

A Revitalized City in the Desert: Beersheba During the Ottoman Period

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Abstract

Throughout the 400-year reign of the Ottoman Empire over the Palestinian territories, the majority of its construction efforts were focused on and around Jerusalem. The Ottoman Empire decided to create a new city in the Beersheba region in 1900, driven by various factors and made significant efforts to transform it into a modern city comparable to European cities. The city of Beersheba was meticulously laid out using the grid/Hippodamian plan, a fundamental feature of Roman urban architecture.

This article is a case study of Beersheba. The foundation of the city of Beersheba, located by the Ottoman Empire near the Negev Desert, the structures built in the city, the meaning of the city of Beersheba and the region where the city is located for the Ottoman Empire are emphasized. The most important question asked is why the Ottoman Empire needed to establish a city in the middle of the desert and what method was followed in the establishment of this city. It is also discussed how the city developed and what was done accordingly.

The article was prepared based on archive sources. In this research, documents in the State Archives and the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives were examined. Archival documents are of great importance as they are the primary sources of the period. In addition, studies providing information about the general history, foundation and demographic structure of the city were also used. Thus, a contextual analysis was tried to be created on the multi-faceted subject and the case study method was used in this research.

It concludes that the Ottoman Empire wanted to assert its power and authority and establish a modern city in this newly established city. For this purpose, architects trained in Europe have worked. The Ottoman Empire built many public institutions, mosques, and schools in the city. It managed to assert its power and authority by choosing the locations where the structures were built. It is still possible to read these traces in the city today.

Keywords: Beersheba, desert, grid plan, Negev, Ottoman Empire.

Introduction

The initial habitation in the Beersheba commenced in the 4th century BC, specifically during the Copper Age. It is presumed to have been destroyed or abandoned many times (Whelan, 2020). The Mosaic Map of Madaba in the 6th century AD illustrates Beersheba's location as a city situated to the south of Judea. The settlement is characterized by a multitude of buildings, distinguishing it from other cities in the Negev (Varga & Talis, 2021). The region fell under Muslim dominion in the 7th century AD and subsequently became deserted. The biblical location of Beersheba was misinterpreted during the Crusader Kingdom, and another settlement 60 km to the north was named Beersheba. The error was rectified during the early 20th century when the Turks founded a new enduring colony (Avni et. al. 2016).

Palestine lands, which fell under Ottoman sovereignty in 1517, remained under Ottoman rule until 1917. There was no administrative organization in the region until 1900. Urbanization efforts were concentrated in and around Jerusalem (Bahadır, 2018). The article focuses on why the Beersheba region, where no administrative structuring or settlement was attempted for four hundred years, experienced a great change and development in the second half of the 19th century. Its objectives are:

- To find an answer to the question of what the reasons behind the revitalization of the Beersheba region as a city in the 19th century were and what was done in the city for this purpose.
- To evaluate and document the change that the city experienced in the 19th century from an architectural perspective.

Theoretical Framework

The concepts of city and urbanization have become common research subjects of different disciplines. Each discipline has looked at the subject from a different perspective. In general, cities are defined as places with a certain population size. However, urbanization cannot be explained only by population. Aktüre (1985) defines the city as follows: It is a type of settlement where non-agricultural production is carried out intensively, all rural and urban production is supervised, distribution is controlled, and has the elements brought by a certain technology. Ortaylı (2008) also defines the city as: settlements where division of labor and specialization are more developed than other types of settlements and where qualified human resources are concentrated.

According to Keleş (1973), urbanization: "is an event that results in the increase in the number of cities and the growth of existing cities in parallel with industrialization and economic development, creating organization, division of labor and specialization in the social structure".

Lerner (1958) says that urbanization is the first stage of modernization. Because after the Industrial Revolution, there was a rapid wave of immigration and as a result, modern cities emerged in today's sense. That's why historians define the emergence of cities as the birth of civilizations (Kaypak, 2013). Urbanization has both interacted with the social structure of societies and transformed and reshaped the social structure over time. The change and transformation effect of urbanization on the social structure did not occur suddenly but has continued to this day as a process that extends over a long period of time (Tosun, 1995).

Aktüre (1985) states that significant changes took place in the field of administration in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. These changes, which emerged with the visibility of the central state, also brought about changes in the spatial structure of cities. The first of these changes is the "administrative center" focused on the government office. Another change that emerged in the spatial structure of the city emerged in the administrative organization of the army. With this change, the soldiers of the new army who provided security in the city were placed in barracks built outside the cities but along the main transportation axes.

