6 CENTRAL STUDY AREA: BE'ER SHEVA AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

6.1 Introduction

The central study area centers around the modern city of Be'er Sheva. In the center of the study area runs the Be'er Sheva–Arad Valley, which is mostly flat; to the north and south of it are low hills that reach up to 450 m above sea level (Figure 6.1).

The altitude of the study area ranges between 145 and 450 m above sea level. The wadis in the study area—Nahals Beersheva, Hebron, Beqa, and Secher—are dry riverbeds that only carry water after heavy winter rains. Nahals Hebron, Beqa, and Secher run into Nahal Beersheva which flows into Nahal Besor. The area of the modern city of Be'er Sheva is mostly flat, and only toward the northeast and south are there small hills. The landscape of the study area has changed dramatically since the early 20th century, mostly due to development.

The Turkish Administration built the modern city of Be'er Sheva at the beginning of the 20th century on the remains of the Roman-Byzantine city (Gophna and Yisraeli, 1973: 115). Musil (1908: 66) visited the site in 1903, reporting the systematic destruction of the ancient remains in order to gain building material for the houses of the new city. Archaeological research on the ancient city of Be'er Sheva, the core site of the entire region, began in the 1950s. As a result, salvage excavations were carried out by the IDAM and later by the IAA and universities. Next to the modern city of Be'er Sheva, there are mostly smaller towns and villages in the study area, mainly Bedouin settlements, with some army bases and agricultural areas (Figure 6.2). About 100 square km of the study area consists of

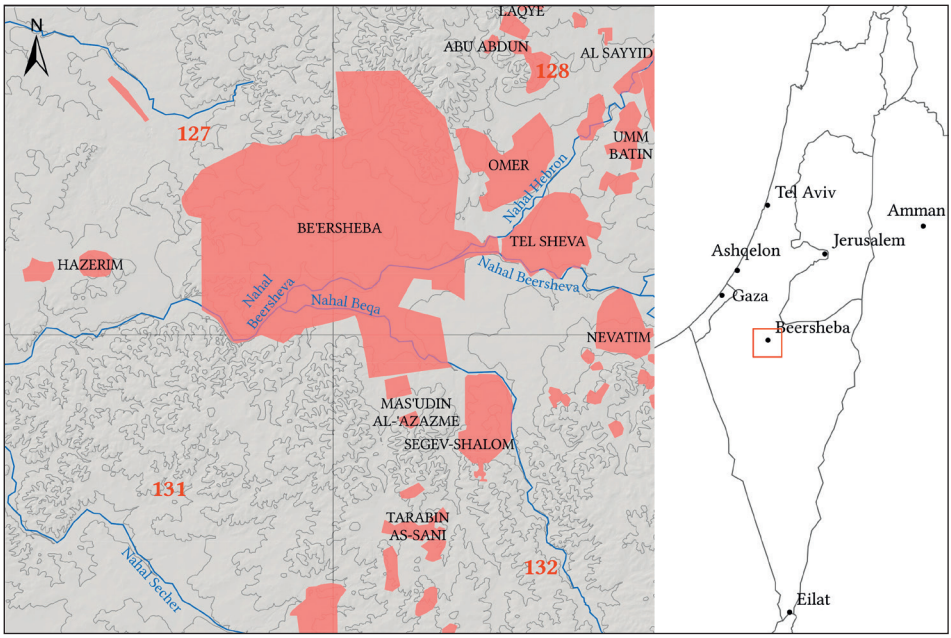

Figure 6.1 Central study area, showing the main modern settlements.
Survey map divisions (maps 127, 128, 131, and 132) appear according to the Archaeological Survey of Israel, including Nahal Beersheva, Nahal Hebron, Nahal Secher, Nahal Tson, and Nahal Beqa.

developed areas, including paved roads. The other 300 square km are partially used for agriculture, with a few forest areas, and in many parts of the study area—especially to the east and south of Be'er Sheva—there are several unrecognized Bedouin settlements (Shmueli and Khamaisi, 2011).

The central study area, with the ancient city of Be'er Sheva in the center, is divided into four survey maps. The northern two maps, Be'er Sheva West (127) and Be'er Sheva East (128), have not been systematically surveyed. Most of the area is covered by the modern city of Be'er Sheva. The two maps comprise a collection of development surveys, excavations, and inspections conducted, by IDAM and IAA, with the majority of the data having been acquired since the 1990s. Because of the development of the city of Be'er Sheva in recent decades, many sites were surveyed and excavated, and the published survey maps are a collection of these surveys and excavations. For all intents and purposes, the area can be considered as having been fully surveyed. The two southern maps were surveyed in the 1980s and published in 2014 online. In total, 670 classical sites were registered by the ASI (Table 6.1).

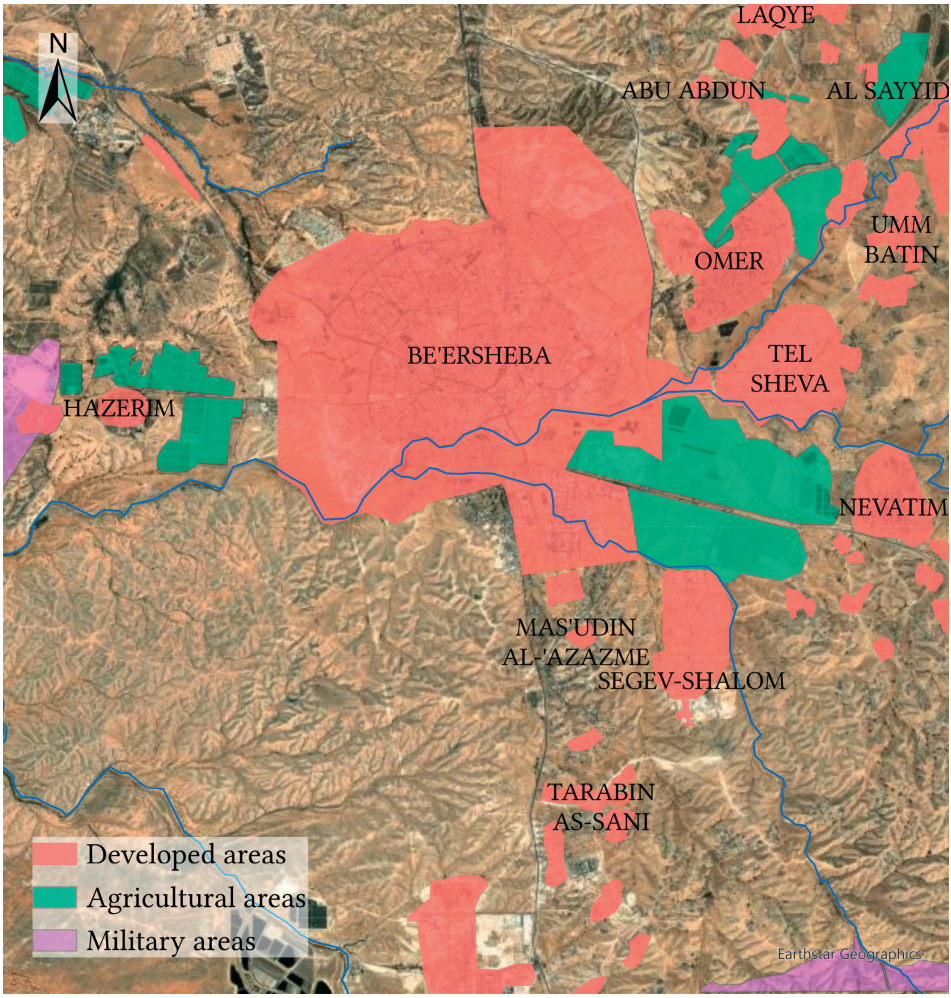

Figure 6.2 Modern land use of the central study area.

Be'er Sheva comprises the most extensive section of the study area. Smaller towns and villages surround the city, and there are some military areas. Background: Satellite Imagery (DigitalGlobe—ESRI).

Table 6.1 Survey maps, sites, density, and survey method in the central study area. This number includes only the Classical sites registered during systematic surveys, not the sites added based on development surveys, inspections and trial trenching, or excavations.

Map No.	Dates surveyed	Area (sq km)	Number of Total Sites	Density of Sites	Number of Classical Sites	Density of Sites	Survey Method	Reference
127	–/–	100	344	3.44	243	2.43	Collection of surveys and excavations	Shemesh, 2018a
128	–/–	100	306	3.06	229	2.29	Collection of surveys and excavations	Shemesh, 2018b
131	1982 and parts in 2009	100	109	1.09	79	0.79	Field-walking	Baumgarten, 2014a
132	1980	100	105	1.05	89	0.89	Field-walking	Baumgarten, 2014b

As is evident, the archaeological density of sites (0.79–2.43) is similar to that of the Besor region. In maps 127 and 128, the density is higher because the modern city of Be'er Sheva is located at the center, built on the remains of the ancient city. Therefore, many archaeological sites have been discovered there. In addition to these data, many sites (over 400, mostly tombs and structures) uncovered through inspections (mainly in the Old City of Be'er Sheva) have been added to the database. Furthermore, where there was little information available in survey map publications, the publications in *'Atiqot* and *Hadashot Arkheologiyot: Excavations and Surveys in Israel (HA-ESI)* or additional scientific literature were consulted for this study.

In many cases, when burials were excavated, the exact location of each tomb was not given, only a general location. When possible, the exact location was determined with the help of published maps, georeferenced, and added to the database (see chapter: 4.3 GIS data). An additional challenge with tombs is that the majority have not been excavated or no finds were present, therefore, exact dating is often impossible. However, the ranges of dates for tomb types are known, such that, for example, cist tombs built from whitish/yellowish limestone slabs appear in Late Roman to Early Islamic period contexts throughout the Negev.

6.2 Methodology and site size

Most sites were found in the central study area. In the central study area, 951 Classical sites were recorded and added to the database┐ those sites have been discovered during past surveys, excavations, inspections, and trial trenching. (Figure 6.3). This number differs from the site numbers from surveys (Table 6.1), as over 300 sites found during inspections and excavations were added to the database. During the Hellenistic period (n = 16) and Early Roman period (n = 12), no apparent change in the number of settlement sites is observed. In the Late Roman period, the number of sites climbs to 47 (20 sites date to the general Roman period and, based on the available data, it is not possible to date them to one of the subperiods—these 20 sites have not been included in Figure 6.3). An increase in sites is clearly evident from the Late Roman period, which continues into the Byzantine period but decreases in the Early Islamic period.

Most sites date to the Byzantine period (n = 755). Of course, one must take into consideration that (1) many tombs have been discovered that date to the Byzantine period (n = 227) and (2) not all sites were built and inhabited during the same period. However, these numbers provide a general idea of the settlement

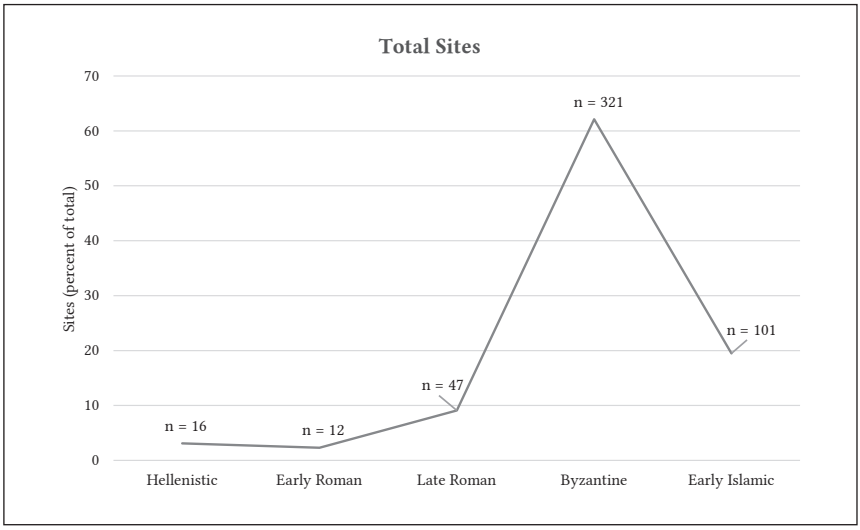

Figure 6.3 Central study area, total sites according to archaeological period. Twenty sites that date to the general Roman period were not included in this figure. Site percentage according to period (Be'er Sheva counted as one site): Hellenistic 3.1%, Early Roman 2.3%, Late Roman 9.1%, Byzantine 62.1% and Early Islamic 19.5%; absolute numbers on the graph.

patterns in the study area. Furthermore, over 200 sites discovered during excavations, test trenches, or inspections belong to the Roman-Byzantine city of Be'er Sheva. To be able to compare the different survey areas, the many sites (> 400) located within the area of the Roman-Byzantine city of Be'er Sheva, are counted as one settlement, like in other towns and villages, and not every structure has been accounted for. In the Early Islamic period the site numbers drop by two-thirds to 101 sites, although the percentage of Early Islamic sites is much higher than in the other two study areas (n = 19.5%). Of all sites in the western study area, 8.2% date to the Early Islamic period, and, in the eastern study area, 11.2% of all sites date to that period. The difference in site percentage numbers is explainable by the fact that in the central study area, the northern two "survey" maps include many excavations. Through excavations a much more exact interpretation and a more precise dating of the site is possible, this resulting that more Early Islamic sites could be identified.

In the Late Roman period (third–early fourth century CE), settlement activity in the area increased. Be'er Sheva grew from a large village/town in the Late Roman period to a city in the Byzantine period and served as the capital of the northern Negev. The number of villages and farms increased considerably from

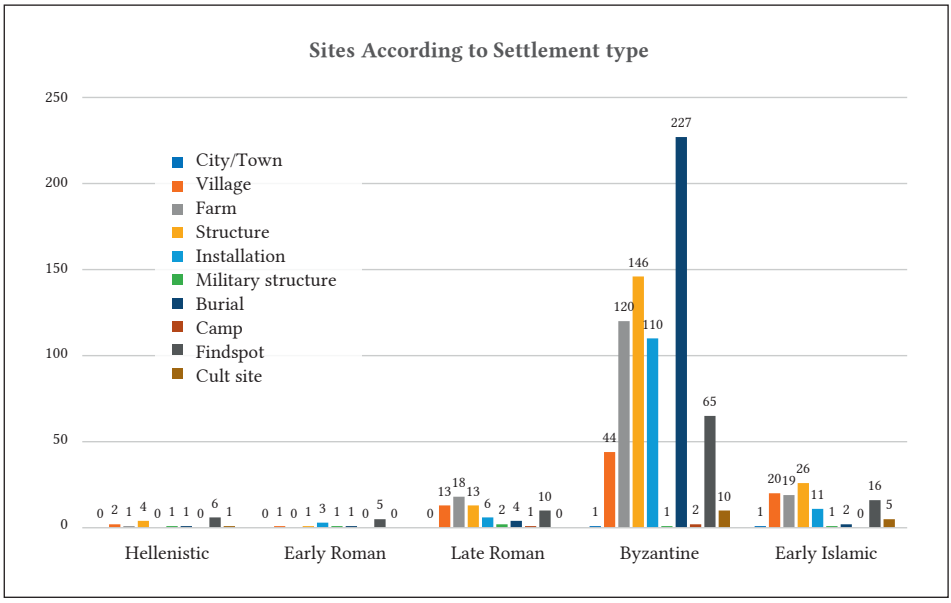

Figure 6.4 Sites according to settlement type in the central study area.
Cult sites have been counted twice. In the study area one Hellenistic temple, several churches and monasteries and one possible synagogue were found.

the Late Roman period to the Byzantine period (villages by 358% and farms by over 733%), as shown in Figure 6.4. For the Byzantine period, a large number of burials are shown. However, this number includes burial sites—in some places, only one tomb has been found, while there may be a whole cemetery in others. Based on the different publications of excavations and internal reports of inspections, it was not always possible to map the exact location of each tomb. Sometimes only a general area was given without spatial reference to each tomb. In other cases, the exact number of tombs was unknown—the number 227 represents, therefore, at least over 400 individual tombs.

Wherever possible, the size of the settlements was calculated in order to classify the site. In some cases, the size was given by the surveyor or excavator, however, this was not the case for many of the sites. If no size was given, it was estimated based on the described finds. The majority of the sites fall within the category of up to 1.0 hectares. These include installations, cisterns, farms, single buildings, and also small villages with few structures (hamlets).

Byzantine Be'er Sheva (90 to 140 ha) was the largest urban settlement in this study area during the Classical period, and there were a few other large settlements (e.g., Tel Sheva and Khirbat Amra). There are a small number of other sites larger than 3 ha, mainly dating back to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Settlement size according to archaeological period.

