BEERSHEVA IN THE ROMAN-BYZANTINE PERIOD

There is one fact that makes Beersheva characteristic among all other towns in the ancient land of Israel and which determines its vicissitudes in history. This fact is its location as a border-city. From the conquest of Canaan by Joshua up to the very end of the Byzantine period, we read in our sources that Beersheva lies on the very line of the southern border of the country. “From Dan to Beersheva” is not a mere traditional saying. It was certainly taken into consideration by the Talmudic sages, for example, when fixing the halakhot related to things allowed or permitted within the land of Israel.  

More than the northern border, merely conventional or determined by historical facts, the southern one is intrinsically linked to the geographical factor, and thus it is submitted not only to history. About the end of the first century A. D., when the northern Negev was flourishing under the Nabatean rulers, Jewish historian Josephus Flavius writes about prophet Elijah that, “frightened as he was, he fled to the city called Bersoubee (Beersheva)... and, leaving there his servant, escaped into the desert”. Josephus’ approach to the location of Beersheva, for him obviously lying on the desert line, is important. Indeed, and contrary to what may be expected, this location on a geographic border preserved Beersheva from its total extinction. Other towns flourished in the Negev during the Nabatean, Roman and Byzantine periods, some of them more important than Beersheva, not only from the economic point of view but also from that of the ecclesiastic administration. Yet they were too far away from the Judean hills and the coastal plain to resist the fatal consequences of the Persian and the Muslim invasions of the seventh century.

Mentions of Beersheva are hardly found in ancient written sources of the Roman-Byzantine period, i.e. from the middle of the first century A.D. to the middle of the seventh century. Even Church historians are almost totally silent in this regard. Monastic story-tellers have nothing to report. Christian pilgrims went to

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1 See Mishna, Gittin, 1, 1.
2 Antiquitates Judaicae, VIII, 13, 7.
Hebron, not to Beersheva, to commemorate Abraham. Some of them certainly passed by our city on their way to or from Mount Sinai, but all they can tell us, like pilgrim bishop Eucherius in the sixth century, is that it is a "very large village" and that its distance from Hebron is "twenty miles". Other Christian writers, who probably never visited the country, even made a confusion between Beersheva and Gerar, in that time an important town placed some 24 kms. north-west from Beersheva.

However meager, the sources we possess in order to establish the existence and relative location of the Roman and Byzantine Beersheva are reliable. They are the same sources that enable us to draw a general picture of it. They may be divided into two categories: 1) historicogeographical, and 2) archaeologico-epigraphical. The first category includes only sporadic references of the kind of those already mentioned by Josephus and Eucherius. They are the Roman work called Notitia Dignitatum Orientis, which is a list of the imperial dignitaries of the Eastern Roman provinces and of each of their towns (early fourth century); Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea and famous Church historian (fourth century); Jerome, the western monk and writer who spent many years in the country (fourth-fifth century); and two papyri of the lot found in Nessana (early seventh century). Two other sources, the work of geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus (second century), and Georgios Cypros, a geographer of the sixth century, must be excluded from this short list, as the references made to them by some scholars are based on a confusion of names between Beersheva and Birsama.

The second category of sources is represented by the archaeological remains found in the site, which, without having been properly and systematically excavated, has produced a rather high number of inscriptions, most of them Christian epitaphs of late date, but also some others of great interest, including fragments of imperial decrees, and dedication of monuments in the town. To these sources, the representation and inscription of Beersheva on the famous Madaba map must be added (sixth century). Unfortunately, it must be pointed out here that our town does not appear on the not less famous Peutinger map (a medieval copy of an original Roman map).

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4 Cyrilus Alex., PG LXXI, 493A. According to him, Gerar changed its name for Beer-Sheva after the incident about the wells (Gen 21.22-31; cf. 26:20ff). See M. Abel, Géographie sacre chez S. Cyrille d’Alexandrie, RB 31 (1922) 416.
5 A good reproduction of the part of the map of our interest here may be consulted in Y. Aharoni, The Roman Road to Aila (Elath), IEJ 4 (1954) 11, Fig. 1.
1. Beersheva and the Roman "limes"

In order to understand the particular position of Beersheva within the bulk of the Palestinian towns during the Roman-Byzantine period, we must bear in mind that its particular location often converted it into a victim of antagonistic expansionist forces. From the purely traditional point of view of Jewish history, Beersheva was part of the territory assigned to the tribe of Judah (Jos 15:1-12). But the Edomites had already conquered it as early as the Persian period. Repressionist movements by Yochanan Hyrcanos (125 B.C.) subjugated all the Edomite territory, at that time reduced to the southern portion of the territory of Judah, from Hebron to Beersheva and from Iarda (‘Orda) to ‘Ein Gedi. Beersheva was therefore a border-town of the ancient Judaean territory limiting with the Nabatean kingdom when Roman Pompeius conquered the country in 64/3 B.C., and it automatically became a Roman border-town. Yet, the whole country being still administered by the Hasmoneans (and later by the Herods), it does not seem that the Romans undertook any fortifications work in the area.

Most likely it was not until the Flavian emperors, and perhaps during the reign of Vespasian (69-79 C.E.) that the Romans were well established within the former Judaean and Herodian zone of defence on the northern outskirts of the Negev. The Flavian emperors developed a defence system of the imperial borders, which, for the coming centuries and all along the Byzantine period, became an important institution, both militarily and administratively. This so-called limes or organized Roman “boundary-line” consisted in Southern Judaea of a line of fortifications which ran from south of Gaza, parallel to the wadis Besor, Beersheva and Malhata, over the Zohar ridge to Ein Gedi. This latter locality was probably the eastern base of the Flavian line, with a Roman garrison, protected by permanent outposts. More or less important strongholds existed along that line, being prominent among them those of Ma’on (Menois), Beer Shema’ (Birsama), Beer Sheva (Berosaba), Malhata (Malatha), and ‘Ein Gedi (Engaddi).

Roman strongholds along the imperial borders were of different kinds and purpose. There were fortresses, forts, observation and signal towers, and service buildings such as road stations — either with or without sleeping-rooms (mansiones, mutationes), custom posts and proper rest houses. On the present site of

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6 For the historic development of the Roman defence border in Judaea, as well as for archaeologicaal excavations in it, see the studies of M. Grön, The Origin of the Limes Palaestiniae and the Major Phases in its Development — Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms, Bonner Jahrbüche, Bh.
Beersheva there was a big fortress according to some sources 7. This was certainly a typical Flavian fortification, with its characteristic design of a “courtyard fort”, namely a rectangular building around a central courtyard, without protruding corners, with all the barracks, stores and other installations built as small square rooms against the outer walls, with flat roofs.

Obviously, the *limes* of Southern Judea was planned by the Romans to protect the country against the expansionism of the Nabateans, who ruled from Damascus to the Red Sea and from Petra to the Mediterranean. Now, when emperor Trajan conquered the Nabatean territory in 106 C.E., another boundary-line had to be built in the Transjordan and ‘Araba region down to ‘Aqaba (Aila) in the south. Nevertheless, it is sure that Beersheva and the other towns and smaller strongholds of the Negev order were maintained in their defence purpose, while Roman garrisons were also established in important Nabatean cities like Avdat (Oboda). A reinforcement of the boundaries of the *wadi* line seems to have taken place in the time of Hadrian (117-138), most important posts being now those of Metzad Tamar, Hetzba, Ma’alei ‘Akra, Murnub (Mampsis), and Beersheba (Berosaba). Indeed, the Negev desert, always inhabited by nomads and brigands, constituted a permanent threat for the properly inhabited land. There are scholars who, in view of later documentation, hold the opinion that the Negev boundary-line was maintained by the Romans and the Byzantine emperors not only as a region of special concern within the Palestine provinces, but even as a territory enjoying a particular administration system, as we shall soon see.

