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The heroic figure of the Zionist pioneer

The appropriation of the marshlands in Palestine (from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1950s)

In the late 1940s, the German Zionist author Cheskel Zwi Klötzel depicted the conquest of Palestinian land by the Jews¹ as follows:

In reconstructing the Jewish National Home in the land of their ancestors, the Jews “collected” deserts, marshes, rocky mountains, places that nobody wanted or inhabited, and they turned them into fields, gardens, vineyards, and orchards, thus creating “living space” for thousands of their brothers. (Klötzel 1947, 3)²

According to this Zionist discourse, in which the author takes up Israel Zangwill’s adage referring to a “land without a people for a people without a land,” the Jews transformed the uncultivated lands of Palestine, a Palestine described as more or less deserted. Klötzel divides these uncultivated lands into three main categories: marshlands, deserts, and rocky mountainous territories. Focusing on the first category, this article seeks to analyze the territorial strategies and discourses at work in the transformation of the marshlands of Palestine.

These marshy areas were mainly concentrated in northern Palestine: the Jezreel Valley (Gottmann 1935, 150) (also called the Plain of Esdraelon), Galilee, the Kabarah marshes, and the Hula Valley.³ Further wetlands were located along the coastal plain. The formation of Palestine’s principal wetlands was

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1. In this article, we adopt the commonly accepted usage of capitalization for the noun Jew. This choice thus designates the Jews as a people.
 2. **Translator’s note:** Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.
 3. Several spellings for Hula are present in the sources: Huleh, Houla, Hula.

studied by the French geographer and archaeologist Félix-Marie Abel (1933, 114), and was described by the geographer Jean Gottmann as follows:

On the western flank of the Palestinian anticline, many small *wadis*, dry or almost dry in summer, descend toward the Mediterranean, often forming marshes on their flat shores. (Gottmann 1935, 145)

These areas were characterized by low population density and the prevalence of malaria. From the 1880s onward, Jewish agricultural colonization in Ottoman Palestine altered the perception of these wetlands, which had previously been avoided: they became new areas for agricultural conquest. Subsequently, following the formation of the Zionist movement in Palestine at the turn of the nineteenth century, reinforced by the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, the marshlands figured as a major strategic stake in the control of the Palestinian territory, and they became privileged sites for the demonstration of techniques imported from Europe and North America.

Jewish agricultural colonization projects in Palestine had been underway long before the institutional and political shaping of the Zionist project by Theodor Herzl in his 1896 book *Der Judenstaat* (Bensoussan 2005). The Russian pogroms of 1881, triggered by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, led to a movement of Jewish migration to Palestine organized by the Lovers of Zion, who established several agricultural villages there. From 1882 to 1903, between 20,000 and 30,000 Jews migrated to Palestine to devote themselves to agricultural work (Perrin 2000, 98). Nearly twenty years after the establishment of the first agricultural colonies, Zionism, a complex ideological, social, and political movement, was lent a more structured form thanks to the assembly in Basel of the first Zionist Congress in 1897, organized by Theodor Herzl. “Zionism,” a word that Herzl adopted from Nathan Birnbaum, who had coined it in 1890, refers to the movement seeking a sovereign territory for the Jewish people.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the search for a territory for the Jews focused on Ottoman Palestine, considered to be the ancient land of Israel (Charbit 2007, 43).⁴ The Zionist Organization then equipped itself with the necessary institutions for the purchase and development of a permanent agricultural presence in that territory. In 1901, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) was created to facilitate the purchase of land from Ottoman Arab landowners with the aim of registering it as the “eternal and inalienable property of the Jewish people” (Katz 2005, 35). Within the JNF, offices were soon set up dedicated to agricultural land development, particularly water resource management, marshland drainage, and afforestation (ibid.). The Palestine Land

4. It was the rejection of the Zionist territorial project in Uganda proposed by Theodor Herzl in 1903 that led to the firm and definitive choice of Palestine as the territory in which to develop the Zionist project.

Development Company (PLDC), another Zionist land-purchasing organization, was established in 1908.

On the eve of the First World War, however, most of the Jewish agricultural settlements in Palestine were not the fruit of the nascent Zionist movement. For the country contained several dozen agricultural villages financed by the French baron Edmond de Rothschild. His philanthropic work, beginning in the 1870s, aimed to meet the economic and moral needs of the poverty-stricken Jewish population of Ottoman Palestine through the development of agricultural structures (Antébi 2003). The Zionist Organization's project for a sovereign territory for the Jewish people was not the one ultimately chosen by the baron. Instead, from 1899 onward, his agricultural villages were managed by the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) and then, during the British Mandate (1923–1948), by its Palestinian branch, the Palestine Jewish Colonization Association (PICA), founded in 1924. Thought of as a return to the land, agricultural colonization was indeed central to a project of Jewish regeneration advocated both by the Zionists and by the baron (Laurens 1999, 129). The new Jew was to be born of this renewed contact with the land of Israel, land of his ancestors, increasingly referred to in Hebrew with the expression "*Eretz Israel*." The redemption of the Jews through the working of a supposedly abandoned land lent substance to the image of the Jewish pioneer, *halutz* in Hebrew (Bensoussan 2005, 641). But this Zionist ideology had to contend with the complex political reality of the Mandate entrusted to the British by the League of Nations at the San Remo Conference in 1920, the charter of which was ratified in 1922. The British Mandatory Government had a "twofold obligation" (Picaudou 2006, 159–76): to fulfill the promise of a "national home for the Jewish people" made to Zionists in the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, while guaranteeing the rights of the Arab population of Palestine.