	Settlement size (ha)					
	Unknown	**0.0–1.0**	**1.1–3.0**	**3.1–10**	**< 10**	**Tot.**
Hellenistic settlements (332–37 BCE)	0	15	1	0	0	16
Roman settlements (37 BCE–324 CE)	0	65	13	0	1	87
Early Roman (37 BCE–132 CE)	0	11	1	0	0	12
Late Roman (132–324 CE)	0	34	12	0	1	47
Byzantine settlements (324–640 CE)	43	667	36	6	3	755
Early Islamic settlements (640–750 CE)	15	81	1	3	1	101

6.3 Previous field work

In the central study area, many sites have been excavated, and the majority are located in and surrounding the modern city of Be'er Sheva. Most excavations were salvage excavations, but a few excavations were a few larger excavations were conducted by universities. In addition to the excavations conducted in modern Be'er Sheva, other prominent ancient sites were Tel Sheva and Khirbat Amra. Several excavations conducted in and around Be'er Sheva were joint projects of BGU and the IAA, as for example excavations at Compound C (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 315; Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b), Abu Matar (Gilead et al., 1993) and Rakafot 54 (Peters et al., 2020). Tel Sheva was excavated between 1969 and 1976, by TAU, directed at first by Aharoni and after his death by Herzog (Aharoni, 1973).

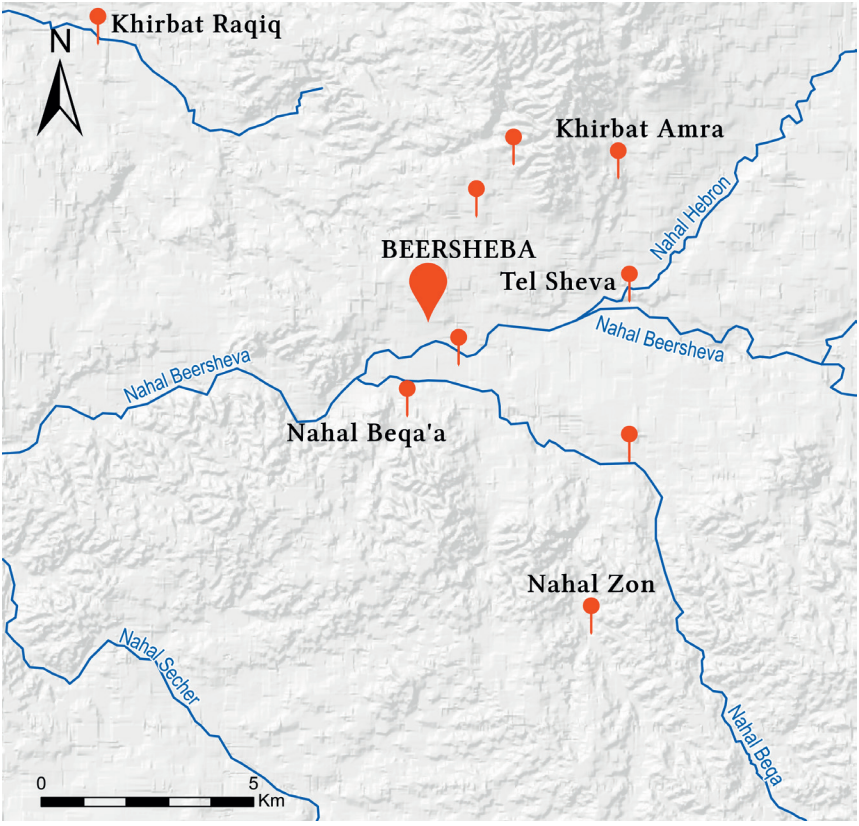

Figure 6.5 Previous field work in the central study area.
In and around the city of Be'er Sheva, several extensive and important excavations have been conducted. The sites and excavations are discussed according to the dating of the site (see below).

Khirbat Amra, which was excavated in 1993–1994 (Tahal, 1996; 2000), represents the most extensive excavation of a rural site, dating from the Classical periods in the Beersheba Valley until the present day. Many of these excavations will constitute a data baseline for chronologically comparing the survey.

6.4 Hellenistic period

Sixteen sites recorded in the study are dated to the Hellenistic period. The site density is comparable to that of the other two study areas (n = 0.04). In the eastern study area, it is equal (n = 0.04), and in the western study area, it is a bit higher (n = 0.05). All sites are relatively small, between 0.01 and 1 ha, mostly one to two single structures, some with underground spaces, with the exception of Tel Sheva, which was probably around 2 ha (Figure 6.6).

The largest and most important site in this area during the Hellenistic Period was Tel Sheva.[13] The site is located between Nahal Beersheva and Nahal Hebron, which merges to its west. About ten meters higher than its surroundings, the tell is one of the summits that dominate the Be'er Sheva valley (Aharoni, 1973: 1). The Hellenistic site included a citadel, a temple with a courtyard, silos, and refuse pits (Aharoni, 1973: 34; Figueras, 1980; Derfler, 1981). The temple was in use from the third to the first centuries BCE. An underground disposal area (*favissa*) contained clay and bronze figurines and a Babylonian cylinder seal (Lehmann, 2013). The citadel was probably established after John Hyrcanus I conquered the area (Figueras, 1980). Tel Sheva was located at the southern edge of Judea, near the border with the Nabatean kingdom. During excavations, 60 Hellenistic coins were discovered at Tel Sheva, the majority dating to the second and first centuries BCE (Kindler, 1973: 90–96). Interestingly, one-third of the coins (n = 25) are of Nabatean origin, indicating trade relations with the Nabateans during the Hellenistic period. All 25 Nabatean coins are dated between 110 BCE and 62 BCE and were made from bronze (Kindler, 1973: 90–96). The Hellenistic period finds (other than coins) have not been published at the time of writing. To the east of the tell, a lower, mainly flat area is located. Mainly Byzantine structures were discernable during surveys,

13 Bedouins called the site Tell es-Seba. Y. Aharoni used the modern Hebrew name found on the maps during time of excavation, which was Tel Beer Sheva. However, he used the biblical transliteration Tel Beersheba instead of the modern form (Aharoni, 1973: 1). In the course of this research, the site will be called Tel Sheva, as researchers agree that the site was not ancient Be'er Sheva, which was located where modern Be'er Sheva is located. Tel Sheva served to safeguard the road between Be'er Sheva and Tel Malhata (Fritz, 1973: 87–88).

such as a church (Woolley and Lawrence, 1914–1915: 45). However, many Hellenistic and Roman period sherds have been found (Aharoni, 1973: 1). Therefore, it is assumable that, during the Hellenistic period, the main population lived on the food of the tell, forming a lower settlement. However, to date, no Hellenistic period structures have been excavated in this area, which is covered today by the modern Bedouin town of Tel Sheva.

At Khirbat Amra, located about 2.5 km northeast of modern Be'er Sheva, the remains of a Hellenistic period structure, probably a small farmstead, were discovered during the 1994 excavation (Tahal, 1996; 2000). The farmstead was at least partially overbuilt with a larger farmhouse dating to the Early Islamic (Area E, see Figure 6.14, below; Tahal, 2000). Several walls could confidently be attributed to the Hellenistic period structure, forming two rooms with a slightly different orientation than the Early Islamic farmstead. The rooms most likely had a beaten earth floor, on which four complete vessels (three juglets and an oil lamp) were found, which date to the second to early first century BCE (Taxel and Michael, forthcoming). One can assume that the structure, which has been excavated only in part, probably dates to the second to early first century BCE. This assumption is based on the pottery finds from Area E. Furthermore, Hellenistic-period pottery sherds (fourth–second/first century BCE) were found in several other excavation areas. However, only Area E contained a large quantity of Hellenistic-period pottery related to the architectural remains. Based on the ceramic evidence, the Hellenistic period occupation ended probably during the early first century BCE (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). There were no imported ceramics found at Khirbat Amra, which might be an indication that indeed only a small farmhouse was located there, and that the settlement was short-lived. The majority of other studied sites in the northern Negev show a certain amount of imported ware. In the Be'er Sheva valley imported wares were found in the settlement east of Be'er Sheva (Baumgarten, 2003; 2020, Israel and Feder, 2011), Tel Ira (Fischer and Tal, 1999), Tel Malhata (Tal, 2015) and Tel Aroer (Taxel and Hershkovitz, 2011), and for the Besor study area (see Chapter 5.4 Hellenistic period). These sites were all larger sites, several of the smaller sites did not have any imported pottery, especially in the Late Hellenistic period.

To the east of Be'er Sheva, halfway to Tel Sheva, the remains of a Hellenistic village were found during a salvage excavation in 1998/1999. According to Baumgarten (2003; 2020), this settlement might have been a satellite settlement of the large settlement at Tel Sheva. Several large underground cavities were excavated, and pottery, part of an ostracon, and a Rhodian amphora handle were found. The finds date from the second to first centuries BCE (Baumgarten, 2020). Nearby, a second excavation took place where Hellenistic period remains were also found. It is possible that these remains belonged to the same settlement (Israel et al.,

2011; Haimi, 2013). Several structures had been excavated, and two of the structures had underground rooms. The exact function of these structures in the respective villages is unclear. However, they were most likely used for agricultural purposes, as they were located close to Nahal Beersheva, and built terraces were also found in the area. In addition to the Hellenistic pottery, loom weights, a jar stopper, and fragments of millstones and pounding stones were found (Israel et al., 2011; Haimi, 2013).

At a smaller site at Bir Abu Jekheidim, located at the northern bank of Nahal Ashan in the northwestern part of the study area, remains from the Chalcolithic, Iron Age, and Hellenistic periods were discovered during a survey conducted in 1958 (Cohen, 1977). In 1976, Cohen excavated the Chalcolithic underground dwelling places. Near one dwelling place, he excavated a skeleton and at its side found a cooking pot from the second century BCE (Cohen, 1977). It seems that the Hellenistic burial was dug into the Chalcolithic remains. Nearby, two structures from the Hellenistic period were found during additional surveys.

At Nahal Ashan 2, which is located in the northwestern corner of the study area on a moderate slope of a loess-covered hill, building remains dating to the Hellenistic period were discovered during excavations in 1999, and according to the excavator, these remains belonged to a ruined settlement (Israel, 2003). The structure was built from mud bricks with a beaten earth floor, and a coin dating to the mid-second century BCE was found. Furthermore, 25 loom weights were found on the floor, as well as pottery vessels (krater and base of a jug). The site continued to be occupied in the Early Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods.

Five coins were found in the course of three salvage excavations in the modern city of Be'er Sheva date to the Hellenistic period and might serve as an indication that some kind of settlement was already established in the area. Three coins were found in the Old City of modern Be'er Sheva or nearby (Old Bedouin market;[14] Qenion[15]), dating from the late fourth to the third centuries BCE. Two other coins found in the Ramot neighborhood[16] of Be'er Sheva date to the late second century BCE. Nevertheless, at the time of writing, no structural remains dating to the Hellenistic period have been found.

Further, no Hellenistic settlements were found during surveys or excavations in the study area south of Nahal Beersheva (Figure 6.6) (Baumgarten, 2014a; 2014b). This is most likely related to the fact that the border between the Judean and Nabatean kingdoms was somewhere south of Nahal Beersheva.

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14 Excavation permit no. A-1862/1992
15 Excavation permit no. A-1644/1989
16 Excavation permit no. A-2748/1997

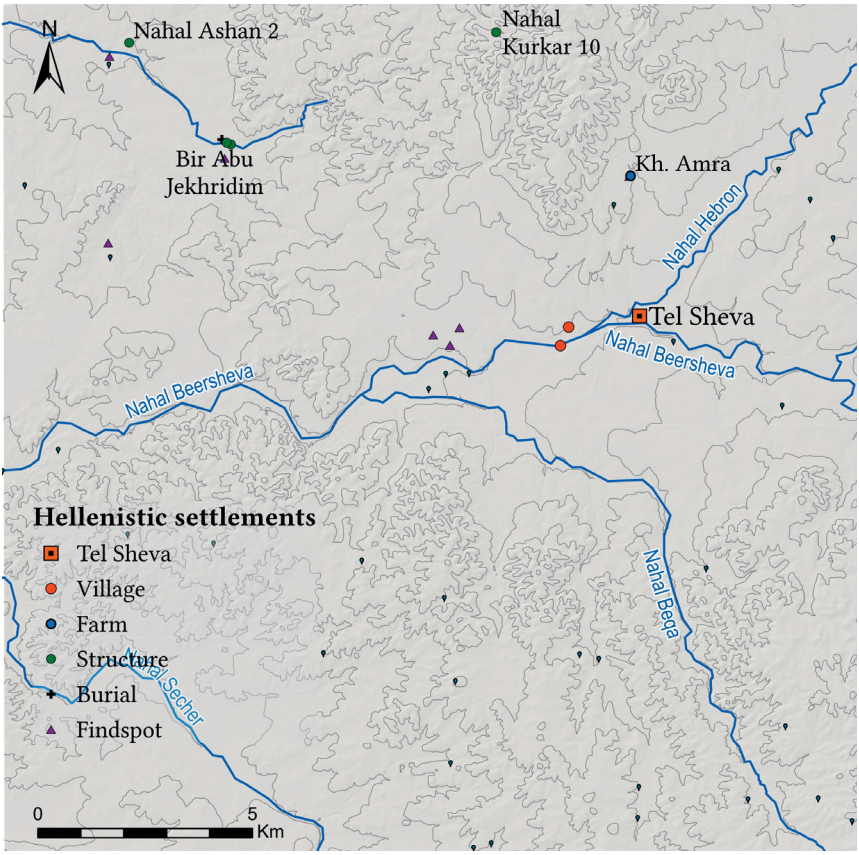

Figure 6.6 Hellenistic settlements of the central study area.

6.5 Roman period

Twelve sites date to the Early Roman period, 47 sites date to the Late Roman period, and dates for 20 sites could not be established, as no pottery was published. The site numbers expand sharply from the Early Roman to the Late Roman period. Four times more sites have been identified as belonging to the Late Roman period than the Early Roman period. A similar expansion of settlement numbers is visible in the western and eastern study area.

6.5.1 Early Roman period

During the Early Roman period, the settlement density in the central study area was low, and only 12 sites have been dated to this period. The settlement density is 0.03, which is slightly lower than in the western and eastern study areas. Only a few settlements appear in the study area (Tel Sheva, Rakafot 54, and Nahal Ashan 2), and a further three installations and six findspots have been found during surveys or excavations (Figure 6.7).

The largest site in the area, Rakafot 54, was a Jewish rural village that was discovered and excavated in 2018 and 2019. The site, which is located north of modern Be'er Sheva, is located within the area of a former army base, and its remains were partially damaged by it. The ancient village was established in the first cen-

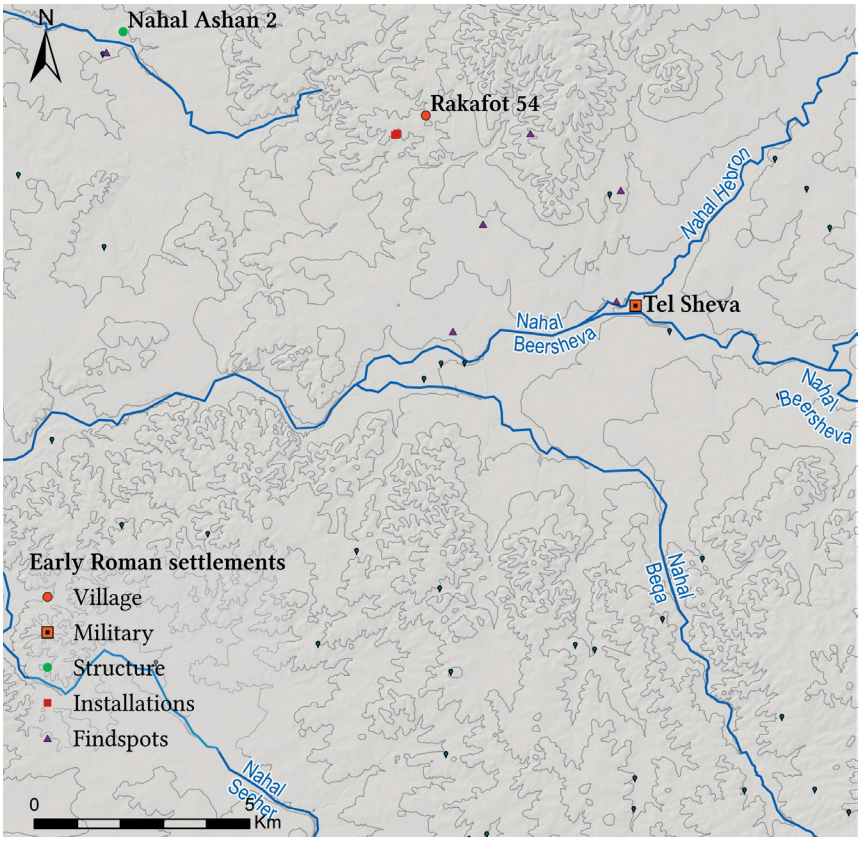

Figure 6.7 Early Roman settlements in the central study area.
Tel Sheva and Rakafot 54 were the largest settlements during the Early Roman period, settlements have only been discovered in the northern part of the study area.

tury CE and abandoned in the second century CE, probably after the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 CE. The site was probably located along a road leading from Tel Sheva to the southern coastal plain. Features of the village were a large square watchtower, a possible Jewish ritual bath, ancient trash pits, and an underground system. Many bronze coins, dating from the time of Herod Agrippa I (41–44 CE) until the Second Jewish Revolt (Peters et al., 2020) were discovered during the excavation. Nearby, several sites have been excavated, although most date to later periods.