Who were the soldiers stationed in Beersheva, always ready to be sent to a military action or to reinforce a smaller post in the line? The Judaean *limes* in general was manned by a mixed force to be sent to a military action of to reinforce a smaller post in the times of the Flavian emperors, and it was called *Cohors I Flavia Equitata*. It is mentioned in the inscriptions of imperial decrees, probably from the early sixth century, fragmentarily discovered in Beersheva 8. Part of its troops might have been raised locally.

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7 See below, n. 25. Its traces have today disappeared, but, fortunately, they are still visible in old aerial photographs of the present town.

8 Their several fragments, found in different occasions and spots, seem to belong not to one but to four imperial decrees dealing with regulation taxes and the *limes* towns of the Palestine provinces. They were published by their discoverers as soon as they were found, and later republished and studied by A. Alt, *Die griechische Inschriften der Palaestina Tertia westlich der ‘Araba* (ed. Th. Wiegand, *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen des deutsch-türkischen Denkmalschutz-Kommandos*, Heft 2, Berlin und Leipzig, XIX (1967) 175-193; *Towers on the Limes Palaestinae* — Actes du IXe Congrès International d’Études sur les Frontières Romaines, Bucarest, 1974, pp. 513-544.
As for Beersheva in particular, the early Byzantine document *Notitia Dignitatum Orientis* which preserves the order of the battle of the Judaean *limes* in the time of emperor Diocletian (284-305), tells us that in Beersheva were stationed cavalry forces of Illirian origin from Dalmatia (Yugoslavia), "Equites Dalmatae Ilirici". Other towns in the Negev had soldiers of a different origin, like the Thracians in Mampsis. About the number of soldiers integrating the forces in Beersheva in different periods, we have no indication in the documents, as we have for instance for the troops stationed in the neighbouring town of Nessana in the seventh century, in whose camp there was a unit of about 200 men, called "the numerus (regiment) of Very Loyal Theodosians". Whether there were any local Jews serving together with the foreing Roman troops, is not an easy question to answer, though it is not at all excluded, for Jews were certainly living in the Negev towns, including Byzantine Beersheva, as we shall see (below, pp. 151-152). We know of federate Bedouin tribes serving as an outer screen of the Romans against other nomads and against the Persian enemy, as well as of the "regiment of the Moors" serving in Byzantine Egypt.

2. *The Farmer-Soldiers and the Imperial Decrees Found in Beersheva.*

During the Severan Age (193-235) the Romans introduced a new administrative system directed to foster the self-support of the border settlements. In order to light the burden of the frontier costs and to facilitate the recruitment of new soldiers, they planned to improve agriculture and farming around the settlements. With this purpose in mind they transformed the units stationed on the borders into a land militia. These farmer-soldiers were called the *limitanei*. Instead of a salary, each *limitaneus* received a plot of arable land in permanent tenency. His obligations were to cultivate this land and, according to a fixed roster, to do a year of active service in the neighbouring fortress, performing all the military duties. At least one son of each family was bound to follow

1921, pp. 4-25). Regarding their main interest here, see below, in the next paragraph.

9 Published by O. Seek, Berlin, 1876. Mention of Beersheva is found in p. 70: "Sub dispositione viri spectabilis ducis Palaeastinae... 18. Equites Dalmatae Illirici, Berrosabae" (in note: *Berosaba*).


11 At the end of the first century, Fl. Josephus mentions the presence of Jews in "a village on the border of the Arabs" that is, Tarda ("Orda"), possibly the present Kh. 'Irq (*War* III, 3,5).
his father in his unit. Thus the problem of the recruitment of new soldiers and filling gaps in the ranks was solved.

This new disposition, which was very successful during the late Roman and Byzantine periods, was bound to a tax system that demanded from each town of the Palestine provinces, including the border-towns themselves, a fixed payment for the maintenance of the Roman soldiers as a whole. Apparently, such payment could be first satisfied in nature but at a certain time, probably towards the end of the fourth century, it was demanded to be paid in species. It is here that the decrees issued by imperial order, which, inscribed on large and fine marble slabs, were discovered in the ruins of ancient Beersheva\textsuperscript{12}, come into the picture. Despite the fact that their interpretation is not yet absolutely sure, they provide us with some information about specific developments in the history of our late Roman and Byzantine towns. Fragmentary as the inscriptions are, we understand that they deal with the specific amounts of money that each town of the Palestine provinces should pay to the military contingents permanently stationed in it or in its neighbourhood. As it seems, there had been abuses from the part of the military authorities, who demanded from the civilians more than what was due. In order to correct this situation, imperial decrees specifying the taxation were issued and permanently fixed in a public place of the town, whereby everybody could be informed of the official law.

The inscriptions have in view two groups of persons as subject to the taxes: the military element, i.e. the limitanei under control of their chiefs or duces, and the association of civil citizens responsible for the right payment of the taxes, who are here called synthelastei\textsuperscript{13}. Three taxes are mentioned in the inscriptions: 1) the so-called annona militaris; 2) a supplementary tax for the members of the bureaucracy (douloi); 3) a specific tax for the vicarius, who is probably the governor of Palestina Tertia\textsuperscript{14}.

Why such decrees were found precisely in Beersheva is not easy to grasp. Was it because of a special stand of our town in

\textsuperscript{12} See above, n. 8. The dating of these inscriptions is not yet a solved question. While some of the former scholars preferred to see them as issued by Justinian, toward the middle of the sixth century, today the opinion prevails that dates them to the beginning of the fifth century, in the time of Theodosius II (see below), but without much consistency. See notes 13 and 18.

\textsuperscript{13} According to Kraemer, (op. cit., p. 22), this denomination is the clue that permits to date the inscriptions to the time of the reforms made by emperor Anastasius I, who shifted that right to tax payment responsibility from the curiales to the synthelastei.

\textsuperscript{14} For the whole interpretation of the decrees and their significance we follow Kraemer's observations (op. cit., pp. 122-124).
the military administration of the southern limes? It could be so, especially if we take into account that Beersheva was the border-town "par excellence", lying on an important cross-road of imperial ways (from Gaza to Petra and from Jerusalem to Eilat). Actually, some scholars are of this view. But it is also possible that the decrees were publicly displayed only in Beersheva because its civilians might have suffered from some specific disorders of the kind mentioned above. This opinion seems to be supported by the fact that we possess an order issued at Constantinople on 23rd March 409 addressed to the prefect of the Praetorium, Anthemiush, by Emperor Theodosius II. It deals with the regulations to be observed in the three Palestine provinces regarding the taxes, on the occasion that "the ducal office of the military camps Birsama and Menois (near Gaza) intend to overthrow the good (imperial) decrees". Is this decree of Theodosius II historically connected with our inscriptions? We do not think so, despite the similarity of contents. The reasons are simple: first, there is no mention of Beersheva in Theodosius' decree; second, the terminology of the Beersheva decrees seems to point to a later date, probably the early sixth century.

From the fragmentary inscriptions, which seem to correspond to a group of four and not only to one or two, as it has often been assumed, we can reach some interesting conclusions regarding the different towns of the limes as far as their relative economical situation is concerned, and this with the help of the papyrus 39 from Nessana, which also deals with the taxation subject.