From the end of the nineteenth century up until the birth of the State of Israel, purchases of land by the PICA, the JNF, and the PLDC in the marshlands of Palestine were governed by different legal frameworks, and developed in line with the major political transformations that were shaking the Middle East.

In Ottoman-ruled Palestine, land law was defined by the Land Code of 1858, inherited from the Tanzimat era. This code was based on practices widespread in the rural areas of the Ottoman Empire, and it tended to favor the spread of private property (Bunton 2009). The specificity of land tenure in Palestine was the importance of so-called *musha'a* lands, subject to shared ownership by village communities (Mundy 1996). When the British took control of Palestine, this legal framework developed according to their very different perception of land law, their various colonial experiences, and their plans for the economic development of the country. The *musha'a* system was seen by the British as an obstacle to increased agricultural production. While

recognizing the land categories defined by the Land Code, the British sought to increase their legal control over the Palestinian territory through the establishment, in the early years of the Mandate, of a property book and a fiscal cadastre (Gavish 2005), as well as the promulgation of land ordinances. The legal conditions of land purchase by Zionists from Arab landowners in Palestine during the Mandate period have been widely studied in Anglophone, Arab, and Israeli historiography, as demonstrated by the recent works of Martin Bunton (2007), Aida Essaid (2013), and Yossi Katz (2005).

Here we wish to examine the specific role played by the transformation of the marshlands of Palestine in the development of the imaginary of the Jewish pioneer conquering uncultivated lands. The purchase and transformation of marshlands by Jewish and Zionist institutions in Palestine took place according to differing territorial logics and interactions with the Arab population as well as with the Ottoman and then Mandatory authority. We will first analyze the change in the role given to these regions in the territorial and agricultural project of the Jews in Palestine. Then, we will show how the appropriation of these lands participated in the construction of the image of “pioneerism” and in the development of a Zionist discourse on environmental action in Palestine.

Jewish territorial strategies and the conquest of the marshlands

From the first Jewish settlements by the Lovers of Zion and the JCA to the land purchases carried out by the JNF, the appropriation of marshlands proceeded in line with the financial capacities of Jewish organizations and the development of Zionist territorial strategies. Initially motivated by a practical economic choice at the end of the nineteenth century, in the following century the purchase of these wetlands came to form part of a Zionist territorial and agricultural strategy, and at the end of the British Mandate it would become a crucial factor in the drafting of the northern border of the future Jewish state.

The first Jewish colonizations and the conquest of the valleys

In 1870, Charles Netter, a member of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (created in 1860), founded Mikveh Israel, the first agricultural school in Palestine, thanks to a firman from the Porte.⁵ Located south of the coastal city of Jaffa, Mikveh Israel was built on a malaria-infested marsh.⁶ This establishment, which represented the first attempt to return French Jews to the land in Palestine, gave Baron Edmond de Rothschild the impetus to finance and support other agricultural settlements in Palestine. In the context of an Ottoman

5. A firman was an edict issued by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

6. Letter of September 16, 1921, from Élie Krause, Archives of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Paris, Israel series, Jaffa-Mikveh XL E123c.

sovereign power wary of European land acquisitions, the choice of land purchased for the founding of agricultural villages—beginning in the 1880s and for some twenty years afterward—responded to two main imperatives: to avoid the most sought-after land in Palestine so as not to provoke the suspicion of the Ottoman authorities; and to select low-cost land (Laurens 1999, 129). This strategy drove the baron's *chargés d'affaires* to focus in part on the lands most neglected by the Arab population: the marshlands in the north of the country, as well as the smaller marshy areas of the coastal plain.

Many Jews who settled in these unsanitary areas ended up contracting malaria. At the end of the First World War, the British authorities estimated that half of the children living in the Jewish villages were suffering from malaria (Sufian 2007, 84). Even the future prime minister of Israel and political leader of the *Yishuv*,⁷ David Ben-Gurion, was not spared by the disease. In his memoirs (1986, 35), he recounts suffering attacks of fever caused by malaria in a colony on the coastal plain where he settled a few months after his arrival in Palestine in 1906:

During the attacks, which occurred about every ten days, I could neither move nor, of course, work. Each time, I had a forty-degree fever and was completely delirious. This lasted three or four days until the fever would relent, leaving me exhausted and broken. I forced myself to adopt a philosophical attitude, and I got to know the length of the cycle and when I would be sick again.

The development of these wetlands involved the planting of numerous *eucalyptus camaldulensis*, trees of Australian origin.⁸ Imported into Palestine by the Jews, they were used to drain the marshes thanks to their high water requirements (Aaronshon 2000). In 1872, eucalyptus trees were first acclimatized at the Mikveh Israel agricultural school (El-Eini 1999, 78). They were then spread throughout the marshy areas acquired by the Jewish settlers. Because of the strong presence of the eucalyptus in Palestine, it was seen by the Arab population as “the Jewish tree” *par excellence* (ibid., 78). Today, it is found throughout the Mediterranean region.