With all these changes carried out consciously and systematically in the urban space over a certain period of time, the concept of "urban transformation" has emerged. According to Özden (2001), one of the reasons leading to this is "Revival- Revitalization". This event is

social, cultural, economic, physical, etc. It is the revitalization of the city, which has fallen into disrepair due to reasons such as, by removing the elements that caused this bad situation.

Literature Review

Robinson (1908) says that Beersheba was just a name in 1900. He adds that Beersheba was a watering place in the desert, had a single stone building, and looked like a large village with many tents. According to Amara (2012), and Solomonovich & Kark (2020), In 1899, there was a sharp increase in the Bedouin population in Gaza, the amount of land held by the Bedouin population. This led to the disputes between the Bedouins and also led the Ottoman government to search for a new place for them. According to Yenişehirlioğlu (2001), after Egypt was taken over by the British in 1882, the British were carrying out propaganda against the Arab Bedouins in the Sinai region. That's why the Ottomans deemed it appropriate to establish a new settlement for the Arab Bedouins living in this region.

Avcı (2009) states that a new settlement was established in the Beersheba region as a result of the Ottoman centralization efforts in the second half of the 19th century. She also states that the disputes between Bedouin tribes since the day the Ottomans dominated the region have caused this.

Meir (1992) emphasizes that the Ottoman Empire wanted to create a new city near the Negev desert that would serve as a regional center for administrative, commercial, and military activities. The location chosen for the construction of this new metropolis is strategically located in the heart of the territory of five prominent Bedouin tribes. In addition, the water wells in this area and the railway in the surrounding area are also important in choosing Beersheba.

According to Biger (2013), Ottoman authorities made plans for new cities in and around Palestine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Ottomans built new cities to respond to the need to protect his borders against Bedouin tribes and to expand old cities. One of these cities was Beersheba. At the same time, the changes experienced in the Middle East, and especially in Palestine, in the second half of the 19th century led to the establishment of new agricultural settlements and new towns.

According to Berelovich & Kark (2023), the reasons why the Beersheba region was chosen by the Ottoman government were: it had a good water supply, it was close to the road connecting Gaza and Hebron, it was also close to the Egyptian border, which could serve as a trade center.

According to Avni et al (2016), Beersheba's strategic location as the gateway to the Negev desert played an important role in the decision to build and develop it as an economic, political, and cultural center. This view of Avni et al. is supported by the following statement by Kark & Frantzman (2012): The Ottoman government registered land on the Negev and its nomadic population and granted land to local sheikhs within the municipality. A marketplace was established in the region and the region became a trade center. The Negev changed dramatically, thanks to the permanent military presence in the region and the settled villages in the surrounding area.

Nasasra & Stanley (2023) point out that the basis of the Ottoman Empire's project was the belief that urbanization was necessary. For this, the Bedouins living between Sinai and Jordan must be adapted to the settled order and modern life.

Büssow (2023) describes the newly founded city of Beersheba as follows: "can be interpreted as a material representation of the separation of powers that characterized late Ottoman government. The Saray was the seat of the civilian government, the barracks and armory were the seat of the military, and the court was the seat of the judiciary and religious administration".

Research Methodology

As stated, this is a case study. It was made in the field of Architectural History. The historical case, which constitutes one leg of the subject, consists of documents that can be collected about the past and the temporal limitation of the subject. In this regard, it is possible

to collect the sources used in the study under two headings. The first of these is primary sources and the other is secondary sources.

1) Primary sources: Ottoman Archives within the State Archives were researched within the scope of the subject. The documents in the Ottoman Archives consist of written documents and plans, sketches and drawings related to buildings. Written documents consist of official correspondence providing information about the period. Plans and drawings provide us with architectural information about the structures built in the region. In addition, photographs, which are also primary sources, are other materials used in the study. Photographs from the period in the American Library of Congress and the Australian War Memorial give us important information.

2) It is possible to divide the secondary sources used in the research into two groups. The first of these consists of studies that look at the subject from a historical perspective. When selecting these studies, studies with main sources as reference points were preferred. Other branches of science dealing with the subject are architecture and urbanism. The studies of researchers who have done research in the field and who know the region on topics such as how the city was founded, its core, and how it developed were investigated.