1) Inscription I and papyrus 39 from Nessana cover approximately the same territory, that is to say, the towns on the ancient border-line of Judaea. This could confirm late Prof. Avi-

15 Late Prof. M. Avi-Yonah placed in Beersheva the "administrative headquarters of the Limes" (in Gazetteer of Roman Palestine, Qedem 5, Jerusalem, 1976, p. 35).

16 See the full text in C. Clermont-Ganneau, Recueil d'Archéologie Orientale, t. V, Paris, 1903, pp. 143-144.

17 Incorrectly as one of the two names is written in the ordonnance, the toponym Versaminis is much more understandable if it refers to Birsamis (or Birsama, today Kh. el-Fārī?) than to Beersheva (Bersabe, Berosabe in Fl. Josephus, Berosaba in Eusebius and in pap. 39 from Nessana, Bersabee in Jerome, Berossaba in the Madaba map, and Bir es-Seba' in the Arab tradition. Yet Clermont-Ganneau and other scholars preferred to see Beersheva mentioned in Theodosius' ordonnance. The same mistake seems to be made by Avi-Yonah (Gazetteer, p. 36) when he mentions Cl. Ptolemaeus (V, 15-17) and Georgius Cyproius (I. 1027) as referring to Beersheva. Actually, the first text reads Bersamma, and the second Barsamon.

18 See above, n. 13. Other proofs for a late dating were already given by M. Abel in his article Nouveau fragment de l'édict byzantin de Bersabée, RB 6 (1909) 89-104.

19 See Kraemer, op. cit., pp. 119ff.
Yonah's view that the *limes* "lost its military usefulness, but remained a fiscal unit into the Byzantine period" 20.

2) Inscriptions III and IV list towns of the Palaestina Prima, Secunda and Tertia, i.e. from all over the country 21. If logically thinking, provincial scribes who drew up the texts for the inscriptions were primarily concerned with local interests, then the list of towns in these inscriptions had probably some special relationship with the northern Negev and this relationship was certainly more economic than political or administrative.

3) Inscription II distinguishes between three groups of towns: Petra-Aila (lines 1-7), the hill country of the Palaestina Tertia (lines 8-17), and the Kerak region in Transjordan (line 18). This arrangement seems to correspond to the amounts paid, descending from the highest to the lowest, actually from 65 to 5 *solidi*. If the figures given correspond to the difference of wealth or the equivalent of land values, as it must be soundly assumed, then Beersheva stood rather low in the rating, while Chermonula (Carmel in Judaea) obtained the first place, and Malhata the last one.

Farmer-soldiers institution, founded by the Severan emperors, permitted the Romans to reinforce their presence in the Negev in general. But with the anarchy that followed the death of Alexander Severus, a certain desintegration of the settlements was felt. Their restoration started in the year 268 C.E. with the accession to power of the Illirian emperors. The great organization of the Negev, however, was reached when emperor Diocletian included the South Transjordanian region in the *Provincia Palaestina* and transferred the Tenth Legion to Aila. Since then the agricultural settlements, organized within the framework of the *limitanei* institution, allowed the magnificent development of the Negev that characterised the Byzantine period.

Protection of the roads crossing the desert fostered a continuous and increasing trade between the Far East and the Roman world. The Negev was the transit way between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Beersheva, located as it was on one of the meeting-points of the Roman *vias* crossing the desert from North to South and from East to West, certainly enjoyed an unprecedented development. It was not only a military and agricultural center, but also an important place of encounter for merchants and traders.

21 See below, n. 31.
3. The Town According to Ancient Sources

From the scarce literary sources available, we cannot get a clear picture of the kind of town that Beersheva was in the Roman-Byzantine period regarding its size, its architectural plan, its civilian administration, its population, etc. While in the first century C.E. Josephus calls it a “city” (polis) in a text referring to the time of Prophet Elijah (as we have seen), in the year 320 Eusebius describes it as “a very large village” (kome megiste) 22. Seventy years later, Jerome translates these words as vicus grandis, “a big village”, though in another reference he also calls it an oppidum, a “town” 23. The next reference is that made fifty years later by Eucherius, a visiting bishop from Lyon, who again calls it a “very large village” (vicus maximus) 24. Without paying too much attention to the different names, the last we can infer from these references is that, in the fourth and early fifth centuries, Beersheva was considered to be a normal civil settlement, and not only a military post (burghus or castellum). Actually, in the mentioned text of Eusebius, a real distinction is made between both parts of the town, when he says that “in it is located a a fortress (phourion) of soldiers”, translated by Hieronymus as “praesidium of Roman soldiers” 25.

What is far less clear is the relation between the settlement on the site of the present city and the military fortress that existed on the present Tell Beersheva, some four kms. east of it. That fortress, which dates from the Herodian times, was probably smaller than the one in the plain, measuring $31 \times 30 \times 31 \times 32$ m. 26, and could have been a dependence of it. In any case, we have no literary reference and very little archaeologic evidence about the Roman and Byzantine periods on the tell. Excavations conducted there have proved that Bedouins used the Roman and Byzantine materials found on the site to build the tombs of their cemetery on the western side of the tell. Among its stones, a semicircular

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23 Ibid., p. 51, and see n. 25, here below.
24 See above, n. 3.
25 We find it worthwhile to quote in full the text it its Latin translation by Jerome: “Bersabee in tribu Iudae sive Symeonis, et usque hodie uicuis grandis in uicesimo a Chebron miiliario uergens ad austrum. in qu et Romanorum milium praesidium postum est, a quo loco termini Iudaeae terrae incipientes tendebantur usque ad Dan” (Onomastikon, p. 51).
26 M. Gichon, The Sites of the Limes in the Negev, Eretz Israel, 12, Jerusalem, 1975, p. 53 (Hebrew). He refers there to the excavations conducted on the tell by late Prof. Y. Aharoni, as reported in Beer-Sheva I, 1969-71 Seasons, Tel Aviv, 1973, p.
one with a Greek cross in the center tells us of the existence of a Byzantine church on the spot. 27

Probably following the administrative changes in the time of Diocletian, Beersheva knew its full development only in the fifth and the sixth centuries. On the Madaba map, the famous mosaic pavement of the middle sixth century, our town appears well designed, having a rather long inscription that points out to its location as the border of the land of Judah:

Bersabee  
Now Berossaba  
Border of  
Judaea in the South, as  
Dan near Panias (is the)  
Border (of Judaea) in the North. 28

The Byzantine mosaist draws the schematic plan of Beersheva in a rectangular form, and the distribution of several buildings is well visible, though their interpretation is of course difficult. It is remarkable however that it appears as much more important than other towns of the Negev, like Mampsis (Kurnub), which is designed as a simple façade of a building or a wall-gate, flanked by two towers. On the map Beersheva is placed between Mampsis and Gerar (Tell el-Fār). In relation with the latter, it is interesting to observe that Hieronymus, commenting on the birth of Isaac, says that it took place in the region of Gerar, "where till this day there is also the town of Beersheva". 29 Whether or not this statement includes that Beersheva was administratively linked to the city of Gerar is not clear. It could be so far as the ecclesiastical jurisdiction is concerned for, while Gerar was an episcopal see, Beersheva was not. From the text of Hieronymus we also learn that the Gerar district was part of the so-called Palaestina Salutaris, established about the year 358 30 from a combination of the ancient Judaean limes region with parts of the Negev that had formerly been the Provinciar Arabia. Automatically, therefore, Beersheva had to be administratively submitted to Petra, the ancient capital of the Nabatean kingdom, later of the Roman Provinciar Arabia, and now of the new Palaestina Salutaris. Yet Beersheva, with the whole limes region, as well as the nearby districts of Gerar, the Constantinian district (Raphiah), and Shuk

27 Today it may be seen in the courtyard of the Municipal Museum of the Negev, in Beersheva. Et seems to have been found on the eastern side of the tell.
29 Hieronymus, Quaest. in Gen. XXX, 30.
30 "...Isaac non sit natus ad quercum Mambre... sed in Geraris: ubi et Bersabee usque hodie oppidum est. Quae provincia ante non grande tempus ex divisione praesidum Palaestina Salutaris est dicta".
Mazzai, seem to have formed independent units as far their municipal organization is concerned. From the year 425 on, *Palaestina Salutaris* was renamed *Palaestina Tertia*.