The first acquisitions made by the JNF from 1901 initially continued the land strategy of the JCA by purchasing abandoned land from local Arab landowners at a low economic cost. Subsequently, a more political territorial strategy was put in place with a view to establishing large contiguous tracts of agricultural land belonging to the JNF (Katz 2005). This strategy was deployed in particular along the Jezreel Valley in the north of the country, between

7. The term *Yishuv* refers to the Jewish community in Palestine before the creation of the State of Israel.

8. See Nadav Joffe and Adèle Ribouot, *Certaines batailles se font en silence. L'afforestation comme arme du projet sioniste*, research paper, École nationale supérieure de paysage de Versailles (2017), 30.

Nazareth and Samaria. The Jewish National Fund now sought to develop “agricultural pioneer fronts,” that is, agricultural settlements in areas from which Jews were previously entirely absent (Dieckhoff 1989, 32). The bottom of the Jezreel Valley perfectly exemplified this Zionist territorial strategy and the related financial imperatives. The lands purchased in this valley, which were part marsh, were considered to be areas with fertile agricultural potential. Their drainage was therefore an essential prerequisite for the development of these new agricultural settlements for the Jewish population. Finally, although for centuries Arab peasants had avoided the marshy areas to avoid malaria, and although the marshy valleys were traditionally areas of incursions and looting by Arab tribes, the Zionists of the JNF brought about a profound change in the distribution of the population and agricultural land in the Palestinian territory through their purchases and the drainage they carried out.

The Zionists were aided in these drainage operations by the British. After the promise made by the British in the Balfour Declaration of November 2, 1917, to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine, the Zionists made various proposals. In 1920, during negotiations surrounding the establishment of the British Mandate in Palestine, Chaim Weizmann, head of the World Zionist Organization, sent a report to Lord Curzon, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, presenting him with the main preferred agricultural options. The drainage of marshlands in order to increase arable land and to eradicate malaria was at the heart of his proposals for land-use planning:

Foremost among the public works which will have to be undertaken are those connected with drainage and sanitation. The prevalence of malaria stands in the way of any organised immigration. The vitality of the immigrants would be sapped and their life imperilled by the malaria mosquito. The drainage of the marshes is of course the only thorough way to combat malaria, all other sanitary measures simply serve as a palliative and do not eradicate the causes of the disease. The number of marshes to be drained is relatively small, and this work should be begun immediately.⁹

Cleaning up the marshlands was therefore an essential step in turning them into fertile land and enabling the expansion of Jewish immigration by increasing the country’s capacity for economic absorption of immigrants (Sufian 2007). This seems a somewhat paradoxical situation, given that the Jewish migrants of the 1930s settled mainly in cities, not in rural areas.

9. Letter from Chaim Weizmann to Lord Curzon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, February 2, 1920, Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony’s College, University of Oxford, Herbert Samuel Collection.



Figure 2. Papyrus in the Lake Hula marshes
in 1935
Unknown photographer,
Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

The financial and health questions related to the draining of the wetlands

Despite the political issues posed by the Zionists, the establishment of the British Mandate in Palestine in 1920–1922 turned the management of the marshlands into a pragmatic issue, one that was above all financial, legal, and health-related. When Britain established itself as the Mandatory power in Palestine, it brought with it a wealth of experience in the fight against malaria throughout the Empire, especially in India. Its first efforts at drainage and sanitation in order to eradicate malaria had been carried out in its military camps at the end of the First World War (El-Eini 2006). Others then followed in certain areas of the Jordan Valley and around the cities of Palestine. In 1930,

Sir John Hope Simpson's report begins its assessment of the health situation in the country by referring, no doubt somewhat exaggeratedly, to the omnipresence of malaria in the past: "At the time of the Occupation Palestine was a country saturated with malaria."¹⁰

The fight against this disease involved planning the drainage of marshlands, research by British entomologists on the spread of the *Anopheles* mosquitoes that carried the parasite, and finally the implementation of laws such as the Drainage (Surface Water) Ordinance of 1942.¹¹ The purpose of this law, the only water-related law successfully promulgated during the Mandate period, was to enable the British Water Commissioner to demarcate the areas to be drained and to plan the sanitation works to be carried out.¹² Generally speaking, during the British Mandate period the number of actors involved in the transformation of the wetlands increased. The British departments for the government of Palestine joined forces with private and international organizations—including the Rockefeller Foundation and the League of Nations—to eradicate malaria from the country.¹³ Arab institutions were also involved in drainage, with the Supreme Muslim Council working on the Wadi Rubin marsh on the coastal plain. In addition, the British fight against malaria involved education: a much less expensive means of trying to limit the spread of malaria than drainage. In the 1920s, the Department of Health distributed leaflets on malaria and the *Anopheles* mosquito in Arabic and Hebrew.¹⁴ However, only the drainage of the marshlands was truly effective in combatting the disease. Sir John Hope Simpson's 1930 report emphasized the importance of the sanitation work carried out by the JNF and the PICA in the main areas of agricultural colonization: the marshlands of the coastal plain, the Kabarah marsh, and the Jezreel Valley. As early as the 1920s, the Palestine Zionist Executive, the Zionist Organization's organ of action, had joined forces with the JNF to seek the necessary funds to clean up the important agricultural settlements of Degania, Kinereth, and Merhavia. Jewish settlers in these three colonies, located west of the Jordan River in the Lake Tiberias region and in the Jezreel Valley, had been severely affected by malaria. In 1919, prior to the establishment of the Mandate, the Zionist Organization had even described the sanitary conditions of these areas as "most critical."¹⁵

10. Sir John Hope Simpson's report, *Palestine. Report on Immigration, Land Settlement and Development. Presented by the Secretary of State for the Colonies to Parliament by Command of His Majesty* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1930) 26.