About 800 meters to the west of Rakafot 54, two cisterns and a water reservoir were excavated.[17] The cisterns had a supply channel for runoff water. The nearby water reservoir, which was ca. 6.3 × 6.4 meters, had a staircase leading to the bottom of the reservoir—the walls were covered with plaster with engravings of ships and animals. According to the excavator, the cisterns and water reservoir date to the Early Roman period, first to second centuries CE, and might be connected to the Jewish village (Eisenberg-Degen and Lev-Hevroni, 2020).

Several remains dating to the Early Roman period were found at Tel Sheva during the TAU excavation directed by Aharoni and Herzog. During the first century BCE, a structure with a bathhouse stood at Tel Sheva. The structure and bathhouse were overbuilt by the Roman fortress (Lehmann, 2013). The excavation results are unpublished; however, a photo of the bathhouse has been published (Aharoni, 1973: Plate 21: 3). The trapezoid fortress measured some 30 × 32 meters and was located at its highest point in the center of the tell (Aharoni, 1973: 1; Fritz, 1973: 83). The remains of the fortress were visible on topsoil (Aharoni, 1973: 1), but the exact date of the construction of the fortress is unknown. However, based on a coin find that was located in its inner wall and dates to 112 CE, the construction of the fortress could not have taken place before the early second century CE (Fritz, 1973: 87). Almost no finds were uncovered within the fortress during excavation, and it seems that the structure was abandoned, and all movable objects were removed (Fritz, 1973: 87). According to Fritz (1973: 87), the fortress was probably abandoned in the fourth century CE. These conclusions are based on the few finds within the fortress, which was reused with some changes in the Early Islamic period. The pottery and other small finds of the structure, bathhouse and fortress have so far not been published. On the eastern foot of the tell, many pottery sherds dating to the Early Roman period were found. There may have been a settlement, dating to the Early Roman period, at the foot of Tel Sheva.

17 Excavation permit no. A-8306/2018; directed by Eisenberg-Degen, IAA.

At Nahal Ashan 2 (Horbat Raqiq), located in the northwestern corner of the study area, building remains dating to the Early Roman period have been discovered in course of a salvage excavation conducted in 1999 (Israel, 2003). According to the excavator, these remains belonged to a ruined settlement (Israel, 2003: 63*). It seems that during the Early Roman period, the same structure from the Hellenistic period was inhabited: the floors were raised, and other changes were made to the rooms. In one of the rooms, a burial site was found below the floor. The tomb had been covered with stone slabs and contained the remains of a pregnant woman in a flexed position (Israel, 2003: 85).

The site of Khirbat Amra, was resettled in the Early Roman period, and between the abandonment and resettlement probably several decades to a century passed. Almost no architectural remains (only one wall) and a small number of Early Roman pottery sherds have been discovered (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). Among the pottery and almost complete amphora and a lamp have been found. These findings were uncovered as a result of inspections; therefore, the exact location is unknown. The Early Roman pottery sherds date throughout the Early Roman period (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). Further, even if almost no architectural remains dating to the Early Roman period were found during excavations, it is quite likely that a small rural settlement or structure existed during this period at Khirbat Amra (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*).

It can be assumed that Tel Sheva and Rakafot 54 were connected by a road, which most likely led to the southern coastal plain. Rakafot 54 was probably the largest settlement of the study area, together with Tel Sheva. Interestingly, the water reservoir with the engraved ships, which is relatively far from the Mediterranean coast located (over 40 kilometers), suggests that the population living there was engaged in maritime trade. Apart from the finds mentioned above, little can be attributed to the Early Roman period in the central study area.

Baumgarten (2014a; 2014b) surveyed the area south of Nahal Beersheva and did not find any remains dating to the Early Roman period. In both survey maps (maps 131 and 132) Classical period pottery was published at only ten sites. In many cases, it was difficult from the published drawings to identify the pottery sherd. However, at two surveyed sites, a few pottery sherds could be identified as possibly Early Roman. At Nahal Beka'a 4, a Late Roman-Byzantine hamlet was discovered during the survey conducted by Baumgarten (2014), five sherds have been published and described either as Late Roman or Byzantine. By analyzing the published sherds, it likely that (1) is probably an Eastern Terra sigillata (ETS A) bowl, dating between 75 to 120/150 CE, and (2) is possibly a Nabatean pottery sherd (Baumgarten, 2014a: site 9). Also, at Nahal Zon 18, a farmhouse dating to the Late Roman to Byzantine period, four pottery sherds have been published: no. (3), classified as Byzantine by the surveyor, seems to be an ETS A bowl (Baumgarten,

2014a: site 49). However, these are only a few sherds and do not prove any settlements south of Nahal Beersheva (within the study area) although it is likely that a few, at least temporal, settlements existed. The area south of Nahal Beersheva was a border area between the Nabatean kingdom and the Roman empire. By 106 CE, Trajan added the province of Arabia to the Roman empire to control the incense trade route (Magness, 2012: 256–57). It is possible that during the Early Roman period, before 106 CE, no settlements were established within the study area south of Nahal Beersheva[18] to maintain an empty territory that would serve as a buffer between "borders." Furthermore, it must be considered that the Nabateans built settlements and waystations mainly along their trade routes. The nearest Nabatean settlement from the central study area was Elusa, approximately five kilometers to the southwest of the border of the study area.

Numismatic evidence suggests that during the second century CE almost no Early Roman sites existed in the central study area. Rakafot 54 was abandoned after the Second Jewish revolt, and only at Tel Sheva remains dating to the second century CE were found (Aharoni, 1973).

6.5.2 Late Roman period

In the Late Roman period, the number of sites grew substantially; in total, 51 sites have been dated to the Late Roman period. The site density is 0.13. During the Late Roman period, Be'er Sheva became the largest settlement in the study area.

In the center, at the highest point of Tel Sheva, stood the fortress (Aharoni, 1973: Plate 81), which was probably built in the Early Roman period (second century CE; see above). The almost square fortress consisted of 17 rooms along its walls and an inner courtyard; the fortress had its entrance to the southeast (Aharoni, 1973: Plate 95; Fritz, 1973: 83). According to Fritz (1973: 87–88), the fortress at Tel Sheva stood along the route from Be'er Sheva to Tel Malhata, and its function was to protect the road between the two settlements and to control the area east of Be'er Sheva. No pottery dates to the Late Roman period—the majority dates from the Late Hellenistic to the Early Roman periods but comes from an unclear context and might also have belonged to the Hellenistic-Herodian fortress (Aharoni, 1973: Plate 76; Fritz, 1973: 87). It seems that the fortress was abandoned no later than the fourth century CE (Fritz, 1973: 86–87). As in previous periods, Tel Sheva most likely had a lower city where the majority of the population lived.

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18 Several (Nabatean) settlements dating to the Early Roman period are known south of Nahal Beersheva (outside the study area). For an overview see Erickson-Gini (2007) and Erickson-Gini and Israel (2013).

In an excavation conducted in 1993 at Tel Sheva by Y. Baumgarten, nine Middle to Late Roman coins were found—one dating to 200 CE and eight to 324 CE (A-2062/1993; unpublished excavation).

At Khirbat Amra, after the site was abandoned in the Early Roman period and probably for a longtime not settled, occupation at the site was renewed during the Late Roman period. A farmhouse and three tombs were discovered during excavation dating to the Late Roman period. The area of the farmhouse has been called Area M by the excavator, and it is located in the southern area of the industrial park in Omer, close to the road to Be'er Sheva (see below Figure 6.14; Tahal, 1996; 2000). The farmhouse consisted of a large building of ca. 18 × 19.5 m and a courtyard surrounded by seven rooms. Many pottery sherds dating to the Late Roman period (third to fourth centuries CE) were found within the building. Three coins, one dating to the second–third century CE and two dating to the late third century, were found within the structure. During inspections, three tombs were found and excavated. Although the exact location of the tombs is unknown, they were located somewhere near the farmhouse. Two tombs were found empty, and a third tomb had a north–south direction and was built from dressed limestone slabs. Within the tomb, six intact candlestick bottles were found (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). The glass bottles were dated to the second to early third centuries (Winter, pers. comm.). It seems that the tombs belonged to the farmhouse, which is the only building that has been excavated in the study area that dates to the Late Roman period. About 300 meters north of the farmhouse, Late Roman-period pottery was found, which might indicate the existence of another small structure, possible an installation. North of the farmhouse, a Byzantine village has only partially been excavated, specifically the northeastern part with the church and farmhouses. It is possible that during the Late Roman period, a small settlement existed at the location of the Byzantine village. The unexcavated remains of the village are preserved *in situ,* as an archaeological park.

Near the settlement Horbat Raqiq, in the northwestern corner of the study area, three tombs were excavated in a salvage excavation in the early 1990s by Negev (1996). The tombs were part of a large burial site surrounding the ancient settlement of Horbat Raqiq. A built tomb as well as two cist tombs have been excavated, and in the built tomb, a sarcophagus was found. These finds date to the Late Roman and the beginning of the Byzantine period (fourth century CE) (Negev, 1996). Based on the finds, it seems that the site probably dates to the Early Byzantine period, as there was a sizeable Byzantine settlement nearby, and other excavated tombs also date to the Byzantine period.

For the first time during the Classical Era, the area south of Nahal Beersheva was settled during the Late Roman period (within the study area). Several sites dating to the Late Roman period were found during the ASI surveys. According to

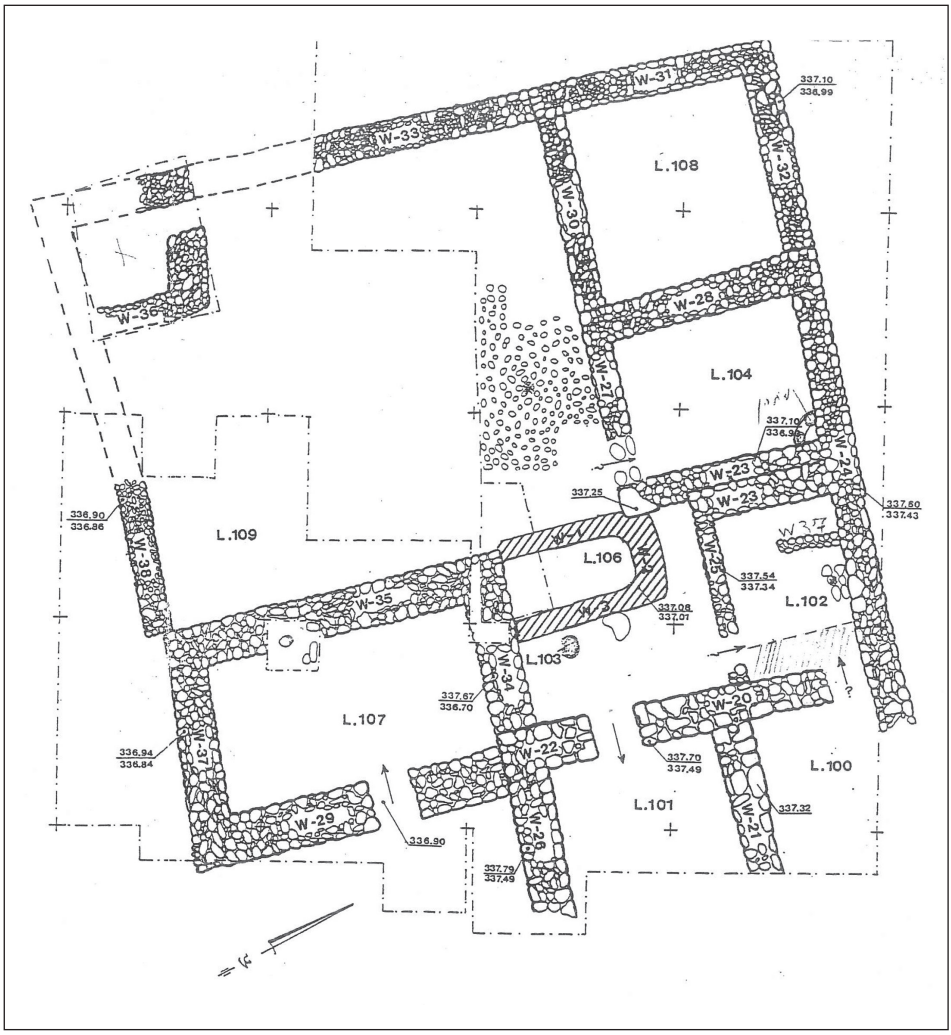

Figure 6.8 Plan of the Late Roman period Farmhouse at Khirbat Amra.
This is the only structure found in the study area, outside Be'er Sheva, dating to the third–fourth century CE. Plan: IAA archives; Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority

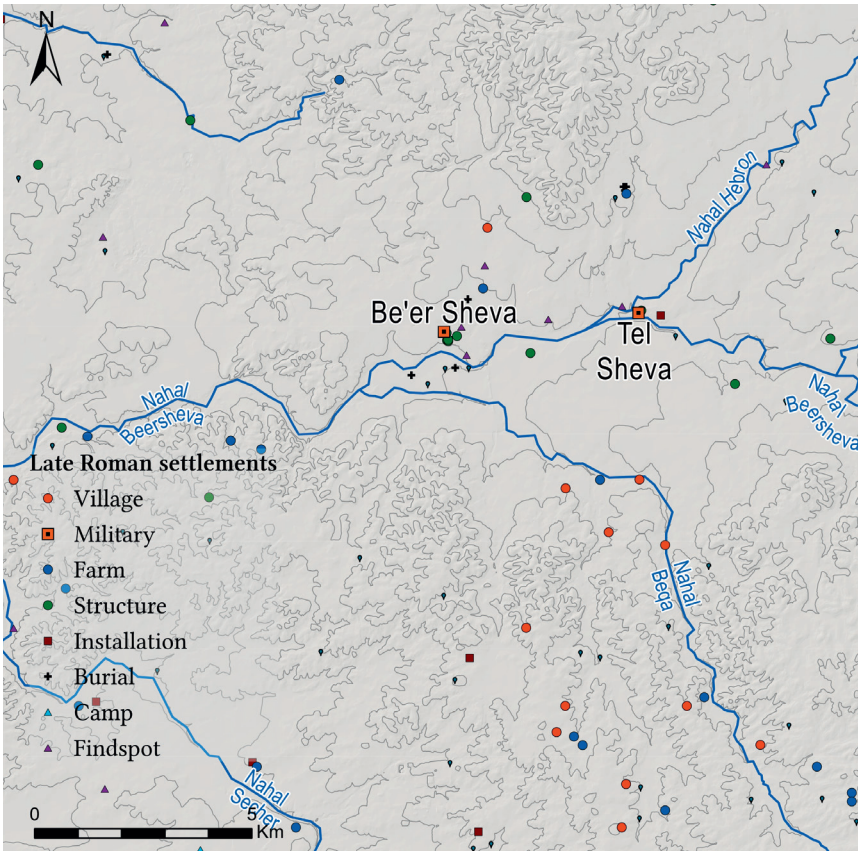

Figure 6.9 Late Roman settlements in the central study area.

the surveyor, all sites that can be dated to the Late Roman period continued to be settled in the Byzantine period. Unfortunately, only a few excavations have been conducted in this area (Nikolsky, 2007; Haimi, 2008; Kobrin, 2016; Lifshits, 2017; Rasiuk, and Shmueli, 2017; Rasiuk, 2020; Michael and Tepper, 2021; Sapir pers. comm.[19]). None of the excavated sites date to the Late Roman period. Instead, they date to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods.

For seven of the surveyed sites, pottery finds have been published: Nahal Sekher 27, Nahal Sekher 24, Nahal Beka'a 4, Nahal Beka'a 8, Nahal Zon 18, Nahal Beka'a 16, and Giv'at Shemen 7. However, the pottery sherds have been difficult

19 Excavation permit A-8641/2020.

to date. At Nahal Beka'a 4, a hamlet consisting of several farmhouses and installations (Baumgarten, 2014b; site 9), five pottery sherds have been published—numbers (1) and (2) are probably Early Roman or Nabatean, (3) is not identifiable from the drawing, and (4) is an FBW bowl, possibly Form 1D or 1E, which date between the late seventh to mid-eighth centuries CE and, respectively, to the eighth century CE (Magness, 1993: 196). Number (5) is a casserole lid; according to Magness (1993: 215), this dates from the Late Roman period to the end of the Early Islamic period (ninth–tenth centuries CE).