What kind of link existed between Beersheva and the Greek city of Eleutheropolis (Bet Gubrin) we do not exactly know, but from the epigraphic material it may be inferred that the link was more than simply geographical, for most of the Byzantine inscriptions found in Beersheva (see below, pp. 153 ff) follow the so-called “era of Eleutheropolis” for the year reckoning. We know that an important road linked that city to Beersheva through Hebron, and from Beersheva it continued to Elusa (Halutza). Pilgrim Theodosius, who travelled from Jerusalem to Sinai about the year 530, registered in his records that between Jerusalem and Elusa there were three *mansiones* and 71 miles. Two of these three rest-houses had to be placed in Hebron and Beersheva. Ancient references precise that the distance between Hebron and Beersheva was twenty miles.

About the internal administration of the city, we know practically nothing, though one or two Byzantine epitaphs may throw a little light on it, as we shall see (below, pp. 154 ff). Strangely enough, the same must be recognised as far as the ecclesiastical affiliation and administration is concerned, an important issue for the historical period of our interest here. Being a rather large Christian town, it seems sure that Beersheva has never been the see of a bishop. In none of the lists of the prelates who attended the important ecumenical and other councils in the fourth and fifth centuries appears the mention of the bishop of Beersheva. This fact is even stranger and more puzzling if we considerer that in the Gaza region alone, from Rafaḥ to Ashod-Yam of today, there were no less than ten bishoprics in the same period. Not a single document or inscription has ever come out with an indication that Beersheva had an ecclesiastical jurisdiction of its own, and affirmation of the contrary by some historians of the city is absolutely unfounded.

32 *Palaestina Prima* included the region between the Gaza strip and Acco in the coastal plain, and between the Mediterranean sea to Gador and Abel in Transjordan. *Palaestina Secunda* was constituted by the regions of the Sea of Galilee, from Beth-Shean plain to the Golan heights.
34 See the text of the *Onomastikon* and of Eucherius (above, nn. 25 and 3).
35 See e.g. T. Wiegand, *Sinai*, Berlin und Leipzig, 1930, p. 54: “(Beerscheba) war... in christlicher Zeit ein hervorragender Bischofssitz mit zahlreichen Kirchen”. 

4. Archaeological Discoveries

When, towards the end of the last century, the land of Israel started to attract archaeological interest, Beersheva was no more than a dead city, not less than Shivta, Kurnub, Halutza, Ruheibe and Avdat. A. Musil, in the records of his visit to the site in 1897, describes it as "a field of ruins". Nothing of its former splendor in the Byzantine centuries was visible, though the very extension of those ruins and the quantity of columns and decorated capitels 'and dressed ashlars told the visitors of its past glories. Musil recorded that the walk from the entrance to the ruins to Wadi es-Seba' took him 9 minutes. On the other side of the wadi he saw three wells (6 m. deep by 3 m. large), on which the Bedouins had installed columns and capitals to serve as *Tranktröge*. He saw some ruins on the southern side of the wadi too.

Five years later, in 1902, when Musil made his second trip to the spot, he informs us that the builders of the new Beersheva, who started their work in 1900, employ the material found in the field of ruins for their construction work. It seems that the destruction of the Byzantine ruins was practically systematic. Musil says that “many complete tombs are discovered, but they are immediately robbed and destroyed. Of the inscriptions, most are destroyed or privately sold, and only a few reach the Government house”.

Beersheva had certainly been lying in ruins for centuries, abandoned probably since the end of the seventh century, not long after the Muslim invasion of the country. Yet some Middle Ages pilgrims testify to the rather good perseverance of some of the churches in the town as late as the mid-fourteenth century. So writes e.g. Sir John Maundeville (1322-1365): "When you pass this desert (= Sinai) on the way to Jerusalem, you come to Beersheva, which was formerly a very fair and pleasant town of the Christians, some of whose churches still remain...". Similarly states Leodolf de Sudheim in 1348: “Once you have passed the desert you arrive at Bersabee, ... which was formerly a nice town but is now abandoned (lit. desertam), where there were once Christians and churches, of which many are destroyed, but some still remain complete”.

Of these impressive ruins, nothing was standing when Musil visited the place. And not only he, but many other interested visitors and archaeologists, like the French C. Clermont-Ganneau.

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and the Dominican Fathers Vincent, Abel, Jaussen and Savignac, who used to come often to the spot at that time, testify to the quasi-systematic destruction of the ancient Beersheva in favour of the new Turkish town that emerged from the Byzantine ruins. Apparently, some material from the site was also brought to Gaza, while a good number of inscriptions reached Hebron and Jerusalem through the hands of dealers, Arab and Jewish alike, who sold them to foreign and local collectors. Many of them are today displayed or just stored in the Rockefeller Museum, the Flagellation Convent, and the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem.

According to Woolley and Lawrence, who wrote in 1914-15, "not only have all the old buildings been razed to the ground, but even the cemeteries have been plundered in the search for stones to be reused in the building of the modern town that overlies the ancient site...". Some of the inscriptions "are built into modern houses; a few are stored in the Government Serai... The ancient town was certainly a large one; its ruins can be traced over a wide area, and the cemeteries to the northwest are very extensive. The ruins of two churches could be seen, also a fragment of mosaic pavement, and heavy foundations in concrete; broken columns and fragments of moulded cornices or carvings are common in the houses of the modern town; but there was nothing to be planned, nor, apart from the inscriptions, anything of interest to be noted".  

It was not until recent time that some archaeological excavations were conducted by the Department of Antiquities of the Israel Ministry of Education and Culture. They were done, however, not following a project of systematic research in the area, but just on the occasion of fortuitous discoveries. They were excavations and surveys of the ancient site, mostly carried out in the area selected for the development of modern Beersheva, which started during the 1950's. As will be seen through the scarce details given by the excavators themselves, the area in which the digs were conducted and which reveals part of the location of the Roman-Byzantine town, is found mostly in the southeastern corner of the present old city, and extends to the zone of the Muslim cemeteries, the central Egged bus station, the municipal market, the Bedouin market, and down to the southern side of the present, road to Hebron, towards the industrial zone. While a large part of this area is now built over, another extensive part has not yet been used for construction, so that more systematic digs could be easily performed in it. Before listing now the archaeological

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activities and their discoveries, we want to point out that a sketch of the location of the ruins as they could be seen at the beginning of this century was done and published in 1903 by Fr. M. Abel. Two churches, probably the same seen by Woolley and Lawrence in 1914, are located at the two extremes, north and south of the field of ruins; the south one was on the southern side of the wadi, and was called ed-Deir, “the monastery”, by the local Bedouins. In other points of the sketch, Abel indicates the presence of wells, foundations and a bath-house (?)..