11. Drainage (Surface Water) Ordinance, 1942. Israel State Archives, 2/13/726.

12. *Memorandum on the Water Resources of Palestine*, presented by the Government of Palestine to the United Nations' Special Committee on Palestine (Jerusalem: Government Printer, Government of Palestine, July 1947), 2.

13. See Hope Simpson, *Palestine. Report on Immigration*, 26.

14. *Pamphlets on Malaria, 1925–1926*, Israel State Archive, 2/28/6541.

15. Letter from the Zionist Commission for Palestine, July 24, 1919, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, Z4/4000.

In 1947, just as the British were preparing to hand over the Mandate to the United Nations, a series of drainage projects, chiefly for Arab villages in the Beisan region, Haifa, Acre, and Galilee, were planned, at an estimated total cost of over 200,000 Palestinian pounds. But the departure of the British from Palestine in May 1948 meant that they were never implemented.¹⁶

Despite the obvious political and strategic stakes, of which Zionist organizations had long been aware, throughout the Mandate the British saw wetland management primarily from a pragmatic and health perspective. By contrast, for the Zionists and the PICA, the question of drainage was a matter not just of public health but also of the development of agricultural land for Zionist colonization, making sanitation above all an issue of demographic and territorial development for the *Yishuv*. Jewish organizations consistently maintained dedicated budgets for drainage up until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. In the mid-1930s, these generous budgets allowed Zionist land-purchasing institutions to take an interest in the largest marshland in Palestine: the Hula region. The strategic, agricultural, and political dimensions of its drainage were to become as important as the eradication of malaria.

The conquest of the wetlands of the Lake Hula region

The marshes around Lake Hula, located in the extreme northeast of Palestine, are fed by the overflow of the lake in winter owing to the influx of water from the Jordan River. In 1914, part of this land was conceded by the Ottoman government to two Arab landowners from Beirut with a view to developing it.¹⁷ The Arab Ghawarina tribe occupied a significant portion of this Hula concession (Tyler 1994, 827); in 1906, 3,000 of its people were living in the territory (Frantzman and Kark 2001, 10). Having settled in the Hula region since the beginning of the nineteenth century, they lived in about a dozen villages.¹⁸

However, no major drainage operations were carried out during the years of the Arab concession, which ended in the 1930s. As soon as British administrative authority was imposed, in 1920, Zionist interest in the drainage and appropriation of the largest marshy area in Palestine, the Lake Hula Valley on the Syrian border, was expressed by Chaim Weizmann. As he indicated in his recommendations to Lord Curzon:

The most important district is the Lake of Huleh to the north of Tiberias. The drainage of the Lake of Huleh would have a triple advantage: Firstly it would get rid of the greatest centre of infection; secondly, it would set free a large tract of very fertile land; and thirdly, it would make available for irrigation the waters of Merom, which are at present a source of

16. *Memorandum on the Water Resources of Palestine*, 8.

17. Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, file KH7/78.

18. *Ibid.*

disease, thereby increasing the fertility of the neighbouring district perhaps tenfold.¹⁹

The Hula region, inhabited mainly by Bedouins, was presented here primarily as an area for the development of agricultural land in the northern region of Palestine, conditional upon drainage.

While the World Zionist Organization had been considering this drainage as early as 1920, the actual purchase of land in the region by the major Zionist organizations did not take place until the 1930s. In 1934, following several years of negotiations with the British and with the Arab landowners, the Palestine Land Development Company (PLDC) bought the Hula concession with a view to developing new agricultural settlements in the area, subject to major drainage works. In the mid-1930s, the JNF, in partnership with the PICA, complemented this agricultural pioneer front with further land purchases with the aim of increasing their value and agricultural yield through drainage (Katz 2005, 40). These acquisitions formed part of the Zionist strategy to develop new agricultural areas in regions where the Jewish population was still sparse.

Indeed, in the 1930s the context altered as the British increasingly sought to dissociate themselves from Zionist agrarian enterprises. The political and social unrest of 1929 and the Great Arab Revolt in Palestine in 1936 hardened the British power's policy on Jewish migration. The general idea was that too much Jewish immigration threatened the fragile equilibrium of Palestinian society, for economic reasons in particular. In 1930, the Hope Simpson report encouraged the British government to assess the country's capacity for economic absorption and to take into account the Jewish unemployment rate to determine a (more stringent) policy on Jewish migration to Palestine. Agricultural development and yield then became a major factor in Zionist justifications of continued immigration. According to the Zionist organizations, the marshes of Hula had significant agricultural potential, as also identified by the British, on the condition that major drainage operations were carried out.