3) In line with historical data and information obtained from different disciplines, the plot of events is presented chronologically to answer the questions of when, why and how the city was founded and what was done in this established city.

The Case Study: Beersheba

Beersheba (called Birüssebi in the Ottoman period) is located within the borders of the present-day state of Israel. Beersheba is the fourth largest city in Israel, after Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa. It has the Sinai Mountains in the north, the Negev desert in the south, Gaza in the east, and the Dead Sea in the west (Fig. 1). Although it is located close to the desert, it has a more temperate climate. In addition, the abundance of water resources in the region has made Beersheba an important place throughout history.

Beersheba's history as a settlement dates back 5500 years. It was mostly used as a seasonal marketplace, a meeting point, and occasionally for agricultural and residential purposes. In the 7th century, the region came under Islamic rule. During the Crusades, a region approximately 60 km north of its biblical location was mistakenly named Beersheba. 1200 years later, during Ottoman rule, its biblical location was transformed into a settlement (Luz, 2005).



Fig. 1: Location of Beersheba on the map
Source: Britannica, 2024

Throughout the 400-year period of Ottoman dominion, Palestine was governed from either Gaza, the Negev, or Jerusalem. Gaza serves as the administrative hub of the Negev region (Nasara, 2015). In 1899, Gaza encompassed five prominent tribes consisting of 70-80

thousand Bedouins and 70 urban centers and settlements. The indigenous communities in this region possessed a land area exceeding five million acres. However, conflicts over land ownership in the area hindered the ability to cultivate sufficient land. Hence, the Ottoman administration recognized the necessity of establishing a fresh district specifically for the Bedouin population (Amara, 2012; Solomonovich & Kark, 2020).

The Ottoman Empire sought to maintain its authority over the border in the Sinai Peninsula following Egypt's subjugation to British rule in 1882. Since the Sinai region became the border between the Ottoman Empire and Britain and due to the British propaganda on the Arab tribes there, the Ottoman Empire deemed it appropriate to establish a city in Beersheba, which was close to the Sinai region and where Arab Bedouins were densely populated (Yenişehirlioğlu, 2001). Also, the Ottoman Empire intensified its efforts to centralize power in the latter part of the 19th century and attempted to address the longstanding issues associated with the Bedouin tribes, which had remained since the Ottoman Empire's dominance in the region. The Ottomans endeavored to assimilate the Bedouins into a sedentary lifestyle with the aim of resolving the conflicts between them and the Bedouin tribes, as well as addressing the internal issues within the Bedouin tribes themselves (Avcı, 2009).

During this period, the Ottoman Empire did not establish a new settlement in Palestinian lands only in Beersheba. New cities such as Baisan, Caesarea, Auja and Acre were also established. The Ottoman authorities devised blueprints for the construction of novel urban centers and communities. In order to establish contemporary urban centers, they engaged in partnerships with European architects and locally trained architects who had received education in Europe. The cities were constructed using a rudimentary grid system (Fig. 2) as its foundation (Biger, 2013).

The Ottoman Empire sought to create a new city near the Negev desert to serve as a regional hub for administrative, commercial, and military activities. The selected site for the building of this new metropolis was strategically located at the heart of the territory belonging to the five prominent Bedouin tribes. Additionally, there were other water wells present in this vicinity. The presence of the railroad in the vicinity was also a significant advantage (Meir, 1992). The reason was that this new city had to be connected to the surrounding regions to facilitate transportation.

The key components for mobility between the adjacent regions and Beersheba were bridges and roadways. Additionally, it was imperative to expeditiously finish these roadways to facilitate the transportation of essential goods to the newly established city. Therefore, it was decided to build a bridge between Gaza and Beersheba over the existing valley (Wadi Saba) and to build a 55 km long road between Beersheba and Khalilurrahman (Bahadır, 2018; Avcı, 2009).

The Ottoman authorities sought the expertise of four architects - one from Switzerland, one from Germany, and two who received their training in Germany - to develop the blueprint for this city, which was established in 1900. The architects devised a blueprint for a metropolis situated in the desert, with a grid pattern that deviated from the typical urban layouts found in Middle Eastern cities (Biger, 2013). The city was established by initially acquiring 2,000 acres of land. Subsequently, the Bedouins who desired to establish a permanent residence and construct houses in this area were given the essential amenities. Additionally, free land was assigned to the Bedouins from the acquired properties (BOA. DH. MKT. 2414/95; BOA. İ. DH.1380/36). The city streets had a width of 15 meters and were composed of plots that were 60 meters wide. The town also had a primary main street measuring 20 meters in width (Meir, 1992; Biger, 2013).