Also from before the archaeological digs, are the notes of Z. Ofer, former chief of the Water Supply Departament of the Beersheva Municipality and a good connoisseur of the past of our city, which state: “Remains of the Byzantine town extend to the southern part of the present city over an area of more than one thousand dunams. If the whole area was actually inhabited at one and the same time, then Beersheva was the biggest town in the Negev. The huge cemetery that extended to the north and the east of the town also testifies to the size of its population. An extensive agricultural hinterland supported the Byzantine town: the whole valley is full of remains of farms and small settlements dating from the same period, which proves that the area was more densely populated than in any previous period”. Ofer knows too that most of the inscriptions once preserved in the Governor’s house, disappeared during the First World War.

In winter 1965 Mrs. Yael Israeli, then director of the Municipal Museum of the Negev in Beersheva, excavated on behalf of the Departament of Antiquites the remaining foundations of Byzantine houses from the 4th and 5th centuries in the zone of the present central bus station. The foundations were found in three different strata at least. In the lowest one, an entrance of a tomb-cave built with ashlars was discovered, two meters under the surface. A corridor hewn in the rock and descending to stairs of 14 m. length leads to a room 8 m. wide, from which the corridor proceeds still further, but was not excavated. On the plaster covering the walls of the room a graffito of a praying figure (an orant) had been drawn. This first systematic dig conducted in the area of the Byzantine town revealed, according to Mrs. Israeli, that the ground floors of the Byzantine buildings were at the same level as the present level.

In 1966 Mrs. Israeli performed also a rescue exploration of three subterranean burial chambers in the same area. They were found at a dept of 5 m. and were built with heavy stones. Among

41 M. Abel, Inscriptions grecques de Bersabée, RB 12 (1903) 425.
43 Hadashot Archeologiot, January 1966, p. 3.
the objects found there was a small ivory head with a cross on its back side, a small column ornamented with an incised cross, knives, coins, pottery sherds and some human bones. On the walls of the chambers there were traces of paintings, showing a cross and people standing in praying position 44.

Also in the same year, and in the zone of the Bedouin market, a breach in a water-pipe revealed the existence of a Byzantine building, one of whose rooms had a fragmentarian mosaic floor in white and black, with an inscription mentioning the names of Peter and Anastasios 45. Across one of the walls (60 cm. thick) another mosaic spread over a second room to north and west. The building could possibly be a religious one, for it is oriented to the east and it is to be dated to the sixth century.

Remains of a church building were rediscovered in 1967 and excavated by Mrs. Israeli in what is now the cross-road Eilat — Hanesssim streets. The church was 15 × 24 m. large, has three apses, and its ground floor was paved with big stone and marble slabs, of which only a few were found. The side wall showed traces of coloured mural paintings. Under the floor of the central apse, an older floor was discovered, paved with stones in white, black, green and little red. The space between the two pavements had served as a burial place, and in one of the tombs, built with heavy stones, the skeleton of a child was found. There were no objects. Several rooms were annexed to the south side of the main building, and one of them had its walls ornamented with unusual glass mosaics in green, blue, yellow and red. On the floor of the room, coins from the Ommeyad period, glassware and pottery were found. The whole structure was possibly a monastery 46.

During the clearing of the area for the industrial zone in 1968, one of the necropolis of the Byzantine town was discovered. It contained some 60 tombs, well ranged in ten rows, all built with hewn stones. Two of them contained lead coffins ornamented with crosser, while fragments and signs of wood coffins were found in all the other tombs. Only three contained some jewelry. This cemetery is dated to the fifth and sixth centuries. Traces of two big buildings, with six or seven rooms around a central courtyard were discovered above the tombs, while under them there were signs of a Chalcolithic settlement 47.

A nice mosaic floor was discovered in 1968 in the area of the Municipal market and is today displayed in the local Museum. Despite its fragmentarian preservation, its size (7 × 4,5 m.) and fine work show that it served as pavement for a public building.

46 Ibid., July 1967, p. 29.
Mr. R. Cohen, of the Department of Antiquities, made the following short description of the discovery: "The central carpet is decorated with a pattern of intersecting red lines joining in squares, each square having a black circle in its center. In the wide space around the carpet there are medallions formed by vinescrolls, each medallion framing a different animal... One may particularly admire the nice execution of the serpent, jiraffe, tigre, lion, wild boar, fawn and rabbit". 48

Figurative mosaics like the one found in Beersheva have been found to some extend all over the country and there is no doubt that it was made during or soon after the reign of Justinian (521-565), a period of which many coins where discovered in our town and to which correspond also most of the inscriptions found here. Its composition, with descriptive isolation and rhythmic grouping of the figures, is typical of the Byzantine style, and so is also its execution. Hellenistic realism in each figure is retained, while there is a disregard for proportions (the jiraffe is not much bigger than the rabbit!). Byzantine mosaics in Israel have a common taste for nature in their iconography, a fact which does not compel us to look for a symbolism. If they often appear on the pavements of churches and chapels it is probably because religious direct symbols were forbidden there since 427. Byzantine artists, who often were simple and anonymous monks, traditionally used copy-books of patterns, including floral subjects and bestiary. 49 Technically, our mosaic pavement cannot be considered a master piece. We are far away from the glorious predecessors of earlier Roman centuries in the country. 50

Next to the mosaic floor here described, other rooms were found, one of them paved with great stone slabs in the south, and another containing a complete pottery furnace in the north. Also this complex could have been a monastery.

In 1968 too, Mr. R. Cohen directed three small digs in the present Shikun Daleth area. In the first one, a group of eight tombs was found, ranged in three rows. In one of them, containing the skeletons of a man and a woman, a cross and a palmette appeared incised on the stone behind their heads. A pit for chalk-making close to the tombs contained architectural fragments and pottery from the fifth-sixth century. The second dig explored a two-room structure, and in one of the rooms (4 × 4 m.) some kitchen pottery of the same period was found. The third dig

48 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
50 Compare e.g. with the more recently discovered mosaic in Nablus, which also shows a similar pattern of interlaced medallions framing animal figures, in Z. YEIVIN, A Third Century C. E. Mosaic from Schechem, Qedmoniot 8 (1973) 31-33.
uncovered a complex of six rooms, in one of which there was a round oven (1 m. wide) with pottery fragments. On the walls, traces of Greek characters 51.

Four pits for chalk-making as well as remains of a building and tombs from the 6th century were discovered in the area of the Eleanor Roosevelt Institute 52.

The buildings excavated in Shikun Daleth did not belong to the town itself, but were probably farms for the agricultural exploitation of the area around the city. One of such farms was also discovered in 1969 in the area of the "new campus" of the Ben Gurion University 53, and excavated by R. Cohen in 1971. A two-room structure (4 × 5 and 5 × 6 m.) appeared around a courtyard. The pottery sherds found on the spot point also to the same period, fifth-sixth century.

Already before these discoveries, in February 1955, S. Levy and Y. Ory had excavated, on behalf of the Department of Antiquities, another Byzantine farm near the present railway station. The building had the same plan as the others, that is, some rooms around a central courtyard. This plan does not differ much from the houses in the present "old city" and they were probably like those still standing in the Byzantine ruins of Shiva and Kurnub. They had an upper storey which served as living and sleeping rooms for several families, and downstairs there were the kitchens, cellars, store, etc. The same disposition appears from the text of papyrus 22 from Nessana 54. The farm excavated near the railway station had a plastered cistern in front of the entrance, and a mill-stone, a kneading-trough and a furnace inside the rooms. This proves that cereals were cultivated in the area. Two other constructions found nearby, toward east, seem to have been an enclosure for sheep and a stable. Apparently this farm had been in use for some 200 years, during the fourth and fifth centuries 55.