Let us give another example of this politicization of the drainage of the wetlands. The Zionist interest in the marshlands of northern Galilee also illustrates Zionist territorial strategy. When the Peel Commission first considered (in 1936–1937) an initial plan for the partition of Palestine, and therefore a future Jewish state, it was important for the Zionists to extend as much as possible the territory that would be conceded to them. Establishing contiguous Jewish agricultural villages in the border areas of Mandatory Palestine was a long-term way of influencing the outline of the future Jewish national home.

19. Letter from Chaim Weizmann to Lord Curzon, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, February 2, 1920, Middle East Centre Archive, St Antony's College, University of Oxford, Herbert Samuel Collection.

Proof, if proof were needed, of the importance of drainage for the Zionists is David Ben-Gurion's speech at the Biltmore Conference in New York on May 12, 1942, where he praised the Zionists' transformation of the Hula marshes:

The Huleh Basin, the largest malarial zone in Palestine; classified not only by the Arabs but also by the government as uncultivable, [. . .] is now being turned by our Halutzim into the most prosperous and productive area of the country.²⁰

This eulogistic appraisal of the Zionist transformation of the region was somewhat excessive at the time, given that monumental drainage works would only really get underway during the early years of the State of Israel. It was in 1953, in fact, that works to dig drainage channels, to pull up papyrus, the traditional tree of the wetlands, and to remove peat were initiated²¹ in order to transform this area of several thousand acres into "one of the most fertile agricultural regions in the world," according to *The New York Times* on August 18, 1953.²² But the conquest of the marshlands also generated Zionist discourses on the status of Jewish pioneers and on the Palestinian environment.

The pioneer and the Palestinian environment in Zionist discourse

Throughout the Mandate, the territorial and agricultural conquest of marshy areas was accompanied by discourses highlighting the bravery of the first Jewish settlers and the technical capabilities of the Zionists. The various developments of Jewish agriculture in Palestine were quickly heralded as the realization of the founding ideals of Zionism: the renewed rooting of Jews from Europe in the soil of *Eretz Israel*, their regeneration through working the land, and the return of Palestine to a dreamt-of fertility (Ben-Amos 2010, 173–200). Through the study of the conquest of these lands, we can analyze the development of the myth of the Zionist pioneer as well as the Zionist discourse on the Palestinian environment.

Redemption through working the land

The conquest of the marshlands lay at the heart of the Zionist ideal of the redemption of the Jews through working the land. The idea of a return of the Jewish people to cultivating the land responded to the Zionist desire to break with diaspora life (considered a debased life, far from contact with the land

20. David Ben-Gurion, "The Biltmore Program," Extraordinary Zionist Conference, Biltmore Hotel, New York, May 11, 1942. <https://israeled.org/resources/documents/biltmore-program/>.

21. "Hula Drainage" file, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem, 5-13/1500.

22. See the article by D. A. Schmidt, "Israel is Draining Swamps for Farms," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1953.



Figure 3: A tractor in the marshes of the kibbutz Nir David in the Beit She'an Valley, December 1936. Unknown Photographer, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

and with agriculture) and to form a new Jew, who would draw strength from renewed contact with *Eretz Israel*. The first Jewish migrants who worked to establish agricultural colonies were therefore called “pioneers.” As Georges Bensoussan writes, “pioneerism is the illustration of Zionism in action” (2005, 641). The choice of the word “pioneer” (*halutz*) to designate the first Jewish farmers is not insignificant, for the pioneers were, in Zionist thought, in the vanguard of the gathering of the Jewish people in Palestine (Sternhell 2004, 137). Thus, their actions in draining and transforming agricultural land were to be understood as a political step toward the future Jewish national home, while land development was seen as bolstering the legitimacy of the Zionist project to claim the land of Palestine.

Historians can analyze the role of the marshlands in the formation of the myth of the pioneer by looking at Zionist accounts of the founding of agricultural colonies, the Zionist press, and the memoirs of Jewish actors involved in colonization. The JNF, along with other Zionist organizations, published accounts in Hebrew, English, and sometimes French that retrace the early years of the agricultural colonies and their evolution. By disseminating information about their agricultural and political actions in Europe and the United States, these works aimed to convince readers of the merits of the Zionist project in *Eretz Israel*.

The drainage of the marshlands is a *topos* in these foundation stories. Take the example of Hadera, an agricultural settlement founded in the early years of the twentieth century in the marshlands of northern Palestine. In 1938, the Zionist writer and farmer Moshe Smilansky published in Tel Aviv, in both Hebrew and English, a booklet that illustrates the connection commonly made in Zionist accounts between the appropriation of the marshlands and “pioneerism.” Following a detailed description of the marshy landscape of Hadera and the agricultural challenges it poses, he recounts a dialogue he supposedly had with another settler:

“And what of the swamps?” asked one of my comrades.
 “Swamps! Nonsense! Rubbish! We shall reclaim them... plant woods... sow wheat. There’s no more fertile land anywhere than reclaimed swamps! The swamps will be drained! We shall plant trees there, sow wheat! Youthful spirits rose again. (Smilansky 1938, 15)

