajloun are recorded in Ottoman documents from 1274 AH / 1857 AD, indicating that Ajloun was recognized as a separate district from Hauran, including all areas that now comprise Jordan, comprising Ajloun along with Irbid, Balqa', and al-Karak. However, by 1278 AH / 1861 AD, shortly before the Ottoman Vilayet Law (provincial law) of 1864 took effect, the district of Ajloun was merged with the district of Hauran. This newly created district included Jabal al-Druze, Hauran, Quneitra, Ajloun (with Irbid as its dependency), Balqa, and Karak.

(* The highest administrative position within the districts

In 1281 AH / 1864 AD, Ajloun was classified as a subdistrict (qadaa') within the district (liwaa) of Hauran, part of the Syrian Vilayet. Al-Balqa and Karak regions continued to fall under the subdistrict of Ajloun's administration until 1283 AH / 1866 AD, when the subdistrict of Ajloun was limited to Irbid and Ajloun. Further administrative changes took place in 1285 AH / 1868 AD with the formation of the Sanjak of al-Balqa', which included Nablus with Bani Saa'b, Karak with Tafilah, and as-Salt with the Jordan valley. Meanwhile, the district (liwa) of Hauran incorporated the sub-districts of Judur, Lajat, the Golan, Irbid and Ajloun, Jabal al-Druze, Hauran, and Quneitra.

Ajloun remained administratively attached to the district of Hauran until the end of Ottoman rule in 1918. Its geographical boundaries were restricted to the area between the Yarmouk River to the north and the Zarqa River to the south, with its administrative center located in Irbid. The village of Ajloun had served as an administrative center, especially during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. However, this shift from Ajloun to Irbid was due to its economic development, proximity to the Hauran district center, and its central location within the subdistrict of Ajloun (meanwhile Ajloun was located at the southwestern edge of the district). Additional reasons that made Irbid a more viable administrative center are: Irbid's resources, its strategic location on transportation routes, and the loyalty of its local sheikhs to the Ottoman authorities. Irbid also served as a buffer against Bedouin tribes in the eastern regions, preventing their encroachment upon the agricultural villages to the west. Additionally, Irbid's relative distance from the stronghold centers of influential local leaderships, such as the Aal al-Shurayda clan in al-Kourah and the al-Fraihat clan in Ajloun and Kufranjah.

Administrative Divisions During the Ottoman Period

Local divisions were prevalent in the Ajloun area, reflecting the influence of local leaderships and prominent families from earlier historical periods. These divisions left a lasting impact on the collective memory of the residents, Ottoman official records, and writings of European travelers who passed through the area..

These divisions or subdivisions were Al-Batin (Bani Jahamah), Al-Ma'rad (Jerash), al-Suwayt (Ramtha), al-Kafarat, as-Saru, Bani Obeid, al-Kourah, al-Wasatiyah, and mount Ajloun. However, during the Ottoman Tanzimat reform period, the government's administrative structure for Ajloun was redefined under the Ajloun subdistrict (Qadaa'). This included two primary subdistricts (Nahiyah): Kufranjah established in 1303 AH / 1885 AD, and Al-Kourah in 1319 AH / 1901 AD, alongside an honorary directorate in Jerash starting from 1310 AH / 1892 AD led by one of the Circassians from Jerash, who had been settled in several villages along the edge of the desert and the Hajj route, including the village of Jerash since 1884 AD.

The administration of the Kufranjah and al-Kourah subdistricts (Nahiyahs) was assigned to government-appointed directors from outside these areas. The Kufranjah subdistrict included villages like Kufranjah (its center), alongside villages of Ajloun, such as 'Ain Janna, Anjara, Khirbat al-Wahadneh, Faara (later known as Al-Hashimiyya), Arjan, Rasoun, Halawah, Owsarh, Ba'oon, Sakhras, Ibbin. The majority of the population in these villages was Muslim, with exceptions in Ajloun villages, Kufranjah, Anjara, Arjan, Owarh, Halawah, 'Ain Janna, and Rajeb, where Christians lived alongside Muslims. During the Tanzimat period, the Ottoman government integrated Christian clans into the administrative councils, granting them citizenship rights equal to those of Muslims.