During the excavations conducted in the area of the new market, traces of a building that could have been the local synagogue were found, according to the opinion of the archaeologists. But this assumption is only based on the fact that one of the foundations found had an apsidal form, without being oriented eastwards as was the custom in contemporary churches. This

53 Ibid., April 1972, p. 35. Not less than 22 dunams of this area are also considered by archaeologists to be an ancient site from the 5th-6th century (Ibid., October 1969, p. 28).
54 Kraemer (op. cit., pl. and p. 70ff) offers and comments a sketch of the plan of one of such houses.
55 Chronique archéologique, RB 43 (1956) 99.
argument is however rather weak for the building could also have been a public bath-house or something else. That there was a synagogue in Byzantine Beersheba is plausible for there were Jews living in the town. A Hebrew-Aramaic inscription, may be a dedication, is known to have been found in Beersheba on a piece of a small marble pillar of a balustrade that could have belonged to the local synagogue.

Of other monumental remains already previously known, we should mention some mosaic pavements which were described and studied by late Prof. M. Avi-Yonah in 1934. One of them, now displayed in the local museum, has on a white background divided by a line of v-shaped springs, a big circle with red decoration. Inside the circle, a pair of sandals (25 × 9 cm.) with rounded points and buttons decorated with x-cross. The sandals are not an insolate motif in the mosaic decoration in the country, and they certainly indicate that this mosaic was the pavement of a place of prayer, either a public church or a more private chapel. Another mosaic fragment shows in the panel a bear passant outlined in black, the inner side of the legs in deep blue, the other side and the body in light blue grey. The animal is apparently attached to a sort of pole with a red rope.

We have not found any information about the exact provenance of the mosaics here mentioned. The same, unfortunately, must be said about many architectural and ornamental pieces today displayed in the courtyard of the Municipal Museum, such as marble columns, capitals, church screens and sculptured lintels; not all the pieces come from the ancient Beersheba, but from other neighbouring sites. On the other hand, some ancient pieces may still be seen reused today in private houses, such as decorated lintels, and some others have been left in situ in private courtyards. Marble columns can be seen till today in the reinforcements of some of the ancient wells near wadi.

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56 See reference to the Jewish inscription found in Beersheba in E. L. Sukenik, The Ancient Synagogue of El Hammeh, Jerusalem, 1958, p. 68. He and other scholars, like Avi-Yonah (Gazetteer, p. 35), rightly believe that a synagogue existed in Byzantine Beersheba.

57 M. Avi-Yonah, Mosaic Pavements in Palestine. Supplement, QDAP 3 (1934) 49, pl. XIV, 1. This author reminds us of two other similar mosaics found in Jerusalem, one on Mt. Zion and one in the Via Dolorosa (QDAP 2 (1933) 170 and 178). The first is accompanied by an inscription that identifies the place as a burial chapel.

58 Ibid., pl. XIV, 2. In this context, mention should be made of the Baptism font in white limestone seen once near the Seral by Woolley and Lawrence (op. cit., p. 108, fig. 43) and today disappeared.

60 Regarding the wells, Musil saw only three in 1897 (op. cit., II/1, p. 165), while a little later G. L. Robinson writes about seven wells (RB 10 (1901) 494). See also Idem, Beersheba Revisited, The Biblical World 3 (1908).
5. Beersheva and its Population in the Light of Byzantine Inscriptions

We have already dealt with the important imperial decrees, which help us to grasp the relevance of our city as a military point of the Roman-Byzantine empire. Now we shall deal with the lot of epigraphic material which was found particularly in the tombs, and which will help us to know a little about the people of ancient Beersheva, as well as about other significant issues 61.

All the inscriptions found in Beersheva are in Greek, with the interesting exception of one in roughly squared Hebrew characters, which makes sure the existence of a small Jewish community among the Christian majority of pagan origin. Unfortunately it is badly preserved, and it runs as follows:

...יוהוושע...
...על נמסהיה...
תנה (?) בריה

The letters תנה probably indicate the date of Joshua’s death, which corresponds to the year 613 C.E. The piece of screen pillar on which the inscription was carved, was later reused as framework for a window in the house of a Turkish officer 62.

Most of the Greek inscriptions are simple Christian epitaphs carved on marble slabs, and only occasionally on limestone blocks like it is usual in the other Byzantine cities of the Negev. A small number appear on architectural parts of public buildings, such as mosaics, coulums, capitals and frameworks of windows. While pointing out the general characteristic features of their redaction, we can also draw some interesting details from their contents.

Our inscriptions are usually dated, and this according to the dating systems of the period. Months may be indicated according to the Roman, the Graeco-Arab or even the Egyptian calendar. Then follows the mention of the Indiction, which is a well-known chronologic indication based on a fifteenyear taxation period, used since the fourth century. An finally the year is indicated, usually according to the so-called “era of Eleutheropolis” (Bet Guvrin) and, in a few cases, according to the “era of Gaza”. This, as said above, may be taken as an indication that from the viewpoint of the civil administration, our city was somehow linked with Eleutheropolis, on the way to Jerusalem. Only in one case, the Christian era seems to be used. The era of Eleutheropolis is

61 Our study is mostly based on the published material and on a few items that are displayed in the local Museum.

62 A. JAUSSEN, R. SAVIGNAC, H. VINCENT, Mélanges, RB 2 (1905) 252; SUKENIK, op. cit.; OPER, op. cit., p. 38, fig.
199 years shorter than the accepted Christian one, and that of Gaza is 60 years longer. As an illustration of the use of different eras, following are three epitaphs, all from the sixth century:

1) Era of Eleutheropolis:

"Here rests blessed Kaioumos from Eilat, who died on the 16th of the month of Daisios, in the 6th indiction, the year 344 according to the people of Eleutheropolis" (= A.D. 543) \(^{63}\).

2) Era of Gaza:

"Blessed Mary entered into rest the 21st of Artemisios, it being according to the Gazeans the 570 year" (= May 16, 510) \(^{64}\).

3) Christian era:

"Blessed Procopius has died the 20th of the month of Loos in the year 576, 9th indication". The year 576 cannot be but that of the accepted Christian era, this date corresponding to the average of all the other inscriptions found in the same necropolis \(^{65}\).

There are interesting examples of the use of a double calendar, our epigraphists being precise in the dating, whether it refers to the day of the death or to that of the burial:

"Here rests blessed Abraham, physician, who died on the 8th of the mont of May, the 18th of Artemisios, in the 12th indiction, the year 365" (= 564) \(^{66}\).

Such plurality of dating systems is only an indication of the cosmopolitan character of the Byzantine Beersheva, where a heterogeneous population lived and met: farmer-soldiers of Dalmatian origin with their Roman officers, Greek people who had established themselves there coming from abroad or from other towns in the country, a probably majority of Nabatean and Edomite Arabs from the Negev who, like the Greeks, embraced Christianity, and a small community of Jews, faithful to the faith and customs of their ancestors. The onomastics of our inscriptions may tell us a little more about this mixed population, though in its study we must take into consideration that names of Greek and Hebrew (i.e. Biblical) origin could be born by anyone, at least in the Christian centuries. On the other hand, sporadic Arabic names, like Obedos (Arabic 'Ubeid), probably represent the aboriginal nomads, mainly Nabateans. But even this could be

\(^{63}\) H. VINCENT, RB 12 (1903) 274-275. This inscription is preserved in the local Museum.