The sanitization of the marshes was presented as the very site for the expression of the courage and hope of the pioneers. In these accounts, the difficulties posed by the development of the marshlands serve to exalt the heroic figure of the pioneer ready to make any sacrifice to ensure the success of the Zionist project. His commitment sometimes extended even to his death, making him a martyr for the Zionist cause. And, indeed, malaria did kill many Jewish settlers in Hadera. In his account, Smilansky highlights the inhabitants’ reactions to the scale of the epidemic and the risks run by the pioneers:

Nevertheless, no man stirred from his place. Were we to run away from the battle? Leave Hadera to revert to its former state? How could we? Some even said, Better to die for Hadera than to live without her! (Smilansky 1938, 37)

This account of the founding of Hadera glorifies the pioneers’ sense of sacrifice for the Zionist cause in order to legitimate the program of agricultural colonization in Palestine and, no doubt, to prompt readers to take action for the cause themselves. Financial donations from Zionist sympathizers around the world were the main source of financing for the Zionist Organization and land-purchasing companies (Katz 2005). It was therefore essential that these bodies presented their work as a concrete implementation of Zionist ideas in Palestine. The tribulations of pioneers in the marshlands of the Zionist settlements served as literary material for exalting these men and their agricultural enterprise. The purchase of the Hula concession in 1934 by the Palestine Land Development Company resulted in the publication of further stories to promote the work of the pioneers. For example, a small booklet written in English entitled *Huleh*, of which 38,000 copies were printed in Palestine in the 1940s, describes in grandiloquent terms the hardships that awaited pioneers in these marshlands:

The Huleh project demands the mobilisation of our best energies: the utmost strength and the protracted efforts which our pioneers have at all times invested in their labour of upbuilding in Palestine. It demands enormous physical exertion, fearless experimenting, disease, the assumption of primitive standards of life, and a readiness to offer every sacrifice they may be called upon to make. But our halutzim will not fail us.²³

The marshes were perceived and presented as spaces for the expression and development of all those characteristics attributed to the new Jew regenerated through working the land: vitality, physical strength, courage, sacrifice, and determination.

For the Zionists, the marshlands were not just sites of the rebirth of their people, but also spaces in which to demonstrate their ability to transform the Palestinian environment in a way that was compatible with their perception of what *Eretz Israel* ought to be.

This heroic discourse, in which pioneers and the draining of the marshes were treated in a spirit worthy of Soviet collectivism, embellishes the often far more difficult personal stories of people for whom the passage through the marshes often ended in failure and abandonment (Bensoussan 2005, 643). We have seen how Ben-Gurion, when he arrived in 1906, had suffered from malaria without it making him any bolder a pioneer—in 1910 he became a journalist in Jerusalem.

The transformation of the Palestinian space in the development of the Zionist discourse

In the *Cahiers juifs*, published in French in 1935, Ben-Gurion described the role of Zionist action in the transformation of the Palestinian space:

The government's definition of "non-cultivable" soil is also rather original: it refers, they claim [here Ben-Gurion is referring sarcastically to the claims of the Mandatory government], to soil that does not yield to the primitive cultivation methods of the fellahs. According to this definition, the Hula region, one of the richest and most fertile in Palestine, is to be considered uncultivable. Our task is therefore not only to acquire more and more land, but also to render fertile lands that have been full of rocks and silt for centuries, and to work the lands that have been cleared with ever-increasing intensity.²⁴

In this account penned by the head of the Jewish Agency, we find all the principal features of the Zionist discourses developed during the British Mandate regarding what the lands of Palestine should be: spaces hitherto abandoned by

23. Unknown author, *Huleh* (Jerusalem: Goldberg's Press, unknown date), consulted in file number KH7/78, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

24. David Ben-Gurion in *Les Cahiers juifs* (Paris, 1935), cited in (Ben-Gurion 1986, 88).

Palestinian peasants, but which are being and will be transformed and made fertile by Zionist work and techniques. According to this discourse, the centuries-old presence of Arabs on Palestinian land had been a failure, owing to “primitive techniques” that failed to make the whole of the territory fertile. The Zionists were thus painted as the bearers of a new “modernity” and technical efficiency that fully legitimated their presence and their acquisition of land.

In this characteristic passage, as in many other texts since the end of the nineteenth century, marshlands such as the Hula region represented spaces for the development of a Zionist discourse on the Palestinian environment that revolved around three main points: the denigration of the Arabs’ use of the marshlands; the demonstration of the efficiency of the techniques developed by the Zionists, which they judged to be “modern” as opposed to the “primitiveness” of those of the Arabs; and, finally, the pursuit of a remodeling of the lands of Palestine so that they may better correspond to the fantasized fertility of *Eretz Israel*. These discourses were developed, once again, in pamphlets relating foundational narratives, as well as in more scientifically oriented writings produced by Zionist researchers recognized in the European and North American academic world.

The creation of an environmental discourse denigrating the inhabitants’ agricultural techniques and promoting the importing of new modes of land appropriation by Europeans is not specific to Mandatory Palestine, and it should be placed in the historical context of colonial societies. Recent research by Diana K. Davis (2012) situates the questioning of the legitimacy of Algerian peasants’ agricultural techniques within the discourses emanating from the French colonial power. In Mandatory Palestine, Zionist academic writings and accounts of agricultural colonization were constructed so as to legitimate before the British Mandatory authorities the establishment of a Jewish national home and, subsequently, in the late 1930s, the demand for a state. Well aware of the twofold obligation enshrined in the Charter for the British Mandate in Palestine (Picaudou 2006, 159–76), the Zionists sought to demonstrate in their discourse that the transformations of the environment that they were carrying out would also benefit the Arab population. They presented themselves as the only people capable of cleaning up the marshlands thanks to their technical knowledge, but they also emphasized the mythologized belonging of the Jews to the land of Palestine.