Ajloun District maintained its prominence as the largest subdistrict (qadaa) within the Hauran district (liwaa) during the Tanzimat reforms, with the highest number of populated villages, exceeding 120. Within Ajloun's subdistricts (nahiyah), Kufranjah and Mount Ajloun comprised 25 villages, Al-Kafarat 11, Bani Obeid 21, As-Saru 19, Bani Jahamah 14, Al-Kourah 16, and Al-Wasatiyah 14. This highlights Ajloun's significant population density and settlement patterns as Ajloun was also the most populous subdistrict (qadaa) in eastern Jordan until the end of the Ottoman period. The earliest available census in 1289 AH / 1872 AD recorded 1,008 residents in Ajloun, with 708 Christians and the rest Muslims.

By 1914, the population had reached 61,967, with Muslims comprising 57,156 (92.2%) and Orthodox Christians totaling 4,749 (7.6%). The census also recorded 62 individuals of unspecified foreign nationalities. In 1915, the district's population was estimated at 61,500, with 31,108 males and 33,092 females, and by the final years of the Ottoman period, the Christian population was around 6,000.

These estimates indicate that Ajloun remained the most populous subdistrict (qadaa) in eastern Jordan compared to as-Salt subdistrict (37,235 residents), al-Karak subdistrict (19,551 residents), Ma'an subdistrict (5,752 residents), and Tafilah subdistrict (7,750 residents). The steady population growth in Ajloun was undoubtedly linked to improved security, enhanced administrative methods, the Ottoman government's efforts to establish stability, economic activity, and migration from Damascus, Hauran, and Palestine. This solidified Ajloun's political and economic significance in the region.

One positive aspect that left an impact from the late Ottoman era was the inclusion of local residents in governance through newly established administrative councils. Numerous administrative institutions were founded during this period, many of which continued their functions after the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921. This period also experienced advancements in communication and transportation infrastructure, such as the construction of roads, telegraph lines, and the Hijaz Railway which linked Ajloun with Hauran, Damascus to the north, central Jordan, southern and northern Arabia to the south, and the subdistricts of Palestine to the west. This development facilitated Ajloun's connectivity with neighboring regions and boosted its role in trade activities. Ajloun's region capitalized on exporting products like grains, firewood, and charcoal from its forests, along with olive oil and other food items, via the railway to Damascus and the port of Haifa and from there to Europe. This economic activity attracted merchants from Syria who contributed to the thriving trade between Ajloun and the outside world.

Ajloun Between 1900-1921 AD

The conditions in eastern Jordan, particularly the Ajloun region, worsened significantly after the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) took control of the Ottoman Empire in 1908. Their strict policies enforced centralization, harsh taxation, burdensome tax collection practices, and compulsory conscription. Ajloun suffered further under the Ottoman military campaigns led by Sami Pasha Al-Farouqi in the Hauran and al-Karak districts in 1908 and 1910, which intensified Ottoman presence in the area. These campaigns resulted in the strict subjugation of the population through conscription, population censuses, forced disarmament, and

heavy taxation. The Ottomans also established a network of police posts to assert unprecedented direct control over the region.

During World War I (1914-1918), the CUP enforced a series of exceptional laws, imposing martial law and imposing high taxes. They confiscated the local grain stocks and food supplies under the guise of supporting the Ottoman war effort (known as Jihad aid).

The people of Ajloun were not isolated from the broader political and intellectual developments \ in the Levant and Hijaz. Many educated young men from Ajloun joined the Arab nationalist movement, opposing the CUP's policies. These individuals, having studied in Damascus and Istanbul, became active in Arab political associations that advocated for Arab rights, justice and for self-governance through decentralization. Many of them joined the forces of the Great Arab Revolt, led by the revered Sharif Hussein bin Ali and his sons, the princes Faisal, Abdullah, Zaid, and Ali, who fought to liberate the Hijaz and the Levant from Ottoman rule.

On September 27, 1918, Ajloun subdistrict (qadaa) formally ended its subordination from Ottoman rule. Sharif Sa'ad al-Sakkini arrived in Irbid to establish a new administration in Ajloun. After the war, eastern Jordan, including Ajloun, fell under what came to be known as the Eastern Region, stretching from Ma'an in the south to the Turkish-Syrian border in the north. This area was placed under the administration of Prince Faisal bin Hussein, later becoming known as the Faisali Arab Government (1918-1920). On March 8, 1920, the Syrian National Congress proclaimed Faisal as King of Syria.