Fig. 2: An aerial photograph of the city of Beersheba founded by the Ottomans – 1918
Source: Avni et. al., 2016

The Ottoman Empire employed all means possible to establish a genuinely modern city. To this end, streets and avenues were afforested, a park was built in the center of the city (Bahadır, 2018), and many public buildings such as the government office, mosque, police station, governor's residence, post office, and school were constructed (Biger, 2013). The first park and geometric garden at Beersheba was established as a manifestation of the Ottoman Empire's aspiration to cultivate vegetation in the arid desert. The garden exhibits similarities to geometric gardens in the French tradition. However, the significance of the well-coordinated garden is also associated with traditional Middle Eastern and Islamic customs. The palace gardens serve as a representation of the ruler's authority and the Circle of Justice, which is a longstanding concept in Ottoman political philosophy. The garden symbolizes abundance, effective leadership, fairness, and overall balance (Büssow, 2023).

Findings and the Discussion

Beersheba Mosque

An archival document from 1900 in the Ottoman Archives enumerates the names of the buildings that were planned for construction to accommodate the inhabitants of Beersheba. These include a government office, a prison, and a mosque. Proposals for the construction of two mosques, one of significant size and the other of smaller scale, were formally presented (Fig. 3). The document contains the cost calculation based on the discovery. According to the statement, the larger mosque would feature a vaulted courtyard on three sides, accommodate a congregation of 400 individuals, and could be constructed for a total cost of 245,000 kurus. Based on the information provided, the proposed modest mosque is designed to accommodate 200 individuals and is anticipated to cost 130,000 kurus. Additionally, provisions will be included to allow for future expansion if needed (BOA. Y.MTV. 204/50). The implementation of a grand mosque was undertaken to make a favorable impression on the Bedouins (Amara, 2021). The mosque's dome deviates from the traditional Ottoman style, featuring a tall and pointed shape. It shares similarities with the domes of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Seljuk periods. The mosque's architecture exhibits an eclectic style that is characteristic of both the region and the Ottoman Empire. The mosque's exterior is partitioned into three pieces, each adorned with plinths and enlivened by three pointed arch forms. Furthermore, each pointed arch of the building features a skylight, while the window openings take the form of twin horseshoe arches, which are commonly observed in Umayyad, Byzantine, and Mamluk architectural structures (Çelebi, 2023).