At Nahal Beka'a 8, also a hamlet with several structures that dates, according to the surveyor, from the Late Roman to Early Islamic periods, only two sherds have been published, labeled (1) Late Roman and (2) Byzantine. Number (1) could be Nabatean, and it seems that number (2) is an Early Islamic lamp (Baumgarten, 2014a: site 30). At Nahal Zon 18, a small farmhouse dated by the surveyor to the Late Roman-Byzantine period, four sherds have been published. The pottery sherds have been labeled Late Roman (1–2) and Byzantine (3–4) (Baumgarten, 2014a: site 49). It seems that number (1) is Cypriot Red Slipware, possibly Form 9, which dates from the late sixth century to the end of seventh century CE (Hayes, 1972: 379–82), number (2) is not identifiable from the drawing, and number (3) is possibly an ETS A bowl. Number (4) is a Gaza amphorae/LRA 4, Form 4, dating to the sixth–seventh centuries CE (Majcherek, 1995: 169). None of the published pottery dates to the Late Roman period.

Nahal Sekher 24, a small village with several structures, dates to the Chalcolithic, Iron Age I and II, Late Roman, and Byzantine periods (Baumgarten, 2014a: Site 60). Five pottery sherds are published: number (1) labeled as Late Roman, is an LRC, Form 3, dating to the fifth century CE (Hayes, 1972: 331); number (2) is CRS ware, Form 9, which dates between the late sixth century and the end of seventh century CE (Hayes 1972: 379–82); number (3) is probably ARS ware; (4) is non-identifiable; and number (5) is a lid, which is not helpful in the dating process as they date from the Late Roman period to the end of the Early Islamic period, ninth–tenth centuries CE (Magness, 1993: 215).

Most of the pottery labeled (late) Roman belongs actually to the Byzantine period. In a few cases, the pottery dates to the Late Roman period, but in most cases, it belongs to the *Late Roman pottery* group (Hayes, 1972), which dates to the Byzantine period. However, pottery has not been published for enough settlements to establish a final conclusion as to whether the majority of the surveyed sites labeled Late Roman existed during the Late Roman period or rather date to the Byzantine period. The small number of published sherds at least provides reasonable doubt as to the dating of the sites. As written above, from the few excavations conducted in the area, none had Late Roman remains. The result of the analysis of the published pottery discovered during surveys presents a similar

picture to the results in the western study area. It seems that the published pottery at most sites, which is classified as Late Roman, is actually Byzantine.

6.5.3 Be'er Sheva in the Late Roman period

Be'er Sheva has been mentioned in several ancient sources, including the *Onomasticon* by Eusebius of Caesarea, dating to the end of third to beginning of the fourth century CE, and the *Notitia Dignitatum Orientis,* dating to the late fourth–early fifth century CE. It has been described as a "large village" with a garrison (Fritz, 1973: 87; Figueras, 1980; Di Segni, 2004: 132; Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 315; Fabian and Ustinova, 2020).

Several excavations have been conducted in Be'er Sheva. The majority of the excavated remains that date to the Late Roman period have been found at Compound C and its surroundings[20]. It seems that the center of the settlement was located around this area. Compound C is located close to the modern market area, located in the eastern corner of the Old City (Figure 6.10). Different construction activities have heavily damaged the area since the 1950s. Several extensive excavations have been conducted in the area. However, many excavations are not well documented: to date, only unpublished, short general publications or preliminary publications exist. In most cases, no pottery and or small finds have been published.

The 2004–2006 excavation directed by Fabian and Gilead from BGU revealed several remains dating to the Late Roman period (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 315; Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b). The remains of the Late Roman period included a massive structure—probably a public building built on remains from an Iron Age structure. Several architectural remains of structures and installations dating to the Late Roman period were also exposed in this excavation. The remains of a hypocaust that most likely belonged to a small bathhouse were discovered.

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20 Several excavations have been conducted at Compound C since the 1950s: Gophna (1962; 1963: 18), Yisraeli (1965; 1966; 1967a; 1967b), Cohen (1968a; 1968b), Gophna and Yisraeli (1973: 116–18), Govrin (1988/1989; 1989/1990), Negev (1995); Sonntag (2001a), Fabian (Permit no. A-1862; A-4012), Talis and Seriy (2007), Fabian and Gilead (License Nos. G-58/2004; G-64/2005; G-66/2006; preliminary report: Fabian and Gilead 2010a; Fabian and Gilead 2010b), and an excavation directed by Eisenberg-Degen (Eisenberg-Degen and Talis, 2020). The largest excavation conducted in this compound was conducted by Fabian and Gilead (2010a; 2010b) from 2004–2006. The excavations conducted in Compound C have yielded remains from five main periods: Chalcolithic, Iron Age II, Late Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic. There are no Hellenistic or Early Roman remains found in this area so far.

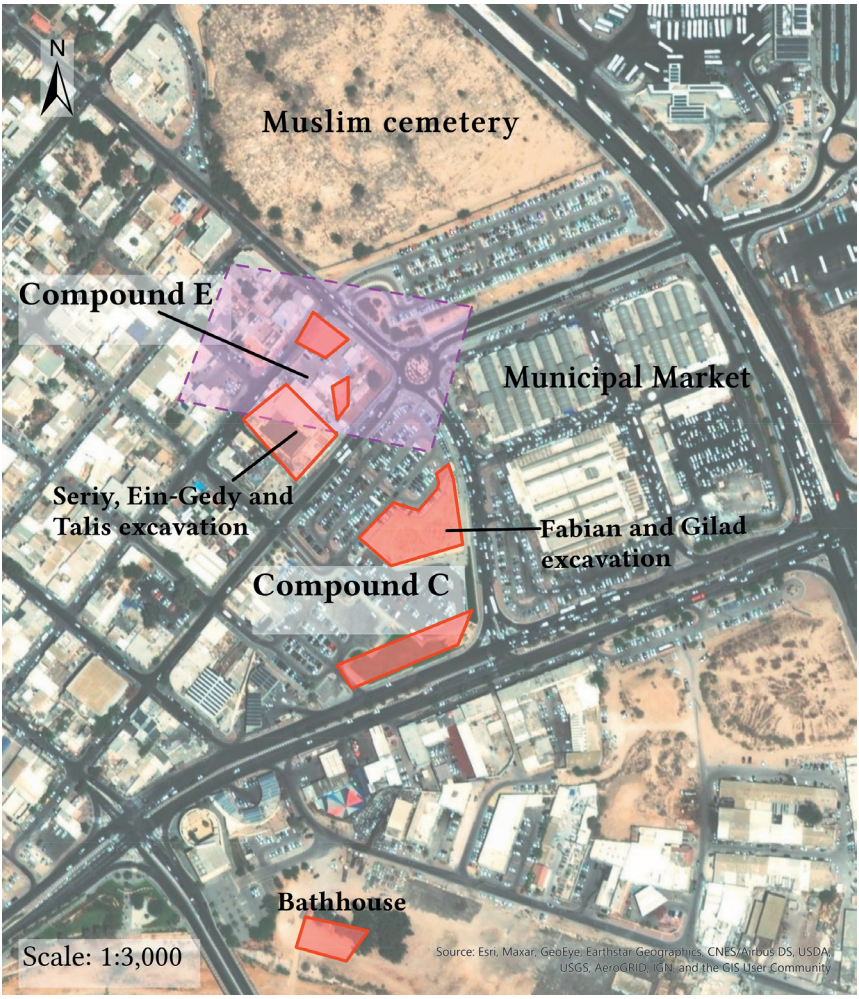

Figure 6.10 Late Roman Be'er Sheva.

Main location of sites discussed in the text that date to the Late Roman period. The purple line represents the proposed outline of the army camp. Background: Satellite Imagery (DigitalGlobe—ESRI).

During the excavation, many coins dating to the third and fourth centuries CE were also found (Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b). Brief remains dating to the Late Roman period have also been exposed in the following excavations: building foundations (Yisraeli, 1965; Gophna and Yisraeli, 1973), pottery, glass, and small finds (Eisenberg-Degen and Talis, 2020).

Consulting aerial photographs from 1918, Fabian (1995) discovered a large rectangular structure, ca. 185 × 120 meters, which he argues used to be an army camp during the Late Roman period. He suggests that the camp might have been built in the early third century CE and served the tenth legion after its transfer from *Aelia Capitolina* (mod. Jerusalem) to *Aila* (mod. Aqaba, Jordan).[21] Two excavations have been conducted in this area, which has been called Compound E (see Figure 6.10: Late Roman Be'er Sheva.. In 1996, Ein-Gedy (Ein-Gedy and Masarwah, 1999: 135) excavated two structures, revealing finds from the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. He concludes that the excavated structures form part of the interior (barracks) of the army camp. During the excavation, 35 coins were found, and 16 were identified and dated to the fourth–fifth century CE, however, no earlier coins were found.

From 2001 to 2002, Seriy, Ein-Gedi, and Talis conducted an additional excavation in the area. The excavation revealed remains from the Late Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods and a settlement from the Chalcolithic period (Seriy, pers. comm.). According to Seriy (pers. comm.), the finding of the remains of a large building within the area supports the hypothesis by Fabian (1995) that this was the location of the army camp. However, no finds, including coins and

21 The Roman emperor Diocletian (284–305 CE) introduced far-ranging reforms, including the administrative transfer of the Negev, Sinai, and southern Transjordan from the *Provincia Arabia* to *Provincia Palastina* (Tsafrir 1986: 82–83; Erickson-Gini, 2002: 118; Di Segni, 2018: 248). This step included building a line of border fortresses and army camps to protect the border of the empire (Magness, 2012: 271). One can assume that the army camp in Be'er Sheva was built during his time. Furthermore, a large amount of coins dating to Diocletian have been found in excavations nearby Compound C (see above and also Chapter 6.8—Coin finds from the central study), which serves as further proof of the establishment of the army camp and public buildings as well as a bathhouse around the late third–early fourth centuries CE. Similar, the army camp found in *Oboda* was dated to the Late Roman period: late third to early fourth centuries CE (Erickson-Gini, 2002: 118). Diocletian transferred the tenth legion from *Aelia Capitolina* to *Aila* around the year 300 CE (Magness, 2012: 271); therefore, I would suggest dating the army camp in Be'er Sheva to the late third–early fourth century CE rather than the early third century. However, taking the excavation results into account, it seems the army camp could not be dated earlier than the mid-fourth century CE (Ein-Gedy and Masarwah, 1999; Seriy pers. comm.). It is possible an earlier army camp was destroyed in order to build a more massive one in the mid-fourth century CE.

pottery, date to the Late Roman period—all date to the Byzantine and later. The excavators suggest dating the structure based on the finds to the middle of the fourth century CE (Seriy pers. comm.). This dating seems consistent with the finds from the earlier excavation by Ein-Gedy (Ein-Gedy and Masarwah, 1999). Varga and Talis (2021) suggest that the large structure, identified by others as an army camp (see above), did not, in fact, serve as an army camp because no small finds of a military nature (e.g., weapons, military workshop, clothing, defense details) have been found during the excavations conducted in the area. The military camp mentioned in ancient sources has so far not been exposed (Varga and Talis, 2021).

Nearby, to the south of Compound C and close to Nahal Beersheva, a bathhouse was excavated in 2004 by Fabian (unpublished; Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 317). The bathhouse structure was heavily damaged by construction in the early 20th century when the Turkish city was built. In the 1950s, the upper part was removed, and in 1992, a drainage channel was built without the permission of the IAA, further damaging the building (Negev, 1995). The building, which is on Abel's (1903) map of Byzantine Be'er Sheva, served probably as a public bath. Two caldarium rooms, a tepidarium, and pools were excavated. The floors of the caldarium were lined with white marble slabs. According to Negev (1995), the structure dates to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. However, Gilead and Fabian (2008: 317) attribute the structure to the Late Roman-Byzantine period (third to sixth centuries CE), though it is unclear how this dating was developed. No pottery or other finds have been published at the time of writing; therefore, a final dating is impossible. As bathhouses were usually built in connection with the establishment of military camps and fortresses for the Roman army (Scheidel, 2007a: 430), the bathhouse in Be'er Sheva was most likely built at the same time as the army camp, or slightly later. Therefore, it can be argued that the construction of the bathhouse dates to the late third or beginning of the fourth century CE.

As can be seen from the excavated remains, the Late Roman settlement of Be'er Sheva surrounds Compound C, and most public buildings were located in its vicinity.

6.6 Byzantine period

This study showed that during the Byzantine period, the northern Negev grew to be densely populated. In total, 755 sites have been recorded in the study area that date to the Byzantine period. Almost 90% of all Byzantine sites are small rural sites; the rest are larger (rural) villages and the city of Be'er Sheva. As men-

tioned above, building activities increased significantly during the Late Roman period, mainly during the late third and the first half of the fourth century CE. Many new settlements were formed, and new areas were settled that in previous periods were only minimally settled or uninhabited. The increase of settlements might be connected to the reforms by Diocletian and the more stable political circumstances. In the Byzantine period, the population of the northern Negev grew substantially and was at its highest point from the Classical period to modern times.

Based on the analysis of the settlement patterns the site density is relatively high (n = 1.9) compared to the eastern and western study areas. The high site density is connected to two factors: (1) over 200 sites belong to the city of Be'er Sheva, and (2) Be'er Sheva was the center of the northern Negev in the Byzantine period. Therefore, many settlements were built on the outskirts surrounding the large settlement. Based on kernel density calculations, Be'er Sheva was also the largest city in the region (see Chapter 6.6.1—Be'er Sheva in the Byzantine period). During the Byzantine period, a large expansion in settlement patterns is evident in the central region. There are many more archaeological sites, and these sites are, on average, larger than in the previous periods. Besides the city of Be'er Sheva, several large rural settlements were found in the study area. All the settlements surrounding Be'er Sheva are connected to agriculture, whether villages, farmhouses, or installations (Figure 6.11).

As the findings from this research show in most cases, the settlements were small farming villages with three or more structures, sometimes with a church, such as Khirbat Amra, Tel Sheva, or Nahal Liqit. No distinction was made between the different kinds of small settlements (hamlets, large groups of farms); all were defined as villages. Using a more specific definition would have added bias and confusion to the data, as there are over 700 sites distributed over an area of 400 square km, and the goal was to know which areas are the most densely populated. To test the density of settlement data, the Point Density tool from ESRI's ArcGIS Pro was used:

> "The Point Density tool calculates the density of point features around each output raster cell. Conceptually, a neighborhood is defined around each raster cell center, and the number of points that fall within the neighborhood is totaled and divided by the area of the neighborhood" (ESRI, 2020b).

To establish high-density populated areas, only villages, farmhouses, and structures were selected, as installations like tombs usually belong to settlements and are not relevant to establish settlement density. Some settlements consist of more than one structure, e.g., a village with 14 farmhouses. To calculate the point den-

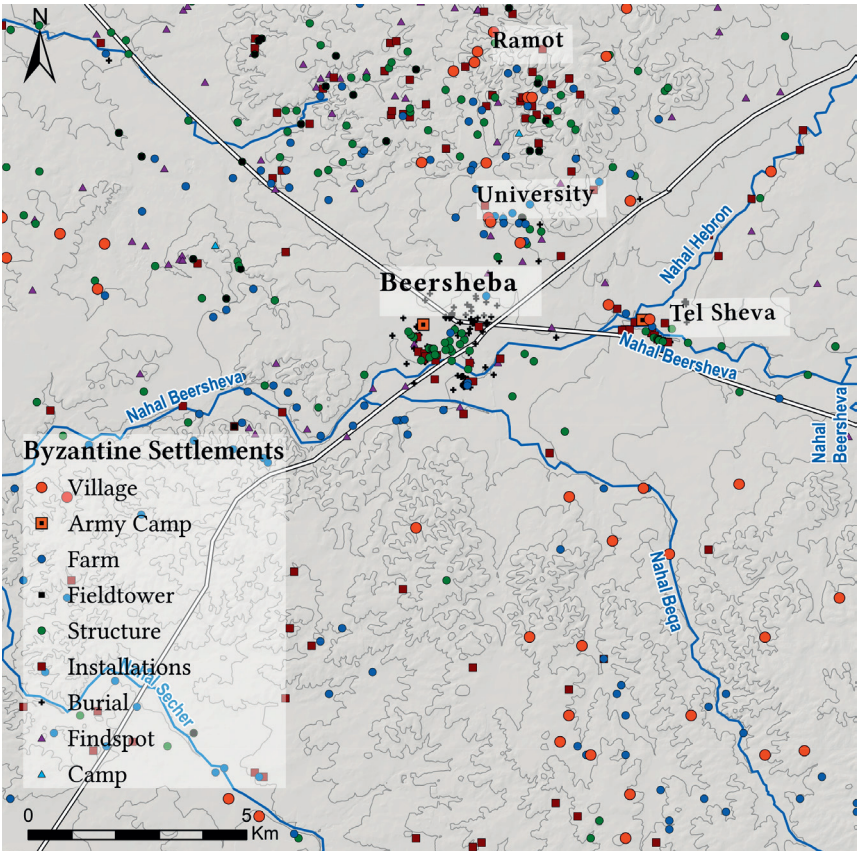

Figure 6.11 Byzantine period site distribution in the central study area.
The northern part of the study area is more densely populated than the southern part.

sity correctly, the number of structures was taken into account (ArcGIS, Point Density tool: *Population field* = number of structures). In most cases, the number of structures was given by the surveyor or excavation reports. However, in a few cases (ca. one-third of the villages), this was not the case. To calculate the point density, the average number of structures was taken for all villages where there were no numbers available (n = 7). The point density was calculated for a circle of one square km. Areas with a density higher than 15, 30, 45, 60, and 75 structures per square km were isolated to illuminate high-density areas (Figure 6.12).