Ajloun remained administratively tied to the Hauran district. In the elections for the Syrian National Congress, Ajloun was represented by Sheikh Suleiman al-Soudi al-Rawsan and Abd al-Rahman Ershidat. However, British and French colonial schemes prevented and crushed the Arab dream of independence and stability. Through the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) and the San Remo Conference (1920), the colonial powers divided the Arab lands into mandates. Syria and Lebanon were placed under French mandate, while Iraq, Palestine, and eastern Jordan fell under British mandate. The mandate on Palestine obligated Britain to implement the Balfour Declaration issued on November 2, 1917, which promised a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine.

Ajloun During the Emirate Era (1921-1946 AD):

After the fall of the Faisali Arab Government in Damascus and the departure of King Faisal bin Al-Hussein from Syria on July 28, 1920, Eastern Jordan descended into chaos due to the absence of a central authority. Britain, with its mandate over East Jordan, initially lacked a clear plan for administering the region. Consequently, several local governments were established under the leadership of tribal leaders and nationalist intellectuals from the area. To assist these local governments, Britain sent a number of British officers to assist in managing their affairs. On Thursday, September 2, 1920, the leaders of the Ajloun district met with Major Somerset and presented him with a memorandum, which became historically known as the "Maqais Treaty," named after the village where the meeting took place. The main demands outlined in this document called for the realization of the Arab nation's demand and aspiration for independence, the rejection of the Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the San Remo Conference resolutions, and any initiatives that would deprive the Arab nation of its independence. They also demanded the establishment of an independent Arab government that would unite the districts of al-Karak and as-Salt, as well as the subdistricts of Ajloun and Jerash under an Arab Emir. Additionally, they rejected Zionist immigration to Eastern Jordan.

Among the local governments formed was the Government of Ajloun, centered in the town of Irbid and led by Kaymakam (sub-district governor) Ali Khulqi Alsharairi. The area's sheikhs formed a committee known as the "Administrative and Legislative Council" to assist the Kaymakam in his duties and provide counseling. Sheikh Rashed Al-Khuzai represented the Ajloun region in this council.

However, Britain was not sincere in its promises to grant Arabs their freedom and independence after the war. British and French schemes and conspiracies, along with conflicting interests among tribal leaders, played a significant role in undermining this emerging attempt to establish a local authority. As the rift grew, several sheikhs split off and established independent governments separate from the Ajloun government. This resulted in the formation of the Government of Deir Yusuf in al-Kourah subdistrict (Nahiyah), led by Sheikh Kulaib Al-Shreideh; the Government of Ajloun subdistrict (nahiyah) under Sheikh Rashed Al-Khuzai; a government in Jerash led by the Al-Kayed family and headed by Muhammad Ali Al-Maghribi; a government in the Wasatiyya subdistrict (nahiyah) led by Sheikh Naji Al-Azzam; and a government in the Ramtha subdistrict (nahiyah) under the leadership of Sheikh Nasser Al-Fawaz Al-Zoubi.

Ajloun became the center of the Ajloun Government, and a municipal council was established there starting in 1920. Ali Niazi al-Tal managed the council for four months (from 13 September 1920 to 21 January 1921). Sheikh Rashid al-Khuzai then formed a council known as the “Council of Ten” to manage the subdistrict (nahiyah) and approve the budget. However, this arrangement, along with other local governments, quickly dissolved with the arrival of the late Prince Abdullah bin Al-Hussein and the establishment of the Emirate of Transjordan on April 11, 1921.

The people of East Jordan in general, and Ajloun specifically, welcomed the prince’s arrival and announced their support for him. All the subdistricts of East Jordan united for the first time in their modern history into one political and administrative entity, known as the Emirate of Transjordan. In 1925, the emirate annexed the districts of Ma'an and Aqaba.

Under the emirate, the administrative structures inherited from the Ottoman period were reevaluated, leading to new administrative divisions. The regions and districts were reorganized into subdivisions known as “governorates,” with Ajloun classified as a second-tier governorate. On October 19, 1927, administrative reforms once again restructured the region. Under a new law, Ajloun became a district (liwaa) centered in Irbid, covering the area from the Yarmouk River in the north to the Zarqa River in the south. This district included three sub-districts (qadaa): Irbid, Jerash, and Ajloun (with its center in Ajloun town), with Ajloun sub-district encompassing 25 villages and clans.