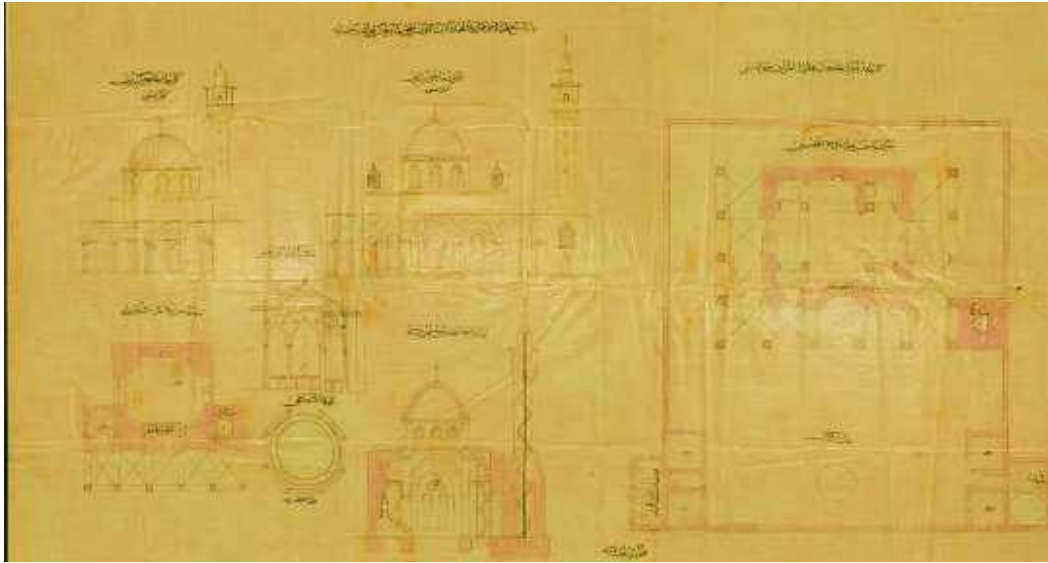


Fig. 3: Layout of the Two Mosques

Source: BOA. Y.MTV. 204/50



Fig. 4: Photograph of the mosque 1914-1918

Source: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C254306>

This monumental mosque can be associated with the Islamist policy that was tried to be implemented in Arab countries during the reign of Abdul Hamid II. The architectural characteristics of the structure are well-suited for this particular objective. The mosque was constructed in an amalgamation of capital and local architectural styles, resulting in an eclectic design. The courtyard located on the northern side of the mosque mirrors the architectural design of the Selâtin Mosque, featuring an enclosed prayer area and a dome. The plan, which embodied the centralized sultanate ideology of the Ottoman Empire's classical era, became the favored architectural style for mosques commissioned by regional rulers after the 17th century as a symbol of their authority (Yenişehirlioğlu, 2001).

Boarding School

Another document from the Ottoman Archive discloses plans for the construction of a residential school in the area. The archive document comprises architectural blueprints and elevation drawings of the school (BOA. DH. İD. 59/72). There are three plan drawings and one facade drawing that seems to depict the main entry facade. There are no directional arrows on the drawing (Fig. 5). Designed as a school building, it has two floors. Floor plans and facades are drawn separately. There is also a single-story building plan. This facility contains many designated areas, including a dining hall, pantry, kitchen, and janitor's room. When approaching the school building from the rear exit, one can observe a dining hall located in the center, with service areas situated on either side.

The ground floor of the school is comprised of rooms located on both sides of a passageway. The main entrance door is flanked by classrooms on both sides, with a teacher's room located at the end of the classrooms on the right side, a janitor's room on the left side, and restrooms nearby. At the terminus of the corridor, there is a landing that may be accessed by two branches of a trilateral staircase, as well as an exit leading to the exterior. A third branch in the middle of the two branches leads from the landing to the upper floor. On the upper floor, on both sides of the corridor, there are dormitories (wards) with bathrooms and toilets. The school building's front exterior, which houses the main entrance, is divided into three sections with plinths designed like Tuscan columns. There are three openings on the first-floor protruding in the center. The gap in the middle is lowered to the floor level unlike the other two windows. Above the opening in the center is the inscription "*Leyli Zükür Mektebi* (Boys Boarding School)." The widths and heights of the window and door openings are the same on the facade. A large floor molding is employed on the facade to provide separation between the floors. There are a total of six windows in the center on both floors and four windows on each side on both floors. The windows on the lower floor have flat arches, while the windows on the upper floor have flat lintels. There are stone jambs around the windows. The drawing made under the windowsill shows that some embossed decorations were thought to be placed under the windows. There are also iron grilles on the ground floor windows (Çelebi, 2023).

Findings from the scanning of the facade indicates that the original intention was to construct it using stone. The building is covered with a wooden hipped roof. The primary entrance of the building is elevated by a set of five steps located on one of the shorter sides. There is a projection above the entrance door. A portico was constructed by positioning four columns with composite capitals beneath the overhang, resulting in a grand entrance configuration.

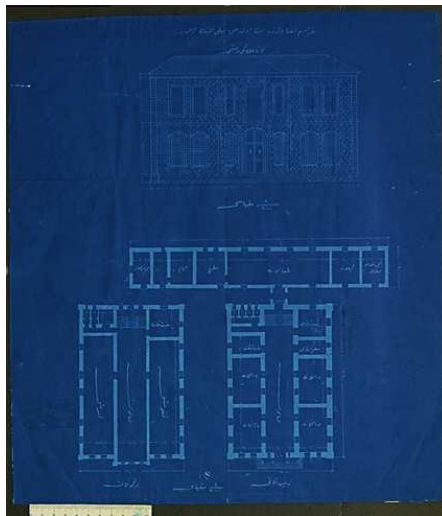


Fig. 5: Layout of the Boarding School
Source: BOA. DH. İD. 59/72

Government Office

One more document within the collection, dated 1900, seeks authorization to construct a governmental residence and a prison near Beersheba, along with a telegraph connection extending from Gaza to the area. Based on this document, the estimated cost for constructing the government home is 195,000 kuras, the prison is 95,000 kuras, and the telegraph line is 15,000 kuras (BOA. DH. MKT. 2354/12).