Similarly, the Zionists noted the lack of large-scale drainage works in the Hula region by the Arab landowners of the concession before they took it over. For the Zionists, this negligence was proof of the Arabs’ inability to render the Palestinian soil fruitful. Two articles on the Hula concession, one published in the Zionist newspaper *Davar* on December 3, 1934, the other written in 1935 by Julian L. Meltzer²⁵ in an orientalist-tinged style, presented the Bedouins of

25. Articles collected in file KH7-78, Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

this region as incapable of increasing the agricultural capacities of the marshlands. Thus, the Zionists imposed in their writings, which were disseminated in British, European, and North American circles, a particular perception of the environment according to which all Palestinian land, whether marshland, rocky terrain, or desert, had to be worked in order to ensure long-term economic and agricultural development. This conception was intimately linked to the Zionists' need to justify a mass immigration.

This discourse on the Palestinian environment was, of course, rooted in a reconstructed history of Palestine wherein the biblical and Roman periods corresponded to models of fertility to which the Zionists wished to return. Writings from the Bible, the Talmud, and Flavius Josephus were used, both in foundational narratives and in scientific writings, as sources of reflection in order to transform the Palestinian environment, thereby blotting out and delegitimizing the period of Arab and especially Ottoman rule. In a more general sense, this was the prevailing discourse during the colonial period regarding the Near East—once fertile in ancient, and especially Roman, times, but doomed to decline after the Arab and Bedouin invasions, which supposedly led to the rise of extensive livestock farming, to the detriment of cities and agriculture. The Ottoman rule was seen to have reinforced this process. In the Syrian Mandate, the French colonizer used similar reasoning and shared the historical vision promoted by the Zionists in Palestine (Weulersse 1946). One of the booklets promoting the Zionists' purchase of the Hula concession retraces the history of this valley as follows:

It is frequently mentioned in the Talmud that the Huleh valley possessed an abundance of olive trees and oil. In the time of Josephus it was one of the most populous settlements in Palestine. It is now an unexploited treasure-trove, covered over with a surface of bogs and slime, from which cultivators must once more extract its wealth in full measure.²⁶

Significantly, the draining of the marshes was not presented by the Zionists as an unprecedented transformation of Palestine, but as a return to a period of ancient fertility.

At the end of the nineteenth century and during the British Mandate, Zionist territorial conquest was therefore strongly imbued with the idea of the reconquest of what had once been known as “the land of milk and honey.” The marshlands lay at the heart of the construction of this Zionist discourse on the Palestinian environment. By the late 1930s, however, discourses around the appropriation of the wetlands of Palestine were superseded by those concerning the conquest of the desert.

26. Unknown author, *Huleh*.

The decline of the conquest of the wetlands in favor of the conquest of the desert

In the late 1930s and during the following decade—in other words, at the end of the British Mandate period and in the early years of the State of Israel—Zionist discourse on the heroic transformation of the marshlands into fertile land gradually faded in favor of the myth of the conquest of the desert. This erasure created a new Zionist history of the conquest of Palestine, one that was even more striking and no doubt more politically profitable: having been constructed in the marshlands, “pioneerism” now turned toward the southern desert, the Negev. Writings at the end of the 1930s concentrated more on the Zionists’ capacity to transform the desert, but they used the same arguments that had been developed for the marshlands: the idea of technical superiority (presented as Western) over the Arabs (inherently unfit because of their backwardness), an idea that went hand in hand with an emphasis on the Jewish people’s historical link with the desert. This change was the result of new Zionist territorial approaches that emerged as the end of the British Mandate loomed. David Ben-Gurion expressed this need for additional territorial conquests as early as the mid-1930s: “Even the acquisition of the Hula Valley is no longer commensurate with mass colonization.”²⁷ In fact, the Zionists sought to acquire new spaces in which to accommodate Jewish migration at a time of high political tension within the Mandate—the so-called “revolution” of 1936, a huge Arab protest against Zionist colonization. It was then that the project of partition became, for the first time, inevitable, due to the Peel Commission. The Peel Plan of 1937, which was meant to respond to the troubles of 1936, proposed an initial plan for the partition of Palestine (Vareilles 2009). However, the outline of the future Jewish state excluded the Negev desert from its territory (Laurens 2002, 348); this was to become a crucial issue.