Throughout the Emirate period, Ajloun witnessed several administrative changes. On June 1, 1930, it was downgraded from a qadaa to a nahiya, then later to a subprefecture then reclassified as an administrative directorate before being reestablished as a subprefecture subdistrict in April 1937. On June 26, 1945, a new municipality was created in the village of Kufranjah.

Ajloun in the Kingdom Era:

The administrative structure in the Ajloun subdistrict (qadaa) remained mostly unchanged until 1973, when it was elevated to a provincial status (mutasarrifya). In 1987, a sub-district was established in Kufranjah, and in 1994, Ajloun itself was upgraded to a governorate named "Ajloun Governorate". In 1996, Kufranjah sub-district (nahiyah) directorate was elevated to a subdistrict (qadaa) directorate. In 2000, Kufranjah district was further elevated to a sub-governorate (liwaa) status, while new subdistrict directorates were created in Sakhrayh and Arjan.

Today, Ajloun Governorate includes several municipal councils:

1. Greater Ajloun Municipality: covering Ajloun, 'Ain Janna, Anjara, al-Rawabi, and al-Safa.
2. Al-Shifa Municipality: covering the areas of Hashimiya, Halawa, and al-Wahdneh
3. Al-Ayoun Municipality: covering Arjan, Rasoun, Ba'oon, and Owsarh.
4. Al-Junaid Municipality: covering Sakhrah, Ibbin, and Ibilin.
5. New Kufranjah Municipality: covering Kufranjah, Balas, As-Safina, and Rajeb.

The people of Ajloun have played a significant role in building modern Jordan, participating in the development of political, economic, social, military, and security institutions. They have upheld the aspirations and concerns of the nation, contributing to its prosperity and expressing loyalty to the Hashemite leadership. Ajloun's residents have stood by the nation on vital issues, especially the central Arab issue of Palestine. They actively participated in resistance against Zionist settlements in Palestine and opposed British colonial policies. Notably, they contributed to the Maqais Treaty, which reflected a high level of national and pan-Arab awareness at that early period, supporting the issues of the nation's and confronting British and French colonialism.

Furthermore, Ajloun's citizens were active in national parties in the 1920s and 1930s. Ajloun's leaders participated in Jordanian national political parties, legislative and parliamentary councils, and national conferences.

Ajloun in the Silver Jubilee Era

Over the past three decades under the reign of His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al-Hussein, may God protect him and strengthen his rule, the Jordanian government has dedicated significant effort to uncovering more archaeological sites in Ajloun Governorate, hoping to deepen our understanding of the rich history of this region. Restoration work has also been undertaken, especially on the famous Ajloun Castle, as well as on several ancient mosques and churches.

In addition to its historical depth, Ajloun boasts breathtaking natural beauty, surrounded by lush forests, high mountains, flowing valleys, and vibrant waterfalls. Ajloun's charm extends beyond its historical and natural allure; it is also distinguished by the rich cultural heritage of its people, who maintain a strong bond of brotherhood, uphold their shared customs and traditions, and embody unity in diversity, with a deep respect for the variety of religious beliefs within the community.

Given Ajloun's historical and touristic significance, the government, following royal directives, has invested in creating a range of tourist facilities in recent years, including nature reserves such as the Ajloun Forest Reserve (Burqush Forest), cultural and hiking trails, resorts like Al-Rous Tourist Resort, and, most recently, the Ajloun Cable Car. Together, these initiatives generate job opportunities for the people of Ajloun and have made the region a prime destination for both Jordanians and international visitors.

In recognition of the importance of reviving Ajloun's heritage and cultural identity, and in light of the vibrant contributions of its intellectuals and cultural associations, Ajloun was designated a Jordanian City of Culture. Ajloun officially took up the mantle from Madaba on December 11, 2012, and served as Jordan's Cultural Capital for the year 2013. Crowning these efforts, the Ministry of Culture established the Ajloun Cultural Center. This center is envisioned as a creative cultural hub and a beacon on Ajloun's long path of history and civilization, a path that spans thousands of years and continues to this very day.

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