The government office was one of the initial structures constructed in this settlement, situated in the heart of the desert. The government building was situated on one of the city's most elevated sites. A two-story government building was constructed on this selected spot (Fig. 6). The construction of government buildings was thought to foster a sense of security and order, leading inhabitants to perceive that the authorities had territorial control (Solomonovich & Kark, 2020).



Fig. 6: Government Office built in Beersheba

Source: Nasasra, 2015.

There is a projection on the front facade of the building above the entrance door. A semicircular arched entrance porch was formed by positioning four columns beneath the overhang. A monumental entrance design stands out. There are three apertures on the ground level that extend slightly beyond the portico. The semicircular arched windows are brought down to the level of the floor. This protruding facade ends with a "c" curved crown. There is a floor molding separating the two floors on the facade of the building. The upper cover of the building gives the appearance of a flat roof behind the parapets. The rest, except for the windows in the projecting section, have flat lintels and stone jambs. The entrance facade of the building resembles the entrance facade of a boarding school.

The central part of the facade of the two-story government office facing the square has a protruding structure. The upper floor is highlighted by three windows with semicircular arches. This type of facade arrangement was commonly found in Ottoman public buildings in the Middle East and Anatolia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Yenişehirlioğlu, 2001). The government office was built of cut stone, as other public buildings.

Municipality Building (Governor's Residence)

There is also a municipality building among the administrative buildings. The first municipality building was built during the governorship of Mr. Asaf between 1904 and 1908. This building was later used as the governor's residence (Luz, 2005).