This interest in the desert as a vital space for colonization intensified during the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, as the triumph of Nazism in Europe precipitated the exodus of those Jews still able to flee, and as the White Paper of May 1939 acted to limit—at the worst possible moment—immigration to Palestine and the potential for Zionist land purchases. Confronted with this situation, Zionist organizations, in particular the JNF, sought to establish a presence in the desert in order to influence the contours of the future state and to enable the mass arrival of migrants (Dieckhoff 1989, 36). The aim was to continue the Zionist territorial strategy that had been in place since the beginning of the twentieth century: to create agricultural colonies in areas hitherto devoid of Jewish presence. These land purchases were no longer made according to Ottoman land law but within the framework of restrictions imposed by the British power (Katz 2005). The desert was portrayed as the

27. David Ben-Gurion in *Les Cahiers juifs* (Paris, 1935), cited in (Ben-Gurion 1986, 88).

greatest technical challenge the Zionists had faced yet, as David Ben-Gurion pointed out in one of his speeches:

Jewish society needs the Negev and must bring its members there. The supreme test for Israel at this stage of its history is not to fight against the hostile forces positioned on its borders, but to render fertile the arid lands that make up 60 percent of its territory.

Undoubtedly, the desert, more than the unexpected marsh, corresponded to the Zionist (and more generally Western) imaginary of ancient Palestine, the one that the *Yishuv* (and soon the State of Israel) strived to recreate. What is more, the biblical image of the Hebrews walking through the desert maintained a powerful presence in British Protestants' representations. This historical and religious link between the Jewish people and the desert is emphasized in the memoirs of the first leader of the State of Israel:

Nowhere, not even in Jerusalem, is continuity with our past so meaningful. Abraham understood the Negev and the importance it would have in the lives of his people, which is very close to what we think in Israel today. (Ben-Gurion 1986, 210)

First told and retold during the draining of the marshes, the glorification of Zionist “pioneerism” reached its pinnacle in the conquest of the desert: an image that was more romantic and ultimately more politically convenient—since a desert has no inhabitants—than the draining of unsanitary marshes inhabited by fellahs. When Ben-Gurion died in 1973, he was buried at the grandiose site of Sde Boker, a Negev kibbutz dedicated to the cultivation of arid lands, not in the plantations of Galilee where he had once suffered from malaria.

Conclusion

In his writings on agronomy, Isaac Elazari-Volcani put forward the principle that he believed ought to guide the success of Zionist agricultural colonization in Palestine: “We cannot afford to reject the most inferior soil or the worst climates of the country’s zones.”²⁸ The idea that the Jews had a duty to transform at all costs the most difficult areas of Palestine can be understood very well through the history of the conquest of the marshlands. Chosen for practical reasons as the first sites for the establishment of Jewish agricultural colonies at the end of the nineteenth century, the marshlands would be fully

28. See Isaac Elazari-Volcani, “Rational Planning of Agricultural Settlement in Palestine,” paper given at the 18th Zionist Congress, Prague, 1933 (Jerusalem: Keren Hayesod, 1935), 7.

integrated into the Zionist territorial strategy of land conquest to establish the Jewish national home during the British Mandate. As lands to be cleaned-up, the marshlands were sites for the implementation of Zionist ideas of Jewish regeneration and the rebirth of the fertility of *Eretz Israel*. In the 1950s, the draining of the marshes surrounding Lake Hula was completed. Relegated to one of the early achievements of Zionism, the transformation of the wetlands gave way to the great work of developing the Negev. The conquest of the desert, in particular through the work of the National Water Carrier, inaugurated in 1964, which diverted the waters of Lake Tiberias toward the north of the Negev, replaced that of the marshlands in the ideal of Zionist, now Israeli, “pioneerism.” Today, the former marshland area of Lake Hula is an area of intensive agriculture, while the lake is a nature reserve managed by the Jewish National Fund—proof for the Hebrew state of its ability to preserve the environment.

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Abstract

The heroic figure of the Zionist pioneer. The appropriation of the marshlands in Palestine (from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1950s)

This paper focuses on Jewish and Zionist strategies to appropriate marshlands in Palestine from the end of the nineteenth century to the early years of the State of Israel. Mainly located in the Jezreel Valley around Lake Hula and along the coastal plain, the marshy, malaria-infested areas were first purchased by Jewish settlers because of their low price. In a context of growing political tension between the Jewish and Arab populations during the British Mandate (1922–1948), acquiring and draining the marshlands became a key part of the Zionist territorial strategy to build a Jewish “national home.” These marshy areas bore witness to the implementation of the Zionist ideals of Jewish “regeneration” and the transformation of the land of Israel.

Keywords: British Mandate, Palestine, agricultural colonization, drainage, malaria, marshes, Zionism.

Résumé

La figure héroïque du pionnier sioniste. L'appropriation des zones marécageuses de Palestine (in XIX^e s.-années 1950)

Cet article analyse l'évolution des stratégies juives et sionistes d'appropriation des zones marécageuses de Palestine, de la fin du XIX^e siècle aux premières années de l'État d'Israël. Situés principalement dans la vallée de Jezréel, autour du lac Hula et dans la plaine côtière, les espaces marécageux, infestés par la malaria, sont achetés par les premiers agriculteurs juifs en raison de leur moindre coût. Dans le cadre de la montée des tensions politiques entre populations juive et arabe pendant le Mandat britannique (1922-1948), les zones marécageuses et leur drainage sont placés au cœur des stratégies territoriales pour la construction du futur Foyer national juif. Ces espaces témoignent de la mise en action des idéaux sionistes de « régénération » des juifs et de transformation de la terre d'Israël.

Mots-clés : Mandat britannique, Palestine, colonisation agricole, drainage, malaria, marécage, sionisme.