As the results of the calculation show, the highest density appears at the center of modern Be'er Sheva, where the Byzantine city of Be'er Sheva was located (see Chapter 6.6.1 Be'er Sheva in the Byzantine period). Tel Sheva, which was

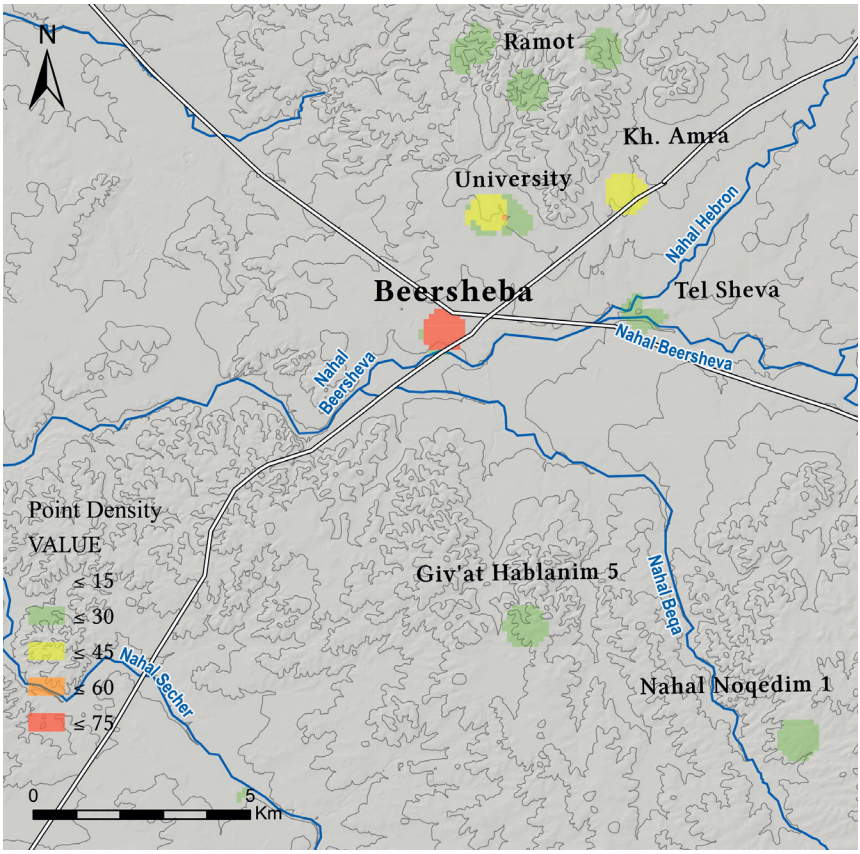

Figure 6.12 Point density analysis of the Byzantine settlements.
Map was created with the Point Density tool from ArcGIS Pro. Only villages, farmhouses, and structures were considered (black dots). The number of structures in each village was also taken into account. The legend indicates site density in a circle of one square km from each location.

a large village during the Byzantine period, also shows a higher density (d = 15–30 s/sq km). However, this density should be higher—not many excavations were conducted, and those that have were only partially published or remain unpublished; therefore, many structures are "missing." Khirbat Amra is located to the east, where an extensive excavation was conducted during the years 1993–1994, probably the most extensive excavation of a rural site in the Be'er Sheva valley. Near the campus of BGU, a larger number of archaeological sites have been registered.

A high density of archaeological sites was also calculated for the area of today's Ramot neighborhood of Be'er Sheva, located to the north of the city center. In this neighborhood area, which is located on low hills, discoveries primarily included agricultural sites such as farmhouses, watchtowers, installations, and cisterns. South of Nahal Beersheva, only two areas show a higher density. These are two villages with several structures: Giv'at Hablanim 5 and Nahal Noqedim 1. Giv'at Hablanim 5 is a village, with a size ca. 0.5 ha, consisting of at least 14 farmhouses (Baumgarten, 2014b: Site 17). Similarly, the site of Nahal Nogedim 1 is a large settlement consisting of at least 15 farmhouses (Baumgarten, 2014b: Site 40).

During the Byzantine period, Tel Sheva was a large village located along the road between Be'er Sheva and Tel Malhata. The ancient remains of Tel Sheva are partly covered by the modern Bedouin town, also called Tel Sheva. Several salvage excavations have been conducted in Tel Sheva since the early 1990s, revealing Classical period remains (A-2062/1993 Baumgarten (unpublished); Baumgarten, 2007; Abadi-Reiss, 2008; Haimi, 2008; Israel, 2008; Paz et al., 2014; A-8072/2017 and A-8491/2019 Pasternak (unpublished)). However, most excavations have so far not been published, or only preliminary reports have been published. The Byzantine village of Tel Sheva was located at the foot of the tell toward the eastern side. The fortress on the tell was probably abandoned in the mid-fourth century CE (Fritz, 1974: 86). Because a large Roman army camp was built in Be'er Sheva during the fourth century CE (see above, Chapter 6.5.3—Be'er Sheva in the Late Roman period), it is possible the troops were moved there. Further, the security situation during the Byzantine period made it probable that there was no additional need for a fortress.

On a small hill to the east of the tell, one or possibly two churches have been discovered (Woolley and Lawrence, 1914–1915: 45). The foundations of the church's long walls are still visible, tesserae and fragments of marble can be found on topsoil (Figueras, 2013: 173) and a deep depression, probably a collapsed cistern, is located in the atrium of the church.

An excavation conducted by Haimi in 2003 revealed a few walls forming several rooms, as well as a *ṭabun*. The published pottery includes, among others, LRS ware, FBW and Gaza amphoras, all dating to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Haimi, 2008). In another excavation conducted by Abadi-Reiss also in 2003, artifacts from the Byzantine period were discovered. A wall, nine tombs, and pottery sherds were found (Abadi-Reiss, 2008), but no pottery was illustrated. At the excavation at Tel Sheva, Shekhuna 36 (A-2062/1993 Baumgarten (unpublished)), 47 Classical period coins have been found that date from the Late Roman to the Abbasid period. During the Byzantine period, most coins date either to the early fourth century CE or sixth–seventh century CE. Nearby, several cist tombs have been exposed during later excavations; the tombs themselves have

not been excavated, but their location was registered[22] (Paz et al. 2014; Pasternak pers. comm.). Test trenches alongside Nahal Beersheva, to the south of the tell, uncovered a large number of cist tombs as well as a few structures an installations (Fraiberg, 2017a). Based on the large cemeteries to the north and south, the church, Classical period coins, and the large number of Byzantine pottery sherds in the topsoil, one can assume that Tel Sheva was, during the Byzantine period, a large village.

Tel Sheva had probably a size between eight and 12 ha (Tsoar and Yekutieli, 1992). In its vicinity, several smaller sites, mainly hamlets, farmhouses, and installations, were found and partially excavated (Negev, 1995; 2000; Israel, 2008). A separate small rural village consisting of six farmhouses has been found to the northwest of Tel Sheva. The site has been surveyed, and one farmhouse has partially been excavated. Pottery found in the course of the excavation dated to the Byzantine period (Israel, 2008).

Khirbat Amra, located about 2.5 kilometers to the northeast of Be'er Sheva, was a rural village settled with interruptions from the Hellenistic to the Early Islamic periods. During the years 1993–1994, a large-scale excavation was conducted in order to build the Omer industrial park. The main remains of the village were not completely excavated (see Figure 6.14; in the red-painted area, some remains are visible in the topsoil), but in the course of the excavation, 19 areas were excavated, and the architectural remains found included a church, dwellings, farmhouses, dovecote towers, and tombs. Most of the finds date to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. It remains unclear whether the Late Roman occupation continued to the Byzantine period or if there was a break between these periods. However, the main site of the Byzantine village was occupied from the fifth century onwards. The size of the large village was probably between 7 and 10 ha. A large church, located in the center of the settlement, has been excavated in Area A, measuring ca. 17 × 25 meters. Underneath the floor of the church, nine cist tombs have been found, one with a Greek inscription and crosses on it. Most of the pottery found in the church dates to the Byzantine and Early Islamic period, mainly starting in the fifth century CE (Tahal, 1996; 2000; Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). Based on findings from the excavation, it appears that the inhab-

22 Excavations were conducted between 2013, 2017–2018, and 2019. Excavation permits nos. A-6779/2013; A-8072/2017 and A-8491/2019. The cist tombs were located, and the location was taken with a handheld GPS, but the tomb itself was not excavated. Such cist tombs were common in the Northern Negev, dating from the Late Roman to the Early Islamic period. For the 2013 excavation a preliminary publication has been published (Paz et al., 2014), the two later excavations have not been published so far. The tombs were probably located on the northern outskirts of the settlement. Cemeteries of Tel Sheva are known to the north and south of the Byzantine settlement.

itants of the village were engaged mainly in agriculture. To the northwest of the church two large dwellings, a large dovecote tower, and several tombs were discovered. Approximately 100 meters north of the church two additional square dovecote towers were located. The dovecote towers indicate the border of the village and were located adjunct to land suitable for agriculture outside the village (Figure 6.13). The dovecote towers from Khirbat Amra date to the Late Byzantine

Figure 6.13 Khirbat Amra, square dovecote towers.
Two square dovecote towers appear in the background landscape of the area. Photo taken during the excavation, in 1994/1995. Photo IAA archives: B-823489; Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

period (fifth/sixth to early seventh century CE). Such towers were built to produce dung as fertilizer, which was used to enrich the poor-quality loess soil, which was needed for cultivating plants, mainly fruit trees and vines, rather than wheat and grains. Several dovecote towers have been found in the northern Negev in connection with a winepress, e.g., Be'er Sheva, southern entrance (Haimi, 2008; Michael and Tepper, 2021) or Nahal Zon (Lifshits, 2017), where dovecote towers were found, together with farming estates and a large industrial winepress.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the inhabitants of Khirbat Amra were either engaged in the growing of fruit trees, vines, or both. However, in contrast to the western study area, where the Gaza amphorae has a high frequency at most sites (see Chapter 5—Western study area: Nahal Besor), at Khirbat Amra, relatively few Gaza amphorae have been found. The majority of amphoras and storage jars were produced locally, similar to other sites in the eastern Be'er Sheva valley (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). This might indicate that the eastern side of the Be'er Sheva valley was somewhat off the main supply routes of the coastal and central Negev wines (Fuks et al., 2020; Lantos et al., 2020; Seligman, 2020). Possibly the population of the eastern Be'er Sheva valley used mainly the wine products from the Judean hill country, as well as local products. Be'er Sheva, and with it Khirbat Amra, were directly connected by road to *Eleutheropolis* (Beit Guvrin) and Jerusalem. The majority of the pottery found that belongs to the Byzantine period dates from the fifth to seventh century CE, which was probably when the village reached its most extensive point, as well as when the church was built (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*).

At Horvat Raqiq, a site located in the northwestern part of the study area, on a loess hill close to Nahal Ashan and Patish, several remains dating to the Byzantine period have been found, including a Byzantine period cemetery, several structures, installations, cisterns, and a farmhouse (Dagan, 1995a; Negev, 1996; Israel, 2003). In 1992–1993, Dagan conducted a survey and an excavation at Horvat Raqiq, the site at the northwestern corner of the study. The excavations revealed the remains of a structure with several rooms and a central courtyard, most likely a farmstead. Among the finds, six complete storage jars were found, two with Greek inscriptions (Dagan, 1995a).

In the area of Ramot, several excavations revealed Classical period finds. The excavations were conducted in the 1990s prior to the construction of the new neighborhood of modern Be'er Sheva (Ustinova and Nahshoni, 1994; Katz and May, 1996; Paran, 1999; Sonntag, 2000; 2001c; 2003; 2012; Fabian and Masarwa, 2003; Fabian and Seriy, 2003a; 2003b; Fabian and Goldfus, 2004). Nashoni, Ustinova, and Bar-Zvi conducted an excavation in 1991 near Nahal Kovashim in the Ramot neighborhood, finding two large farmhouses, a public structure or villa, structures of unknown function, and cisterns. Pottery sherds date from the Byzantine to the Early Islamic period. The finds suggest an agricultural village that provided food for Byzantine Be'er Sheva (Ustinova and Nahshoni, 2004).

In 1994, Sonntag excavated a large Byzantine period farmhouse dating from the fifth to the seventh centuries CE. In the course of the excavation, a watchman's hut and a part of an additional structure were excavated. Interestingly, the Byzantine pottery shows an "extremely high quantity" of Gaza amphoras/LRA 4 type (Sonntag, 2003; 2012) compared to more eastern located sites in the Be'er

Sheva–Arad valley, e.g., Khirbat Amra (see above). In 1998, a farmhouse and several installations were excavated in the Ramot neighborhood. The farmhouse consisted of a tower or fortified room, ca. 4 × 4 meters, and courtyard. This building probably served as a watchtower and as a small seasonal farmhouse that was only occupied during parts of the year. Additionally, a watchman's hut, an oval and square fence, and agricultural terraces were found in the course of the excavation. The pottery finds date to the sixth and seventh centuries CE (Fabian and Masarwa, 2003; Fabian and Seriy, 2003a; 2003b; Fabian and Goldfus, 2004).

A watchman's hut was excavated by Paran (1999) in 1997, with pottery dating to the fifth and sixth centuries CE. Sonntag (2000) later excavated in 1997–1998 a watchman's hut, cisterns, and agricultural terraces. The excavated sites in the Ramot neighborhood represent part of the rural hinterland in which food for Byzantine Be'er Sheva was produced. The sites are located on low hills, and the agricultural terraces prove that the area was mainly used to grow crops. The use of agricultural terraces is interesting as they are usually found in a high concentration more to the south in the central Negev. Animal husbandry played a secondary role.

North of the university campus as well as in the area of the University train station (Be'er Sheva North), several sites have been excavated since the 1950s (Cohen, 1969b; 1972 Negev, 1994; Israel et. al., 2013; Eisenberg-Degen, 2018a; Varga, 2018; Aladjem, A-6289, unpublished; Levi and Ori, Permit No. &-5/1955, unpublished). The area is located at the foot of the Goral hills where today the Ramot neighborhood stands and is therefore connected to the finds described above, forming the agricultural hinterland of Byzantine Be'er Sheva. In the late 1960s, inspections in the area where the university campus was supposed to be built revealed an ancient settlement of ca. 2.2 ha dating to the Byzantine period. The finds included pottery sherds, walls, and cist tombs (Cohen, 1969b).

In 1971, Cohen conducted an excavation in the area and uncovered a farm consisting of two rooms and a courtyard (Cohen, 1972; Figueras, 1980). North of today's campus, an excavation conducted in 1990/1991, directed by Negev, revealed a Byzantine–Early Islamic village. The remains consisted of eight buildings. The buildings were similar, consisting of several rooms and a courtyard. The buildings had one main room with thicker walls, stone columns and pavement remains, partially from marble. The farmhouses had a room with thicker walls, in other excavations also classified as a fortified room or a tower, which were common in this area (Negev, 1991). Furthermore, several installations were discovered: a silo, a basalt donkey-drawn millstone, and cisterns, as well as 12 cist tombs. The tombs, which were found near the buildings, have an east–west orientation. Pottery and small finds date to the Late Byzantine–Early Islamic period, including "numerous" ostraca with Greek writing, including one with a cross (Negev, 1991).

The findings indicate that the population of this small rural village was mainly Christian.

In the same area, in 2016 and 2017, two excavations were conducted: the 2016 excavation was directed by Varga (2018) and the 2017 excavation by Eisenberg-Degen (2018). During the excavation conducted by Varga, four structures were excavated, revealing small farmhouses and six cist tombs. A subterranean site belonging to one of the buildings completely collapsed, and neither its plan nor its function could be reconstructed. The pottery sherds date to the sixth–seventh centuries CE (Varga, 2018). In the 2017 excavation, a subterranean complex with several chambers was found. The chambers were accessed by a staircase that led from a building (not preserved) to the subterranean complex. Some of the rooms contained installations. The pottery sherds date to the Late Byzantine period, sixth and seventh century CE, but no pottery was illustrated (Eisenberg-Degen, 2018a). Such subterranean complexes dating to the Byzantine period are known in the Be'er Sheva area; they served most likely as storerooms in farmhouses or other buildings.

About 600 meters to the east, several Byzantine-period remains were excavated by Israel et al. (2013) in 2004. Part of an excavated farmhouse was already excavated in 1955 by Levi and Ori, but the excavation is yet unpublished. The remains belong to a rural settlement and include a watchtower, farmhouse, and subterranean chambers. The pottery dates to the Late Byzantine–Early Islamic period (Israel et al., 2013). Nearby, Aladjem excavated a subterranean complex most likely belonging to the same remains excavated during previous excavations (A-6289, unpublished). The pottery dates to the sixth to seventh centuries CE (Aladjem, pers. comm.).