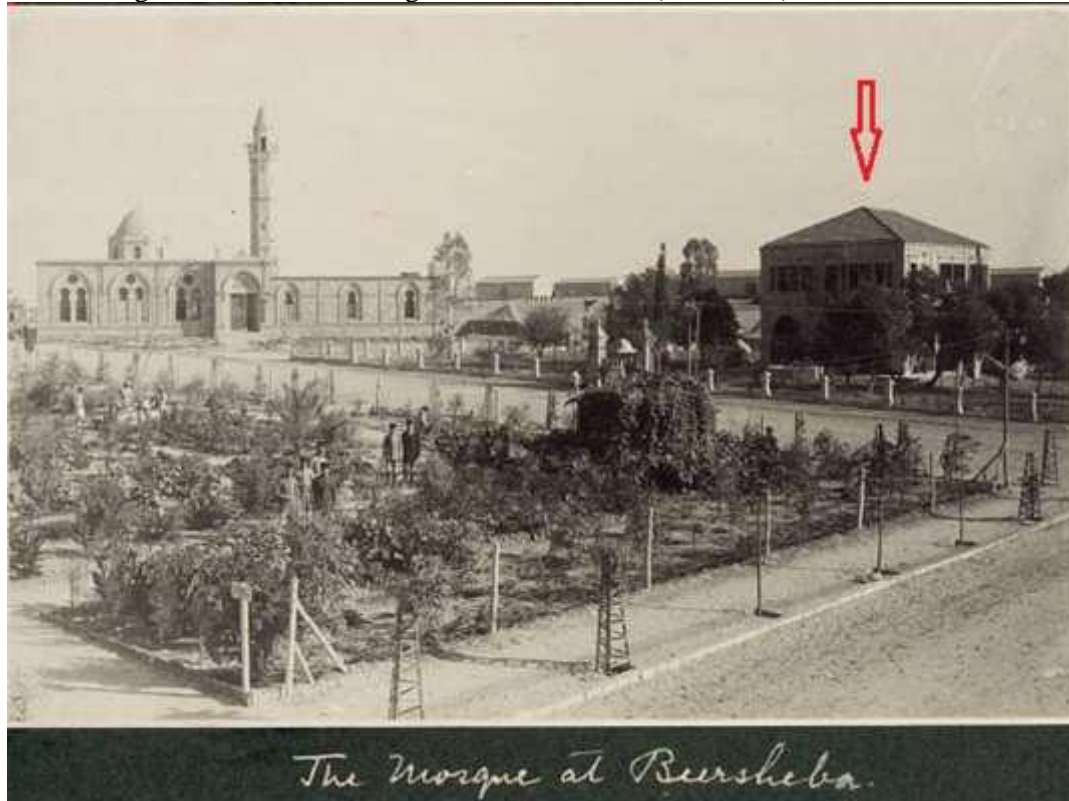


Fig. 7: Governor's residence (town hall)-1917

Source : <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.13709/?sp=1386>

The governor's residence (municipality building) (Fig. 7), built close to the Beersheba Mosque, is two-story and constructed of cut stone. The building's entry front features a portico with three entrances adorned with pointed arches. There are 5 rectangular window openings on the upper floor of the porticoed entrance. The window opening in the center is lowered to the floor level unlike the ones on the side. The two floors are separated from each other by floor molding. The structure is adorned with a hipped roof.

The Ottoman State administration's centralization efforts in the 19th century led to the emergence of many building styles with distinct functions. There are also some buildings within these structures that society did not recognize until then. The structures that were constructed during this period can be categorized as military edifices, governmental establishments, industrial complexes, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, commercial structures, lodging establishments, recreational venues, and transportation infrastructures. Official buildings encompass several structures, including government buildings, municipal buildings, courthouses, post offices, and telegraph offices. Government offices and municipal buildings constructed by the state in various regions were often designed in the neo-classical architectural style. These structures featured a symmetrical layout centered around a central hall and consisted of two stories (Ertuğrul, 2009).

Besides the mosque, school, government office and the municipality building, which later became the governor's residence, other buildings representing the state were also built in Beersheba. These are the police station, telegraph office and post office. In terms of architecture, these structures are more uncomplicated and utilitarian in comparison to others (Luz, 2005). By 1914, Beersheba had transformed into a municipality comprising of 200 residential dwellings, 50 commercial establishments, and approximately 1000 residents. The

settlement includes both civilian and military hospitals, a governor's office, a municipality building, a school, and several other administrative structures (Nasasra, 2015).

Beersheba experienced significant developments in 1915 and the subsequent period from its founding in 1900. The Ottoman Empire sought to prepare Beersheba for the outbreak of World War I. The installation of the telegraph line, roads, underground water pipelines, and other infrastructure was primarily intended to prepare the region for potential conflict in the area. A railway was constructed in 1916 to establish a connection between Beersheba Jaffa and Jerusalem (Amara, 2021). The Beersheba railway station, located remarkably close to the main square, was built towards the end of World War I, shortly before the surrender of Beersheba to the British (1917) (Fig. 8). This was the last building constructed by the Ottomans in Beersheba (Avci, 2009).



Fig. 8: Beersheba railway station (1914-1918)
Source: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1263435>

Conclusions

This article focuses on Beersheba, a city founded by the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The research concludes that there were many reasons behind the Ottoman establishment of the city of Beersheba. These are: Beersheba's geographical location, its water resources, its temperate climate compared to the desert, the desire to relieve the increasing population density of Gaza, to end the conflicts between the Bedouins living in the region, and to adapt the Bedouins to the settled order and to make Ottoman power in the region visible.

The Ottoman Empire constructed this city, according to its desired specifications, in a manner that rendered it a thoroughly contemporary urban center. A significant indication of this is the adoption of the grid plan layout in the city and the engagement of European architects who received their education in Europe to execute this plan. A road network was promptly established to provide the necessary construction materials for the new city and to facilitate its connectivity with the neighboring areas. With the introduction of the railroad to the region, the Ottoman Empire was able to significantly reduce the distance to faraway places. In order to expedite the settlement of the Bedouins, designated areas were assigned to individuals interested in constructing houses, along with the provision of diverse amenities.

The highest point of the city of Beersheba was chosen as the place where public buildings would be built. When the public buildings built in Beersheba are evaluated; They

appear to display a consistent similarity in terms of façade arrangements. All of the buildings are two storey and built of cut stone. The buildings, such as the government and municipality buildings, seen on Ottoman state-owned lands during this era, exhibit a consistent overall appearance. However, the mosque stands out with its unique blend of local characteristics, including horseshoe arches, a pointed dome, and a tall dome pulley.

A landscaped park area has been created in the area where government offices are located. It has become the focal point of the city. Additionally, buildings such as a post office, police station and telegraph office were built in the city. The last building built by the Ottomans in the city is the train station.

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