\(^{64}\) See F. C. BURKITT, Notes on the Greek Inscriptions from Beersheba, PEF QSt (1920) 16-22.

\(^{65}\) ABEL, Inscriptions..., p. 427.

\(^{66}\) JAUSSEN-SAVIGNAC-VINCENT, loc. cit., p. 248-257.
contested when we consider the name Zonainos (Arabic Zunein) of a man from Elusa whose father was Sergios.

Among the Biblical and New Testament names we find Abraham, Elias, Susana, John, Stephen, Timotheos, Mary and Peter. From the Christian sainst-list there is, e.g. George, e legendary martyr from Cappadocia. Typical Latin, though written in a hellenized form, we find the names Severus, Maximus, Flavius, Flavia, Silvanus and Victor. The list of Greek names is longer, including names like Evaristos, Theodotos, Germanos, Dorotheos, Symmachos, Sophia and so on.

Solleos might be a name of unclear Semitic origin, maybe סול or סול.

The above mentioned names belong to inscriptions from the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries, when Christianity had supplanted the former pagan religions of the non-Jewish population all over the country and had reduced the adherents to the Jewish faith to a minority. On how and when the Christian religion was introduced and accepted in Beersheva we have no reference at all. It probably came through the missionary activity of monks, perhaps sent there from Elusa, the most important Christian center of the Northern Negev, see of a bishop and sometimes mentioned by the contemporary Church historians.

From a pre-Christian period, only three inscriptions have been published so far, and only one is dated. The three are important for they are related to the erection or inauguration of monuments in the city. The first one refers to an unspecified public building, the second to a new well, and the third to a work which remains a secret to us inspite, or rather because, of its literary description. The texts run as follows:

1. "It was happily erected by Alexandros and (his) sons Boethos and Alkibiades, through (the work of) Korian- tos (?) the master-builder in the year 136". (= 335 C.E.)

2. "Under (the official order of) T... this well was establis- hed; Domitius The... and Kris... took part in it as master- builder... Let it be recalled in heaven the good fortune that has befallen the metropolis"

3. "O eyes, what marvel is this? What world is figured here? What mortal found this beatiful thing, unknown since

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67 He died in 544. See A. ALT, Ein Grabstein aus Beersheba, ZDPV 42 (1919) 177-188.
68 Solleos died in 518. Proposed Semitic identifications are by Abel, loc. cit., p. 428.
69 ALT, op. cit., p. 13.
70 This badly preserved Greek text was published, without attempting to its translation, by Abel, Inscriptions, p. 428. ALT (op. cit., p. 13f) was the first to give the translation.
the origin of the times? It is Antipatros who accomplished this. He showed the heavens orderly ranged, he who holds in his hands the reins of the armies beloved to Ares”.

The pagan character of inscriptions 2 and 3 is obvious and their references to Greek mythology make a dating later than the mid-fifth century unthinkable. Who was Antipatros (or Antipater) of inscription 3? The name is familiar to us, being that of Herod the Great’s father, who was an Edomite, certainly born not far from Beersheva. But we cannot relate the two names without risking a serious chronological jump. What seems to be more plausible is that Antipatros of our inscription was either the governor of Beersheva or the chief officer of its military camp. The beautiful monument erected by him or in his honor could be a mural painting, a relief, or a mosaic representing the celestial vault, decorating perhaps an enormous sundial or, maybe, a public winter bath-house of the kind known to have existed in Gaza.

In any case, this inscription is an indication that, even before the erection of Christian basilicas, Beersheva was already embellished with nice monuments.

But it is, of course, with the prosperity enjoyed by the Negev and the whole country during the Byzantine centuries, and in particular during Justianian’s reign, that our city reached the sufficient economic development that permitted the building of some beautiful churches in it. Among the aristocrats who most contributed to this building activity, a certain Severos was prominent, according to the epigraphy. In one case his name appears in an inscription carved on a marble slab which starts with the quotation of Psalm 117:20 (in the Septuagint translation): “(This is the gate of the Lord!) the righteous (will enter in) it”.

This is a text often written at the entrance of churches and other buildings. Severos’ name appears more than once associated with that of his wife Flavia, like in her nice epitaph, which is unusually expressive of faith and hope:

“Flavia, the holy companion of Severos, rests here. Having loved Christ and run after him, she left at (the age of) 40

71 This text was first published by N. SCHMIDT and B. CHARLES, Greek Inscriptions from the Negeb, AJA 14 (1910) 66, and their translation was improved by M.-J. LAGRANGE, Bulletin, RB 7 (1910) 733f. See also RB 9 (1912) 160 and 477.

72 As described by John of Gaza, quoted by ALT (op. cit., p. 16).

73 Abel, Inscriptions, p. 428.

74 Thus e.g. in the sixth century church of Santa Catarina on Mt. Sinai (Y. TSAFIR, Monks and Monasteries in Southern Sinai, Qadmoniot 3 (1970) 16, Hebrew).
years. And (you, Flavia), full of confidence, pray for your children’’ 75.

Another important person, Stephen, who bears the noble title of “archiatros (= chief physician) of the sacred palace”, seems to have competed with Severos in his building activity: “and this new work comes from the same generosity of Stephen, they very sage and very illustrious chief-physician of the sacred palace” 76.

Stephen seems to have been one of the most common names among the Christian population of the Negev, as we find it in many epitaphs, not only from Beersheba but also from other cities 77 as well as in the collection of Byzantine papyri from Nes-sana. This may be due to the widespread devotion to the first Christian martyr, whose relics were claimed to have been found on the present Bet Gamal in 415, and in whose honor a magnificent basilica had been erected in Jerusalem by empress Eudocia in 439. The second most common name in the Negev was probably Abraham, in honor of the Hebrew Patriarch who had dwelt in Beersheba (Gen 21:31 ff). And so, in the most recently discovered epitaph we find a certain “Stephen (son) of Abraham” 78. In this context therefore nothing is more natural than to find that one of the churches in our city had been dedicated to both saints, Stephen and Abraham, and this again by the generosity of Severos, according to the following inscription in the local Museum: “(Place) of the first martyr (Stephanos) and place of (holy) Abraham. Severos (and Flavia? donated it) according to a vow” 79.

These churches needed their clergy. Thanks to the epitaphs we know the names of some of the persons consecrated to the religious service of the population, such as deacons Peter 80 and Abraham 81, deaconess Sophia 82, and priest Anastasios “who lived

75 M. Abel, Nouvelles inscriptions grecques de Bersabée, RB (NS) 1 (1904) 269.
76 B. W. Robinson, Two New Inscriptions from Beersheba, AJA 12 (1908) 343-349 (and Fig. 1, p. 344). According to M. Abel (Epigraphie grecque de Palestine, RB 6 (1909) 104f.), these archiatroi often received, as a retribution for their services, the government of provinces or dioceses, or at least honorific titles and exemption of charges, and this allowed them to erect, at their expenses, a civil or religious monument.
78 M. Schwabe, Christian-Greek Inscriptions from Beersheba, BIES 17 (1952-53) 121-125.
79 Jauussen (et alii), loc. cit., p. 251 and pl. IX, 7.
81 “Tomb of blessed Abraham, deacon, having finished his career in the Lord (cf. Gal 2:2)…” Published by Raimondo, Neghev-Beersceva…., p. 267. This epitaph is preserved in the museum of the Flagellation Convent, Jerusalem.
82 Her epitaph in unusual: “Here lies Christ’s maid-servant and bride
85 years, long enough to see children and grandchildren” and was buried in his church 83.