In recent years, several excavations were conducted north and northwest of the Nahal Ashan (Newe Menahem) neighborhood, which is located to the north of the center of Be'er Sheva. Several ancient remains were found, among others two farmhouses from the Late Byzantine period. One farmhouse, located at the eastern bank of Nahal Ashan, had an underground complex—the finds there included cooking vessels, flour-grinding stones, and a simple olive press. According to the excavator, this area might have served as a self-sustaining production center (Eisenberg-Degen, 2018b). A second farmhouse, consisting of an open courtyard and a structure, was found nearby. Next to the farmhouse, a cistern was discovered (Eisenberg-Degen, 2018b).

About one kilometer to the west of the Byzantine city of Be'er Sheva, the site of Abu Matar was located. The site has remains from the Chalcolithic, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods. Abu Matar was first excavated in 1950 by Perrot (1955) and later on during a salvage excavation by Gilead, Rosen, and Fabian (Gilead et al., 1993). The excavation was conducted by BGU together with the IAA. A By-

zantine building of about 400 square m was excavated and classified either as a church, monastery, or villa. The building had plastered walls with painted decorations and partially mosaic floors (Holmqvist, 2019: 24). A tombstone with a Greek inscription, in secondary use, was found within the building (Ustinova and Figueras, 1996: 167; see Figure 6.14A). Furthermore, a cross engraved in dressed stone, was reused as a flagstone (see Figure 6.14B). The structure had two phases: an earlier building from the late fifth to the early sixth century, possibly a church, and an earlier building that was incorporated into the later building, dating to the late sixth–early seventh centuries CE (Gilead et al., 1993; Magness, 2003: 174; Holmqvist, 2019: 24). After the building went out of use at the end of the seventh century CE, a large farmhouse was built, partially covering the Byzantine period building.

South of Nahal Beersheva, not many Byzantine-period sites have been excavated. In 2015, Lifshits excavated a rural estate about seven kilometers to the south of Byzantine Be'er Sheva, consisting of a large winepress, dovecote tower, and large farmhouse. The site dates to the sixth–seventh centuries CE (Lifshits, 2017). In 2016, an excavation conducted at Nahal Beqa, located south of Byzantine Be'er Sheva, revealed the remains of two square buildings, probably field towers consisting of one single room and an agricultural terrace (Rasiuk and Shmueli, 2017). The square structures likely did not serve as family residential buildings but as watchtowers in agricultural fields belonging to residents of the town (Haiman and Fabian, 2009: 45), and they were probably used only seasonally. The pottery dates to the Late Byzantine–Early Islamic period (Rasiuk and Shmueli, 2017). Nearby, a farmhouse and a dovecote tower were excavated, and it is possible that the field towers belonged to the same farming estate. The pottery dates to the sixth–seventh centuries CE (Eisenberg-Degen, 2017). In 1991, a small structure was excavated 100 meters south of Nahal Beqa. The small one-room structure possibly belonged to a farmstead. Pottery finds date the structure to the fifth to seventh century CE (Katz, 1993).

Cult sites have been found in the study area in Khirbat Amra, Tel Sheva, Nahal Liqit, and Be'er Sheva. No religious structures were found within the study area south of Nahal Beersheva. To the north, approximately 7 km from the modern city of Be'er Sheva and just outside the study area, a large basilica church and cemetery were discovered (Figueras, 2004). About 20 km southwest of Be'er Sheva, the city of Elusa was located, which served as the lone seat of a bishop in the Negev. It seems that the churches in the study area went out of use by the eight century CE, at the latest (see Appendix 5—Cult sites in the study areas).

Figure 6.14 Pictures from the excavation at Abu Matar

The pictures showing the Byzantine–Early Islamic remains, (A) Greek inscription in secondary use (B) cross engraved in pavement stone, and (C) room with columns. The site was excavated by Gilead, Rosen and Fabian, pictures taken during excavations by Rosen (published with his permission).

6.6.1 Be'er Sheva in the Byzantine period

In the Late Roman period (late third to early fourth century CE), settlement activity in the area increased. Be'er Sheva grew from a large village in the Late Roman period to a large urban center in the Byzantine period and served as the capital of the northern Negev. As the Classical period city of Be'er Sheva had been destroyed by the building activities in the early 20th century during the establishment of the Ottoman city, its exact size is unknown. To calculate its size, a kernel density estimation (KDE) was performed in ArcGIS Pro (see Chapter 4.6—Calculation of site size). It was possible to use the KDE because many sites had been excavated, surveyed, or discovered during inspections and test trenches. Using KDE, the approximate size of the ancient site can be calculated. This method includes a certain level of error and does not calculate the exact area where the ancient settlement was located. Therefore, the results are influenced by gaps in the data caused by the absence of undiscovered sites. It should be noted that the more sites discovered and recorded, the higher the accuracy of the results. In the case of the ancient city of Be'er Sheva, with over 400 sites belonging to the ancient city, the results can be considered relatively accurate.

Based on these calculations, the minimum extent of the city during the Byzantine period was 40 ha, the medium extent was 90 ha, and the maximum extent was 140 ha (Figure 6.15). Comparing the results with estimates and calculations from other researchers, it can be seen that the suggested calculations as well as the location for Byzantine Be'er Sheva correlate with previous estimates, of 100 to 150 ha (cf. Figueras, 1980; Fabian, 1995b; Peterson, 2005: 57; Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 318; Avni, 2014: 257).

As shown in Figure 6.16, the kernel density was calculated based on the point patterns representing sites (e.g., structures, installations, burials, findspots). The green layer (maximum extent of the city) includes mostly installations and burial sites, as well as a few farms, and can therefore be counted as the outskirts of the city. The red area (minimum extent) can be considered the center of ancient Be'er Sheva, where the highest numbers of structures were located. The area around Compounds C and E was the center of Byzantine Be'er Sheva, as in the Late Roman period (located near modern day municipality market). Therefore, one can conclude that the size of Byzantine Be'er Sheva must have been somewhere between 90 and 140 ha.

During the Byzantine period, Be'er Sheva was one of the largest cities in the region, and certainly the largest of the Negev (only on the southern Mediterranean coast were settlements similar in size or larger found, including Gaza and Ashkelon). This is clearly evident when comparing the size of this city with other large settlements in the Negev (Table 6.3). Elusa, one of the important urban

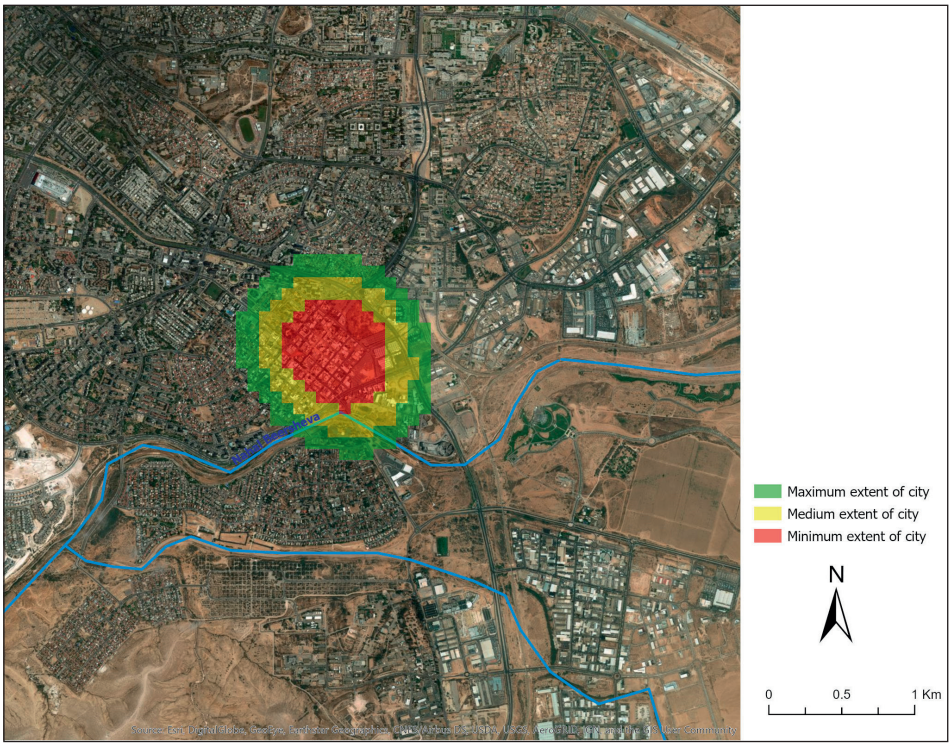

Figure 6.15 Kernel density estimation of the Byzantine city of Be'er Sheva.
Minimum extent of the city: 40 ha; medium extent of the city: 90 ha; maximum extent of the city: 140 ha. Background: Satellite Imagery ESRI—DigitalGlobe.

centers of the northern Negev, was at most 60 ha,[23] meaning it would be about two-thirds as large as Byzantine Be'er Sheva (Table 6.3). Other large settlements in the study areas like Ma'on or Moleatha[24] were only about one-fifth of the size of Byzantine Be'er Sheva.

23 According to Schöne et al. (2019), the city covered about 48 hectares. Between 2015 and 2018, a geophysical prospection was conducted, and the preliminary results of this prospection showed that the city measured approximately 800 × 600 meters.

24 Similar to Khirbat Jemmeh or Tel Sheva, the Byzantine settlement of Tel Malhata was not built on top of the Iron Age tell. It was located at its foot, to the south and east. When discussing the Byzantine town, it will be referred as Moleatha; when discussing the Classical remains on top of the tell, it will be referred to as Tel Malhata.

Table 6.3 Large Byzantine settlements of the Negev.

Site names in italics are settlements located outside the study area, therefore, the size of these settlements is given based on published scientific literature.

City/Town	Size (ha)	Settlement type	Source
Be'er Sheva	90–140	City	See KDE calculations (above)
Elusa	35–60	City	Broshi, 1980; Shereshevski, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1997; Heinzelmann and Erickson-Gini, 2016; Schoene et al., 2019.
Ma'on	30–40	Large town	See Besor study area (calculation based on radius of field scatters).
Tel Malhata/ Moleatha	20–25	Town	See Chapter 7 below.
Khirbat Jemmeh	25	Town	See Chapter 5; Schaefer, 1979: 87.
Khirbat Qasif	20–25	Town	See Chapter 7 below. Govrin, 2015.
Khirbat Irq	15–25	(Small) town	See Chapter 5.
Rehovot-in-the-Negev	10–12	Large village	Broshi, 1979; Shereshevski, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1997.
Tel Sheva	8–12	Large village	See Chapter 6.6
Shivta	8–11.5	Large village	Broshi, 1980; Shereshevski, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1997.
Khirbat Amra	7–10	Large village	See Chapter 6.6
Oboda	7–8.5	Large village	Shereshevski, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1997.
Horvat Hur	4	Village	See Chapter 7 below; Govrin, 1991.
Mamshit	3.7–4.2	Village	Broshi, 1980; Shereshevski, 1991; Hirschfeld, 1997.
Be'er Shema	3	Village	See Chapter 5; Erickson-Gini et al., 2015.

Be'er Sheva was known during the Byzantine period as an important military (Di Segni, 2004) and urban center (Fabian and Ustinova, 2020: 221). Several researchers believe that the headquarters of the *dux Palestinae* (military commander of Palestine) was located in Be'er Sheva, in connection with the Be'er Sheva tax edict (the names of provincial cities and amount of tax they must pay). The marble pieces with the inscription were sold at the beginning of the 20th century CE in Be'er Sheva. Their provenance was for many years unknown. However, in 1996, during an excavation conducted by Katz and Sonntag at the compound of the Israel Electric Company, an additional piece was found in secondary use in an Early Islamic building (Katz and Sonntag, 1996). No similar edict has been found in Israel, leading to the hypothesis that the headquarters of the *dux* was located in Be'er Sheva (cf. Fabian, 1995; Di Segni, 1997; 2004; Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 319; Varga and Talis, 2021). Be'er Sheva was also depicted on the mosaic map of Madaba, which dates to the sixth century CE and has a square form of a camp surrounded by walls (Fritz, 1973: 87; Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 319). Its depiction is different from other cities, for example, Elusa or Mamshit, which were depicted as fortresses. This different depiction might point to the special status of Be'er Sheva (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 319). Similar to the Late Roman period, the center of Byzantine Be'er Sheva appears to have been near Compound C, and the area was surrounded by at least six churches and the army camp.

At least six churches were found within Byzantine Be'er Sheva. However, despite the high number of churches, Be'er Sheva was not an independent Episcopal (see Figueras, 1980; Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). Be'er Sheva was most likely dependent on *Eleutheropolis* (Beit Guvrin) (Figueras, 2013: 29). From the six churches known in Be'er Sheva, five have been excavated (Govrin, 2015: 116–22; Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). Some of the churches were still visible at the beginning of the 20th century, and Abel (1903) visited the area of Be'er Sheva and drew a sketch of the ruins of ancient Be'er Sheva in which he indicates two churches, one in the northwest and one in the southwest of the existing Old City, as well as a monastery south of Compound C. The monastery remains unexcavated. It is located southeast of Compound C, covered by an approximately three- to four-meter-high earth hill.

In 1967, a large church was excavated by Israeli (1967) to the northwest of the existing Old City (the intersection of Eilat and Eli Cohen Street). The church had three apses, was 15 × 24 meters in size, and its floor was paved with large stones and marble slabs. Several rooms were also annexed to the southern side of the church: one room had its walls decorated with glass mosaics (Israeli, 1967). It is possible that the attached structure served as a monastery (Figueras, 2013: 134). That same year, two mosaic floors were excavated in the area of the Bedouin mar-

ket. One of the mosaics has an inscription with the names Peter and Anastasios and dates to the sixth century CE (Israeli, 1967: 5).

In the area of the municipal market, a large church was excavated in 1994 by Fabian. The church had a cross shape and a single apse. With a length of 41 meters and a width of 28 meters, it is the largest church found in Be'er Sheva (Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). Such a transept form of a church is very rare in Palestine (Figueras, 2013: 133). The floors of the church were paved with mosaics, *opus sectile,* limestone slabs, and marble tiles. Nine inscriptions were found during excavations, one incorporated in a mosaic and the others incised on marble. The inscription from the mosaic floor, which commemorates the completion, has a date in it, "the year 345", which, according to the excavator, is based on the chronological system from *Eleutheropolis,* which begins in 199 CE.[25] Therefore, the mosaic floor can be dated to 552/553 CE (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 320; Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). According to the excavator, the church was built in the first half of the sixth century and went out of use in the seventh century CE. Several of the rooms were used as living spaces, and in the mid-eighth century CE, the structure was abandoned (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 320; Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). According to Fabian and Ustinova (2020) it is the largest church discovered in the Negev, and most likely, it served as the main church of Be'er Sheva.

In 1932, a mosaic floor was excavated by Avi Yonah (1933) within the Old City (Mordei Hagetaot Street). The mosaic features in its center a pair of sandals (Avi Yonah, 1933). Such sandal decorations during the Byzantine period have been attributed to public places of prayer (Govrin, 2015: 121). Another indication of a church has been found on Bene Harod Street in the Old City, with several mosaic floors, inscriptions, and marble pieces that indicate the existence of a church (Govrin, 2015: 119).

In 1968, Cohen excavated a mosaic floor near the market, in an area where an army gas station was built southwest of the intersection of Hebron and Eilat Streets (Cohen, 1968). During the construction of the gas station, large parts of the ruins were destroyed. The mosaic floor is 4.5 × 7 meters in size. Eleven medallions depicting animals were found; south of the mosaic, a second room paved with flagstones was discovered. Based on the mosaic style, the floors can be dated to the mid-sixth century, similar to the mosaic in Ma'on. Additionally, the remains of five more rooms were found (Cohen, 1968). It is unclear if this mosaic floor belonged to a church, monastery, a synagogue, or another public building (Govrin,

25 In Be'er Sheva, three chronological systems were used in inscriptions: one from Gaza, which starts at 60 BCE; one from Provincia Arabia, which starts at 106 CE; and one from Eleutheropolis which starts at 199 CE. The last one is the most common chronological system used in in the settlement (Figueras, 1985: 46)

2015: 122). However, several churches and synagogues in the northern Negev have a mosaic carpet with medallions and the depiction of animals (e.g., Ma'on synagogue or Shellal church).

As we can see, there are several archaeological remains that indicate the existence of churches in Be'er Sheva. Most impressive is the large, monumental church excavated in 1994 by Fabian, which is the largest church found so far in the Negev. This also indicates the importance Be'er Sheva had in the area during the Byzantine period.

There are also indications that a Jewish community existed in Be'er Sheva, as a small column of a synagogue chancel was discovered sometime before World War I. The column had an Aramaic inscription (Figueras, 2013: 9). The exact location of the synagogue is unknown (Figueras, 2013: 9), but Figueras (1980) suggests the location of the synagogue as somewhere in the area just south of the Muslim cemetery located at the eastern end of Be'er Sheva's Old City. One tombstone with an inscription in Hebrew was also found, dating to the early seventh century CE (Figueras, 1980).

