

# Old town of Hebron al-Khalil & its environs



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**Criteria:** [\(ii\)](#)[\(iv\)](#)[\(vi\)](#)

**Category:** Cultural

**Submitted by:**

Permanent Delegation of Palestine to UNESCO

**State, Province or Region:**

Hebron al-Khalil

**Coordinates:** N31 30 13 E35 34 52

**Ref.:** 5705

## Description

Ancient Hebron is identified with Jebel er-Rumeideh, located southwest of the current historic town. Archaeological investigations show several layers of occupation, dated from the Chalcolithic period (circa 4000-3000 BC) down to the Umayyad period (661-750 AD). Hebron was always known as the burial place of the prophets Abraham/Ibrahim, Isaac, Jacob and their wives. During the Roman period, Herod the Great (73-4 BC) built a massive wall to enclose the cave of the prophets' tombs. After the conquest of Hebron by Crusaders (1099), this enclosure was turned into a church, and subsequently, after Saladin's retaking of the city in 1187, into a mosque, which was known afterwards as the Haram ash-Sharif. Inside it, a walnut wood-carved Minbur (pulpit), standing near the praying niche of the mosque, was brought by Saladin from Egypt and is considered one of the oldest Islamic wooden pulpits.

With the Arab-Muslim conquest, *al-Khalil* became one of the four sacred cities of Islam after Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, visited by Muslim pilgrims from all over the world. The town and the Haram were honoured and sanctified by the rulers of the successive Muslim states, the 'Ulama, and by the public. Basically, during the Mamluk rule (1250-1516 AD), *al-Khalil* had increasingly flourished and became a famous Sufi centre. Therefore, hundreds of Islamic religious and historical monuments were built close to the Haram, including mosques, zawiyas, ribats, madrasas, bazaars, sabils, etc. During the Ottoman rule (1517-1918 AD) the town witnessed a period of expansion, giving the old city its present-day shape and boundaries.

Hebron today, which is still dominated by the Mamluk architectural style, is one of the few Islamic cities which preserved its authentic set up, visible in its urban fabric and prestigious architecture, corroborated by its particular craftsmanship (the famous pottery and glassware of Mamluk origin) and its traditional life. The Simat, a traditional food dating back to the times of Ibrahim, was traditionally offered to all visitors to the Prophets' Tombs.

Its geographical position on the natural crossroads of Southern Palestine, Sinai, Eastern Jordan and Northern Arabia made Hebron an important commercial and cultural centre throughout history. The fertile soils, abundant rainfall and mild temperatures also made it one of the most flourishing vineyard cultures in the Middle East (see number 8 below).

Geographic location:

The town of Hebron is located in the southern part of the West Bank, about 30 kilometers south of Jerusalem, at an altitude of 900-950 meters above sea level, stretching between two ranges of verdant hills in the northern upper reaches of Wadi *al-Khalil*.

## Justification of Outstanding Universal Value

Hebron/al-Khalil is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, sacred to Muslims, Christians and Jews, as the burial place of prophets Abraham/Ibrahim, Isaac, Jacob and their wives. It is known as Khalil ar-Rahman or al-Khalil, which means "the friend" in Arabic. The Haram ash-Sharif, also known as Ibrahim Mosque, where the "Tombs of the Prophets" are located, embodies an outstanding universal value as one of the most important cult-places. The

historic city, with its well-preserved Mamluk architecture, which developed from the mosque, testifies to a vibrant multicultural town created throughout the centuries and still attached to its traditions.

Criteria met:

criterion (ii) The cultural heritage of Hebron/*al-Khalil* exhibits an important interchange of human values, witnessed by the presence of diverse cultures throughout the centuries, reflected in the architecture and planning of the city and in the archaeological sites on the outskirts of the town. With its Mamluk and Ottoman buildings, associated with the Ibrahim Mosque and the Prophets' Tombs, which represent an extraordinary historical and spiritual landmark, the city displays the evolution of a complex urban fabric as a result of continuous transformations and adaptations to the landscape.

criterion (iv) The old town is an outstanding example of architectural ensemble dating back to the Mamluk-Ottoman period. Its texture, made of residential units grouped around an open space called "Hosh", is preserved in its spirit, despite some cuts opened artificially in the urban fabric.

criterion (vi) Hebron/*al-Khalil* is a clear example of a place directly and tangibly associated with events and living traditions, and especially with ideas and beliefs, relating to outstanding universal values. Its significance as a worship and the burial place of the patriarchs Abraham/Ibrahim, Isaac and Jacob and the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca and Leah spans the categories of time and space, situating Hebron/*al-Khalil* in a position of primary importance to humanity. The potential role of the city as a place for 21<sup>st</sup> century reconciliation is also an asset to bear in mind if and when Hebron is recommended for inscription on the World Heritage List.

### **Statements of authenticity and/or integrity**

The old city of Hebron/*al-Khalil* appears to be well-preserved due to the continuous attentions paid by its inhabitants and public and religious local institutions. In 1996, the newly established Palestinian National Authority set up the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee, a semi-governmental body aiming at preserving the cultural heritage of the old city. It encouraged the re-settling of Palestinian families who had left the city after the 1967 war, considering the local population of the town an essential component for its conservation and maintenance. The Committee still plays a fundamental role in conservation and management of the built environment. The Ibrahim mosque has been, and still is, the object of conservation works, carried out with the scientific supervision of the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee's expert team. A revitalization plan is currently being implemented for the safeguarding of the cultural resources and enhancement of the economic situation, looking at cultural tourism as a potential factor of positive change. This plan will serve as informative tool for the preparation of the management plan.

In 1998, the project carried out by the Hebron Rehabilitation Committee received the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture, in recognition of the outstanding contribution for the preservation and rehabilitation of the Islamic architecture in the old city of Hebron.

### **Comparison with other similar properties**

An appropriate comparative analysis is to be conducted within the Middle East and the Arab States Region: the Medina of Marrakech and Fez in Morocco, the Kasbah of Algiers in Algeria, the Medina of Tunis in Tunisia, Islamic Cairo in Egypt, the ancient cities of Aleppo and Damascus in the Syrian Arab Republic represent similar properties to be explored. The Old City of Acre, in Israel, and the Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls, are the nearest similar properties. While this property is similar in numerous respects to many other towns of the region, it is, however, unique in containing the Haram ash-Sharif, a great building in its own right, within which are, uniquely, the Tombs of the Prophets. In those two respects, Hebron/*al-Khalil* is different from any other place.