In an unpublished Greek inscription, probably from Beersheva, mention is made of a certain Anastasios, monk (?) of the Holy Trinity (?) 84. Actually this is not the only indication that monks and monasteries existed in the town. As stated above, a particular spot in the field of ruins of the Bizantine period that was seen before the Turks started building the present city, was called Ed-Deir, (the monastery) by the local Bedouins. In two of the spots that were excavated the archaeologists thought to have discovered the remains of monastic establishments (above, pp. 149 and 150). Also important evidence for the existence of monasteries in the town comes from a very reliable literary source: the spiritual correspondence of Barsanouphe, an ascete living in a monastery of nearby Gaza in the sixth century. No less than 54 of his letters are addressed to a certain “Abbot John of Beersheva”, who had come to live in that monastery. John seems to have been an expert builder of churches and a good administrator. On one occasion he becomes angry because the rain has damaged the bricks... He is sometimes critical of Abbot Seridos, the hygoumenos of the same monastery. With words of patience and spiritual comfort. Barsanouphe tries to lead his impulsive disciple to the right path 85. John was already a monk when he joined that monastery with the only aim of living near the two great fathers, Barsanouphe and John, his friend and disciple. The title of abbot given to him in the letter headings may indicate that he had actually been the hygoumenos, the superior of a monastery in Beersheva. John had left it for personal reasons, in search of good guidance in his spiritual problems 86.

Among the civil titles of people named in the inscriptions we have seen those of two physicians but there is also an advocate,

Sophia, the diligent Phoibe (cf. Rom 16:1), who fell asleep in peace the 21st of March, indiction 11, in the year 319 (= 518). May God the Lord...” (Alt., op. cit., p. 25).

83 This unpublished epitaph is displayed in the local Museum in Beersheva.

84 I hope to publish this undated, fragmentarian, text in the near future, together with another unknown inscription. Both are still in Beersheva.

85 The most recent and complete translation of this correspondance is in French, by L. Regnault, Ph. Lemaire and B. Outtier, Barsonouphe et Jean de Gaza, Correspondance, Abbaye Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, 1972.

86 “Réponse du Grand Veillard (Barsanouphe) à l’abbé Jean de Beersheba qui lui avait demandé de venir habiter près d’eux dans le monastère (de l’abbé Séridos)...” (Ibid., p. 13).
Stephen, who died in 555, and Elias (son) of Promos, a scriniarius, i.e. a clerk probably charged with the redaction or conservation of documents, who died in 605. Among the military personnel, we find “John, the tribune”, who died in 613.

Despite the Christian character of all these inscriptions, most of them accompanied by a cross at the beginning or at the end, sometimes a cross and a palmette, and often an invocation like “Lord, help Stephen...”, there are cases where a certain syncretism is manifest. This is illustrated by the following long epitaph written in Greek hexameters, in which only a final “invocation of Christian hope comes to reveal the intimate thought of the survivors”:

“† I am Georges, son of Theodotos. Now, the destiny has extinguished me in my youth, and so I have left the grief to my father and my uncle, who had nourished me and given me an excellent education.

Otherwise: A fatal destiny has extinguished the sweet and gracious Georges, charming child, like a lamp. This young Phaetoon of Helicon rests near his grandfather, he who has left behind him the grief and many tears to his father and his uncle. 12th indiction. At 18 years of age. † Let Christ give you the rest, my orphan!”

Finally, and in the same context of syncretistic feelings in front of the death of a beloved person, a curious discovery made in one of the graves excavated in 1904 is to be recorded here. Inside a sarcophag, and together with terracotta lamps and glass vases, there was a statuette of the fertility goddess. The figure is that of a nude female, bearing a collar around her neck and bracelets on her risen arms. The hairdress points to a possible Egyptian origin. The discovery puzzled its publisher because of the Christian character of the necropolis in which it was made. It is not impossible that this particular tomb belonged to a pagan, but it seems more reasonable to accept the fact as that of a popular attachment to the ancestral cults so typical of this country all along its history.

87 Burkit, loc. cit.
88 Among the people mentioned in the Nessana documents we have also a certain “Flavius Victor Abraham, scriniarius of the Nessana camp” (Kraemer, op. cit., p. 60f.).
89 C. Clermont-Genneau, RB 3 (1906) 86.
91 Schmidt-Charles, loc. cit., p. 65.
92 Jaussen (et alii), loc. cit., p. 249-250.
93 R. Savignac, Chronique, RB (NS) 1 (1904) 88-89.
Conclusion

Poor as is our knowledge of the events that marked the history of Beersheva during the Roman-Byzantine period, we are fortunate that the archaeologic and particularly the epigraphic material enables us to feel very near the heart of the people who integrated its civic community. Heterogeneous as it was, problems could not be missing. Agriculture has never been easy in the Negev. Border-soldiers from abroad had to find their way of life combining military service with farming. Taxes were heavy for everybody. Nomadic Arabs likely came to Beersheva for their regular market days, probably meeting about the same place as today, near the famous wells. A few Jews had to survive among a Christian majority. Caravans of Arab traders and European pilgrims used to pass by on their long journeys, staying for a while in the rest-houses of the city, the beloved metropolis of its citizens. There was plenty of work, not only for architects, stone-dressers, sculptors and simple masons, but also for an advocate and a physician, for civil clerks and army officers. Many people died astonishingly young, but there was always a good old priest to attend them in their final moments. Rich aristocrats were generous in their gifts to churches and monasteries, sometimes in performance of a vow, but always on condition that their names would be perpetually commemorated on the monuments they erected.

What was the end of this living, human, community? No records have been kept to tell us what happened in the Persian invasion of the country in 614, but it was certainly the first strike that foretold the tragedy that was approaching. Palestinian cities fell one after other in the hands of the Persians with an incredible fastness. In their rage against the Byzantine emperors, they destroyed almost systematically the monuments and put fire to the churches they found on their way, for they represented a sign of the Byzantine power in the East. If life continued in the cities and villages, it was probably in the terror of a military occupation that lasted for ten years. Our latest dated inscriptions are from 613, i.e. just one year before the Persian invasion. When emperor Heraclius finally overpowered the secular enemy of the empire, there was probably so much to do in every aspect of the civic life that a full restoration was not yet reached when, in 634, the Muslim conquest came to put a tragic end to the Byzantine civilization in the country. Not everything was lost, however, with the Muslims and it seems that life in Beersheva continued till the beginning of the eighth century, like it is proven in Nessana. Actually, the few Ommeyad coins found on the soil of one of the churches seem to give evidence to the fact. And from Arabic sources we know that 'Amr Ibn el'As, the famous Muslim
conqueror of Egypt in 639, retired to Beersheva later in his life. This means that the city was populated and was attractive enough to call the attention of the general, who seems to have bought or received it as a permanent property for himself and for his descendants.

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95 "(Beersheva) is the village of 'Amr ibn el-'Aṣ of Palestine, in Syria. There live some of his parents" (Al-Bakri II, 762). This text was written before 1094.

94 'As-Sab' is a region, in Palestine, between Beit el-Maqdis and El-Karak. There are there seven wells, from which the site bears its name. This is the property of 'Amr ibn el-'Aṣ; there he lived, after his retirement from public life" (Yaqut. III, 34).