Excavations at Compound E revealed the remains of a possible army camp. In 1995, Ein-Gedy excavated two barracks from the army camp, dating the structure to the fourth–fifth century CE (Ein-Gedy and Masarwah, 1999: 135). A large building with an "entrance plaza" was found during later excavations in the same area. In the course of the excavation, 55 coins were found, dating to the mid-fourth to fifth centuries CE (see Appendix 2—Coin finds from excavations). According to the excavators, the army camp was built during the mid-fourth century and was probably abandoned at the end of the sixth century or early seventh century CE (Seriy, pers. comm.). However, the interpretation that the site served as an army camp is disputed (cf. Varga and Talis, 2021).

Several excavations revealing Byzantine period remains have been conducted at Compound C. From 2004 to 2006, a large-scale excavation directed by Fabian and Gilead from BGU revealed several remains dating to the Byzantine period (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 315; Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b). The remains of the Late Roman period, a massive structure—probably a public building—continued to be used during the Byzantine period. Several walls were repaired, and new ones were added to the Late Roman period structure. Findings included fragments of tesserae, roof tiles, bronze objects (possibly medical tools), ceramic stoppers—one with a Greek inscription, and coins (Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b).

In two excavations conducted by Eisenberg-Degen in 2017 and 2018 (Eisenberg-Degen and Talis, 2020) in Compound C, to the south of the BGU excavation, only scant remains from the Byzantine period were found. The finds include tesserae, coins, a bone handle, glass fragments, and pottery sherds. Most of the pottery sherds included Gaza amphorae/LRA 4 type and bag-shaped jars; further-

more, some imported ware, LRC, and local ware, were found (Eisenberg-Degen and Talis, 2020).

Residential neighborhoods have been discovered to the north, east, and west of the city center. The buildings were built from a combination of stones and mudbricks. In 2011, a large excavation was conducted at the central bus station in Be'er Sheva, and two buildings with underground rooms were found. The large dwellings show the remains of household works, agricultural activities, cooking, and storage. Grain silos were found in two underground rooms (Varga and Nikolsky, 2013). The majority of the ceramic finds, as well as the coins, date between the fourth and sixth centuries. The buildings were probably in use until the Arab conquest (Appendix 2—Coin finds from excavations; Varga, pers. comm.). South of the central bus station, two large villas or public buildings were excavated. Pottery finds from the excavation date to the sixth to seventh century CE (Talis, 2015).

In the area of today's Electric Company, an excavation was conducted in 1995 (Katz and Sonntag, 1996; and Katz and Sonntag, n.d.).[26] The excavation revealed remains from the Chalcolithic, Iron Age, Byzantine, and Early Islamic periods. Several buildings that date to the Late Byzantine period might have continued, according to the excavators, into the Early Islamic period. Furthermore, eighteen cist tombs were discovered in the course of the excavations. They were dated by the excavators as Byzantine. However, the faces of the deceased were oriented in a southern direction (Katz and Sonntag, 1996) and this might serve as an indication that the deceased were Muslim, and the burials should be dated to the Early Islamic period.

Next to the central bus station, remains of a pottery workshop have been found that indicate that the workshop was in use during the fifth and sixth century CE. The site has not been excavated to date (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 322; Varga and Talis, 2021). Next to it, a winepress was excavated by Sonntag in 1998. Pottery finds have been dated from the fourth to the eighth centuries CE, whereas the majority date to the Byzantine period (Sonntag, 2001b). Most likely, the pottery workshop and the winepress were connected.

South of the Byzantine city, a large agricultural estate was excavated in 2004, 2017, and 2020 (Haimi, 2008; Michael and Tepper, 2021; Sapir, pers. comm.). The site is located next to Nahal Beersheva, ca. 300 meters south of the Byzantine city, just on its outskirts. Several inspections and trial trenching have been conducted in the area. During test trenches, over 50 cist tombs were discovered; the tombs have not been excavated, but their location was recorded. Based on type,

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26 The excavation (A-2225/1995) was directed by Katz and Sonntag. The excavation remained unpublished, two preliminary internal reports exist of the excavation (Katz and Sonntag, 1996; and Katz and Sonntag, n.d.)

orientation, and building style, they date to the Byzantine or Early Islamic period. The estate consists of a large building, probably a farmhouse (Sapir, pers. comm.), as well as two large dovecote towers, an industrial winepress, a pool with channels, and an enclosure wall (Haimi, 2008; Michael and Tepper, 2021). The dovecotes date to the Late Byzantine period. With an external diameter of 8.4 meters, these two dovecotes are among the largest found in the Negev to date. Most of the pottery dates to the Middle to Late Byzantine period. Based on the pottery found in the dovecot towers, they were built in the late fifth/early sixth centuries and went out of use in the seventh century CE (Michael and Tepper, 2021). The dovecot towers are similar in size to the two from Shivta (Hirschfeld and Tepper, 2006). The two large dovecotes produced pigeon droppings, which were used as a fertilizer for grapevines and other fruit trees near the site. Based on the industrial winepress found nearby, one can conclude that the fertilizer was used for grapevines. As both winepresses were in near proximity to the Byzantine city of Be'er Sheva, likely the production of wine produced in these winepresses was for the local population.

Surrounding the Byzantine city, hundreds of tombs, the majority being rectangular cist tombs built from whitish limestone slabs, were discovered (Cohen, 1968a; 1968b; 1969a; 1972; Nagar, 1995; 1996; Varga, 1997; 1999; Sonntag, 1999a; 1999b; 1999c; 2001d; 2001e; Schuster, 1999; Daniel and Bar'el, 2001; Govrin, 2003; Baumgarten, 2004; Nikolsky, 2004; Israel, 2009; Abadi-Reiss and Eisenberg-Degen, 2013; Peretz, 2014; Shmueli and Rasiuk, 2017; Michael, 2018; Rasiuk, 2018). Most of the tombs are located to the north and east of the Byzantine city. Some expansion between the Late Roman-Early Byzantine and Late Byzantine-Early Islamic periods is visible as there were structures built over cemeteries (Petersen, 2005: 57). The majority of the tombs were rectangular cist graves, with a general east–west direction, and some of them had a built floor. The outline was lined with large, dressed limestone stones and covered with one row of stone slabs.

Especially during the last 20 years, most tombs discovered were not opened due to political and religious beliefs (see also Balter, 2000). Therefore, when tombs were found, either changes in construction plans were made, tombs had been moved, raised, and buried at a lower point (e.g. Israel, 2009), or covered with a concrete plate (e.g. Michael, 2018), to protect the burials. On a few occasions, the tombs were excavated. This practice makes it more difficult to date the tombs. In general, built cist tombs from whitish limestone date in the northern Negev from the Late Roman to the Early Islamic periods. Based on the general direction of tombs, one can indicative date them to a specific period. Byzantine tombs many times showed an east-west direction. Nager and Sonntag (2008) suggest that in the Early Islamic period, the Negev burial tradition continued, but the burial posture was changed. The faces of the dead were turned to the south, or the body was

placed to the right side. Many tombs have been discovered in the last couple of decades and continue to be discovered. However, it may not be possible to establish the full extent of the cemeteries as, according to Musil (1908), many tombs were destroyed when the Ottomans built modern Be'er Sheva at the beginning of the 20th century:

> "Bei dieser Gelegenheit werden zahlreiche Gräber aufgedeckt, aber beraubt und sofort verschüttet, weshalb ich kein einziges gut erhaltenes zu sehen bekam. Man versicherte mir, daß sehr viele Inschriften gefunden werden; um sie aber nicht der Regierung herausgeben zu müssen, werden sie einfach abgemeißelt" (Musil, 1908: 66).[27]

6.7 Early Islamic period

During the Early Islamic period, 101 sites were recorded. The settlement density is 0.25, which is significantly lower than during the Byzantine period, but much higher than the Hellenistic and Roman periods. It is possible that the decline was connected to the Byzantine empire's long wars with the Sassanids or the transition from the Byzantine Christian rule to Arab Muslim rule in the mid-seventh century CE. Although the Negev was not involved in the war with the Persians, its impact remains unclear (Haldon, 1995: 406; Schick, 1995: 20–48; Walmsley, 2007: 45–47; Holmquist, 2019: 10).

This study shows that in the course of the Early Islamic period, the number of sites drops from 321 to about 101. However, it may be assumed that many sites built during the Byzantine period were also in use during the Early Umayyad period. Thus, the true site numbers for the Early Islamic period were probably (much) higher than registered, but nevertheless, a clear decline is evident from the general numbers. It is worth noting that many of the villages and large farmsteads continued to exist, especially around the city of Be'er Sheva (Figure 6.16). Additional, large rural estates were built surrounding Be'er Sheva and in the whole northern Negev during the Early Islamic period. Specifically, during the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, there is evidence of the establishment of large farmhouses, for example, those surrounding Be'er Sheva (Gilead et al., 1993; Eisenberg-Degen and Kobrin, 2016; Aladjem, A-5416/2008), at Hura (Peretz, 2012), Nahal

27 "On this occasion numerous graves were uncovered, but robbed and immediately buried, which is why I did not see a single well-preserved one. I was assured that many inscriptions were found; but in order not to have to give them to the government, they are simply chiseled off" (Musil, 1908; 66).

Gerar (Peretz, 2015), Nahal Anim (Fraiberg, 2017b), Lehavim (Kobrin, 2016), and at Khirbat Amra (Tahal, 1996; 2000).

At Ramot Nof, several structural remains were found, among others two large farmhouses and a public building or village, suggesting a small rural village in the hinterland of Be'er Sheva. There are no drastic changes or catastrophes visible at the end of the Byzantine period, and the site continued to be occupied in the Early Islamic period. Ustinova and Nashoni (1994) suggest an abandonment of the settlement somewhere in the mid-eighth century.

During a salvage excavation directed by Gilead et al. (1993), a large Early Islamic farmhouse was discovered at Abu Matar. At the end of the seventh century CE, a large farmhouse was built, partially covering the Byzantine period building. The finds include ovens, stone objects, and bones (Gilead et al. 1993). In several rooms, Buff ware with floral imprints (*Khirbet al-Mafjar ware*) was found (Gilead et al. 1993). Gilead and Fabian (2008: 327) date the Buff ware to the Umayyad period (second half of the seventh and first half of the eighth century) and, accordingly, date the abandonment of the building to the eighth century CE. The dating of Buff ware is debated; plain ware appears after 750 CE, and molded Buff ware was probably not used before the early ninth century CE (Cytryn-Silverman, 2010: 106). Therefore, it is likely that the large farmhouse at Abu Matar was settled longer, possibly until the late ninth–early tenth centuries CE.

To the north of Be'er Sheva, at Nahal Ashan, Eisenberg-Degen and Kobrin (2016) excavated a large farmhouse from the Early Islamic period was found. The farmhouse consisted of a large courtyard surrounded by several rooms. The structure had two phases, as, at a later point, several rooms were added. An Umayyad post-reform coin dating to the early eighth century CE was found where an early wall was connected to a later wall. The walls of the added rooms were constructed of fieldstones and dressed stones (Eisenberg-Degen and Kobrin, 2016). Pottery finds include, among others, Buff ware and marble ware. Only one piece of Late Byzantine pottery was found, which was probably from the nearby Late Byzantine farm (Eisenberg-Degen, 2018). It seems that the farmhouse was built in the eighth century, and toward the end of the eighth–early ninth century, additional rooms were added.

Another large farmstead was excavated in 2016 by Eisenberg-Degen (2017) at Nahal Be'er Sheva, and three main construction phases were visible. The first phase consisted of a rectangular building with three rooms adjacent to an extensive courtyard and several other walls. During the second phase, several rooms were added, and the walls consisted partially of dressed stones in secondary use. Three silos, as well as *tabun*s and hearths, were excavated. In the final phase, minor changes took place: architectural elements and dressed stones in secondary use (e.g., column drum) were added, some walls were dismantled, and new walls

were added. The pottery finds included Buff ware, among others, and the pottery dated to the eighth–ninth centuries CE (Eisenberg-Degen, 2017).

Nearby, about 400 meters to the east, another Early Islamic farmhouse was excavated in 2008 by Aladjem, this excavation was unpublished by the time of writing.[28] The farmhouse, which evolved from a single-room structure into a large farmhouse, was occupied from the seventh to the eight, possible ninth century CE. According to the excavator, the pottery assemblage included mainly cooking pots and jars, additionally FBW and Buff ware was found (Aladjem, pers. comm.).

The Byzantine settlement at Tel Sheva probably continued during the Early Islamic period. On top of the tell, the Roman fortress was reused as a waystation in the Early Islamic period. Some alterations were made to the fortress walls and entrance (Fritz, 1978: 87). Not many finds have been discovered, however, one gold coin dating to the mid-eighth century CE was found within the fortress, that was probably occupied during the seventh and eighth centuries CE, before being abandoned in the early ninth century CE (Fritz, 1973: 87; Herzog, 1993: 173). As mentioned above (see Chapter 6.6), several excavations have been conducted in Tel Sheva, revealing remains from the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods. However, most have so far not been published. The village was located at the foot of the tell, toward the eastern side. An excavation conducted by Haimi in 2003 revealed a few walls, forming several rooms, as well as a *tabun*. The published pottery includes LRS ware, FBW, and Gaza amphoras, all dating to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Haimi, 2008). At the excavation at Tel Sheva, Shekhuna 36 (A-2062/1993; Baumgarten, unpublished), 47 Classical period coins have been found, dating from the Late Roman to the Abbasid period, and 16 date to the Early Islamic period. Two coins date to the seventh century CE (Arab-Byzantine coins), 13 are Umayyad post-reform coins, dating from the early to the mid-eighth century CE, and one Abbasid coin dates to the late ninth century CE (see Appendix 2—Coin finds from excavations). These amount to 23.8% fewer coins than during the Byzantine period but significantly more than during the Late Roman period. Based on the coin and excavation data, the settlement in Tel Sheva continued to exist during the Umayyad period and probably was of similar size as during the Byzantine period. After 750 CE, only one Abbasid coin was found. Thus, it seems that the majority of the village was abandoned toward the end of the eighth century and early ninth century CE, similar to the fortress on top of the tell. By the late ninth–early tenth centuries CE, the site was completely abandoned.

In Khirbat Amra, most remains date to the Byzantine and Early Islamic periods (Tahal, 1996; 2000). The church in Area A dates, based on the findings, from the

28 Excavator: Aladjem (IAA), Excavation permit no. A-5416/2008.

fifth to the eighth or ninth centuries CE. Within the church, two post-reform Umayyad coins were also found. It is unclear if it was used for liturgical or secular purposes. It only went out of use in the late eighth–early ninth century CE, when the building materials from the church were used for other buildings. In Area E, an Early Islamic period farmhouse was excavated. The structure shows two phases of construction. It is located about 50 meters east of the Byzantine period basilica church. The farm was not built on any previous period remains. In the ninth century, changes were made on the farm, and many architectural remains from the nearby church were used, including building stones, capitals, column drums, and decorated stones with crosses. This serves as an indication that when the farmhouse was first built in the late Umayyad period, the church was still in use. Within the large farmhouse, Arabic ostraca were found that date from

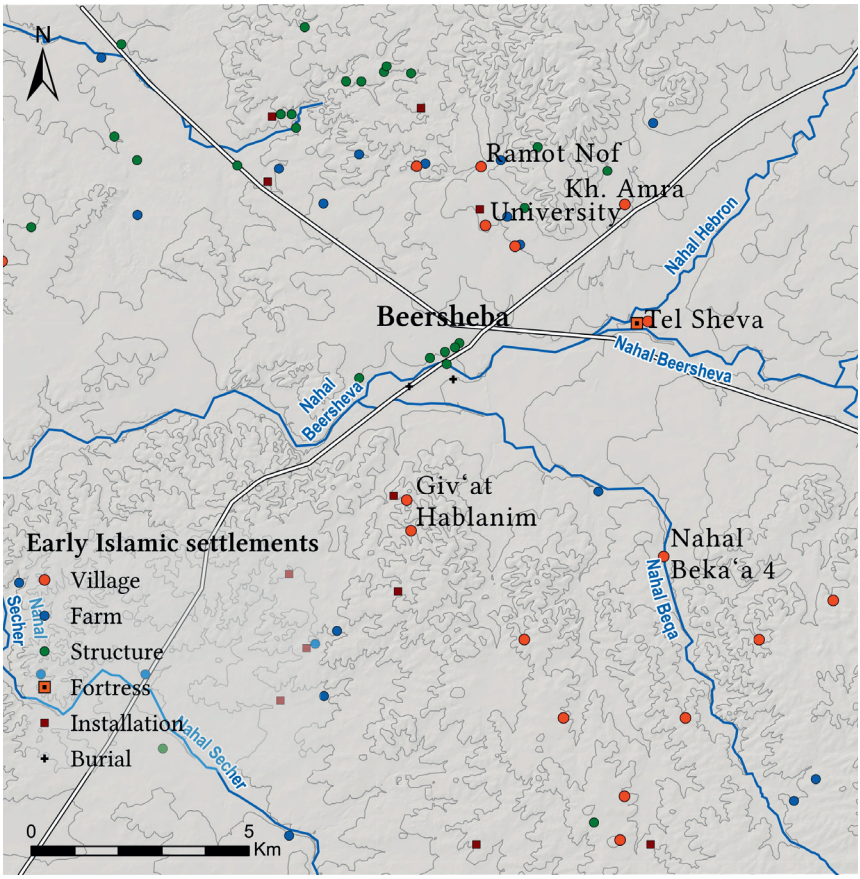

Figure 6.16 Early Islamic period site distribution in the central study area.

the seventh/eight to the ninth–tenth centuries CE. The ostraca deal with debts and tax matters.

In Area F, another large Early Islamic period farmhouse was excavated (Tahal, 1996; 2000). This building also had architectural remains in secondary use, probably taken from the church. The building dated to the eighth–ninth centuries CE. Several more dwellings date to the Early Islamic periods, most to the eighth–ninth centuries CE (Taxel and Michael, *forthcoming*). It seems that during the Umayyad period, several large farmsteads were built at Khirbat Amra, and those were in use at least until the late eighth possible ninth centuries. Several structures had a second phase, where building material from the church (and probably from other abandoned buildings) was incorporated into the walls and floors of the farmsteads, meaning the church went out of use in the late eighth–beginning of the ninth century. Some farmhouses continued to be used in the late ninth and possibly the early tenth centuries CE. Only a few Early Islamic coins were found at Khirbat Amra: two date to the Umayyad period (post-reform coins) and one Abbasid coin dates to the eighth–ninth centuries CE.

Religious buildings during the Early Islamic period included churches in Be'er Sheva, Khirbat Amra, and probably also Tel Sheva, and they continued to be used in the Early Islamic period. At Khirbat Amra, the church was in use until the eighth or early ninth centuries CE. On the northern border of the study area (just outside the study area), the church of Horvat Karkur Illit was excavated. The church continued to be used at least until the second half of the seventh century CE. After the abandonment of the church, the building was probably used for secular purposes (similar to the monumental church in Be'er Sheva, see Chapter 6.7.1), as proven by the *tabun*s built in several places (on mosaic floors and on graves) and other construction-based modifications. The coin finds date to the early eighth century CE (Figueras, 2004: 8–9).

Within the central study area, no Early Islamic Mosque has yet been found. However, about six kilometers to the north of the study area, south of the Bedouin town of Rahat, an Early Islamic open-air mosque was found next to a large farmhouse. The open mosque dates to the Abbasid period, most likely to the eight century CE (Seligman and Zur, 2021: 37*). In a recent excavation, directed by Shmueli, Kogen-Zehavi and Michael (A-9312), a second open-air mosque was discovered nearby. The mosque dates to the Late Umayyad–Early Abbasid period.

The majority of the sites dating to the Early Islamic period belong to the category of small sites between 0.0 and 1.0 ha in size. Only a few larger sites dating to the Early Islamic period could be found, for example, Tel Sheva, Khirbat Amra, and at the university campus. During the Byzantine period, most sites were small, rural settlements. The city of Be'er Sheva was likely settled at least until the mid-eighth century CE without major changes.

Figure 6.17 Open-air Mosque excavated near Rahat.
The open-air mosque with mihrab (prayer niche) towards Mecca (south) dates to the eight century CE. Site excavated by Seligman and Zur (2021: 31*, Fig. 7), photo by Peretz (IAA). Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

6.7.1 Be'er Sheva in the Early Islamic period

During the Early Islamic period, the city of Be'er Sheva continued to be a large urban center, and many pottery sherds and coins from the Umayyad period were found during excavations of different buildings and in churches. New buildings were constructed with stones from abandoned buildings from the Byzantine period. These facts demonstrate that Be'er Sheva continued to serve as a large urban center during the Umayyad period.

After the abandonment of the army camp near Compound E, new buildings were constructed that were less massive, and they probably were not public buildings. The excavator relates these changes to the decline in the status of cities as administrative, economic, and religious centers, which occurred in southern Israel after the Arab occupation (Seriy, pers. comm.).

The excavation in the area of today's Electric Company compound revealed several structures dating to the Early Islamic period (Katz and Sonntag, 1996; and Katz and Sonntag, n.d.). Among others, a large, probably public building was built

in area E1 (20.7 × 23 m) with thick walls of 1 to 1.5 m, and a second large building (25 × 32 m) which was possibly, according to the excavators, used for the production of grape honey. A second room served as a *latrine* (Katz and Sonntag, 1996). In one of the buildings, pieces of the Be'er Sheva tax edict were found in secondary use (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 319). As mentioned earlier, 18 tombs were discovered in Area A, and most tombs had an east–west direction, with the head of the deceased facing south (Katz and Sonntag, n.d.). This might serve as an indication that the deceased were Muslims and the cemetery dates to the Early Islamic period.

The large church near the market, excavated in 1994, was in use by the Christian congregation until the seventh century CE (Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). In the seventh century CE the roof of the church collapsed and the rooms adjacent to the apse, as well as the chapels, were converted and used as secular spaces (Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). According to Schick (1995: 128–31) many churches show evidence of later domestic occupation and it is important to determine whether there was a gap in occupation or if the later domestic occupation was connected to the abandonment of the church, e.g., expulsion of the congregation. In the case of the monumental Be'er Sheva church, which was damaged, it can be assumed that the church was abandoned peacefully by the Christian population of Be'er Sheva. The reoccupation of the intact rooms occurred after the abandonment of the church building and was most likely not connected to it. It seems that the structure was finally abandoned around the mid-eighth century CE (Fabian and Ustinova, 2020). Similarly, in the northern church/monastery of Be'er Sheva (Israeli, 1967), Umayyad coins were found on the floor, which seems to indicate that the church was also in use during the Umayyad period (Figueras, 1980). However, it is unclear if the structure was used as a church during the Early Islamic period or whether it served domestic purposes instead. The exact size of Early Islamic Be'er Sheva is unknown, but based on the findings, it seems clear that the settlement continued to be a large urban center in the northern Negev at the beginning of the Early Islamic period and then decreased gradually until the late ninth–early tenth centuries CE when the city was finally abandoned. The coin finds during the Early Islamic period from Be'er Sheva support this hypothesis, showing a decline of some 60% of coin finds until the mid-eighth century. By the ninth century, the decline was 90%, and by the late ninth and early tenth centuries, it had reached 95%. Furthermore, a study of glass finds from different excavations within the city of Be'er Sheva shows that no break is evident in the glass products throughout the major events of the seventh century (Persian wars and transition from Byzantine to Arab rule). The glass finds of the seventh and eight centuries CE show glass types that were used in Christian and Muslim context. However, new glass types were gradually introduced by

the Muslim population (Winter, 2020: 191–194). Furthermore, the study suggests a transformation or change of part of the population in the eight century CE. The glass finds decreased significantly in the late eight–early ninth century CE (Winter, 2020), these findings correlate with the settlement and coin finds of Be'er Sheva.

6.8 Coin finds from the central study area

In total, 66 coins date to the Hellenistic period: the majority were discovered at Tel Sheva (n = 60), and other coins are from Be'er Sheva (n = 5) and Nahal Ashan 2 (Horbat Raqiq) (n = 1) (see Appendix 2). Coins date from the late fourth century BCE to the first century BCE, spanning the complete Hellenistic period. Most coins date to the second and first centuries BCE. This number is heavily influenced by the large number of Nabatean coins (n = 25) found at Tel Sheva, all dating to the late second to early first century BCE. Without the Nabatean coins from Tel Sheva, there are two peaks visible: one during the third century and a second during the second part of the second century BCE. The majority of the coins dating to the late fourth and early third century BCE were Ptolemaic coins, with the exception of one Seleucid coin (Tel Sheva) and one Proto-Nabatean coin (Old Bedouin market). Palestine was under Ptolemaic rule until 198 BCE (Avi-Yonah, 2002: 42) and then for almost one century under Seleucid rule. The majority of the second century BCE coins are therefore also Seleucid coins, except for one Nabatean coin (Ramot) and two Ptolemaic coins (Horbat Raqiq and Tel Sheva). Only two Hasmonean coins were found in the study area (Figure 6.18).

Few coins date to the Early Roman period (n = 9). They date from the first century BCE to the first century CE (50 BCE and 100 CE). Between 50 CE and 70 CE (First Jewish Revolt), only two coins were recorded. The same is true between 70 and 100 CE, where two additional coins have been found. Between the years 100 and 200 CE, only one coin was recorded, found at Tel Sheva (Fritz, 1973: 87) within the walls of the fortress.

These findings do not include the coin finds from the village Rakafot 54, where several dozen coins were found that date to the first to early second centuries CE. These include coins minted by Herod Agrippa I (41–44 CE), Roman procurators of Judea (6–66 CE), provincial Roman coins (37–117 CE), Nabatean coins (until 106 CE), and coins of the First Jewish Revolt of 66–73 CE (Peters et al., 2020). The coin numbers increase significantly during the Late Roman period (n = 120). Between 2004 and 2005, an excavation at Compound C in Be'er Sheva took place (see above). The excavation was conducted by BGU, and over 90 coins dating to

the Late Roman period were found. The majority date to the time of Diocletian in 284–305 CE (Gilead and Fabian, 2008: 317–18; Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b).

Taking the coins from Rakafot 54 as well as the coin finds from the excavations in Compound C into account provides the following picture. The majority of sites were abandoned prior to the First Jewish Revolt. It's probable that only the village at Rakafot 54 and the settlement at Tel Sheva were populated in the central study area, possibly with some small sites. No coins were found for the period from after the Second Jewish Revolt (ca. 135 CE) until the year 200 CE, meaning that probably most sites were abandoned, with the exception of Tel Sheva, where a Roman fortress was built during the second century CE. Only four coins dating between 200 and 250 CE were found in the study area. Toward the last quarter of the third century, the coin numbers rise strongly. Between 250 (especially after 284 CE) and 300 CE (n = > 100),[29] and between 300 and 324 (n = 107). This means that the main settlement activities in Be'er Sheva as well as in the whole study area started probably after 250 CE and reached their peak around the years 300 to 324 CE during the Late Roman beginning of the Byzantine period.

Most likely, the sharp increase in building activities in the region was due to the wide-ranging reforms of Diocletian (284 to 305 CE), the administrative transfer of the Negev (from *Provincia Arabia* to *Provincia Palaestina*), the establishing of a line of border forts and military camps (probably not including the one in Be'er Sheva, see above), changing the monetary system and system of government (Tsafrir, 1986: 82–83; Magness, 2012: 320). This is also evidenced by the large number of coins found in Be'er Sheva that date to the time of Diocletian, compared to the low number of coin-finds from earlier time periods, including none in the area of the army camp. Therefore, based on the findings and dating, one can conclude that Late Roman Be'er Sheva was probably founded after the reforms by Diocletian. There might have been a small settlement established in the area in the early third century CE, but the strong growth of the settlements took place in the last quarter of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries CE.

According to Figueras (1980), most inscriptions and coins found in Be'er Sheva date to the reign of Justinian I (521–565 CE). The majority of the coins in the IAA database date to the early fourth century, with fewer dating to the fifth (n = 32) and sixth centuries (n = 43). However, these coin finds include only those found on excavations conducted by the IAA after its establishment in 1990. Therefore, it could be that most of the coins date to the sixth century CE. Figueras (1980), however, does not provide exact numbers or reference. Considering that the sixth century and early seventh century coins (until 638 CE) were in use until 'Abd al-

29 This number includes the coin finds from the unpublished excavation from Compound C (Fabian and Gilead, 2010a; 2010b).

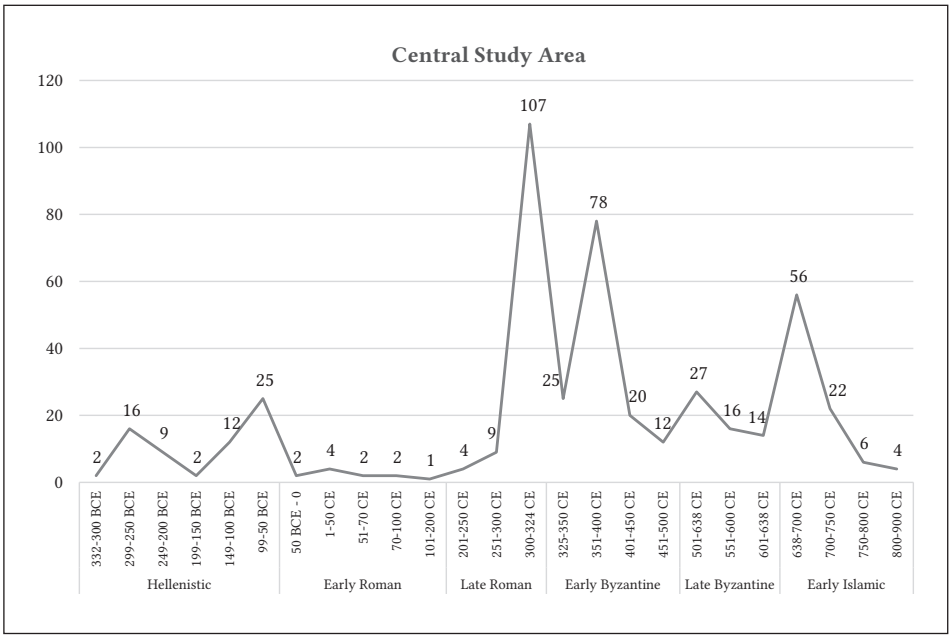

Figure 6.18 Coin finds from the central study area according to dating.
Coins according to percentage: Hellenistic 13.8%, Early Roman 2.3%, Late Roman 25.2%, Early Byzantine 28.3%, Late Byzantine 11.9% and Early Islamic 18.4%. The coins from Rakafot 54 (several dozen) dating until the second century CE and from Compound C, Be'er Sheva (G-58/2004; G-64/2005) are not included in Figure 6.18 (ca. 90 coins, dating to the late third beginning of the fourth centuries CE) due to the preliminary status of analysis and unpublished excavations. Roughly 65% of the coins date between 300 and 638. Coin data from the IAA internal database (*Menorah*) see Appendix 2.

Malik's reform in 696–97, then in total, 57 coins have been found in the study area, dating to this time period.

From the Early Islamic period, 56 coins were found to be from the Early Umayyad period (696 CE), with the third-largest number of coins found in the area after the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods. As stated above, the sixth century and pre-reform Arab coins circulated together until 'Abd al-Malik's reform in 696–697 (Walmsley, 1999), meaning that those coins were still in use until the late seventh century. Thus, one can see that the numbers between the Byzantine and post-reform Umayyad coins did not change drastically, and a drop in coins is only visible in the mid-eighth century CE (Figure 6.18). Taking Figueras's statement (1980) into account (see above), that most inscriptions and coins found in

Be'er Sheva date to the time of Justinian I, there must have been a drop in coins to the late seventh century and early eighth century CE, at least for the city of Be'er Sheva. However, besides the drop, it would still be the third-highest number of coins registered in the study area: (1) late third–fourth century CE, (2) sixth–early seventh century CE, (3) late seventh–early eighth century CE.

The figure from the coin finds from the central study area show higher activity during the Hellenistic period, which is clearly connected to the activities in Tel Sheva, as the majority of all Hellenistic coins were found there. During the Early Roman until ca. 250 CE, a relatively low frequency is shown. Between 250 and 300 CE, we have probably a similar number as between 300 and 324 CE, taking the coin finds from the Compound C excavation of BGU into account. This indicates that the main settlement activities in Be'er Sheva, as well as in the whole study area, started at some point after 250 CE and reached their peak around the years 300 to 324 CE during the Roman period. Most likely, the substantial increase in building activities in the region was due to the wide-ranging reforms of Diocletian (284 to 305 CE).

There was a decline in coins during the fifth and sixth centuries. Figure 6.18 shows a decline by 638 CE and a sharp rise at the beginning of the Early Islamic period. Byzantine coins were used at least until the end of the seventh century. The 56 coins in the figure only relate to Umayyad coins introduced after the reform of 'Abd al-Malik in 696/697 CE (Walmsley, 1999: 346–47). The coin-finds decline in frequency during the eighth century CE, which continues until the early tenth century CE. Based on the coin-finds, and considering the coins that are not represented in Figure 6.18, the following conclusions can be drawn: (1) there was a drop in coins from the sixth–early seventh century CE, (2) the Umayyad post-reform coins are still at a high level, and (3) the Early Islamic decline in coin numbers is visible from the mid-eighth to the early tenth century CE. For the city of Be'er Sheva, the rise in coin numbers is visible between the Late Roman–Early Byzantine period (284–324 CE), peaking in the fourth century and declining during the fifth, with the highest numbers during the mid-sixth century CE (taking Figueras statement (1980) into account). In the seventh century, there is a decline that might be connected to the Sassanid invasion in the early seventh century and the transition from Byzantine to Muslim rule shortly afterward. It also may relate to the phase of ruralization that took place during the late sixth and early seventh century CE.