

Ottoman Town Planning in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Palestine

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Abstract

The Ottoman authorities made plans for new towns in Palestine and the adjacent areas in the late 19th and early 20th century. They were motivated by the need to protect their boundaries against the Bedouin tribes and by answering the need to enlarge the old towns. As they lacked any real knowledge of modern town planning they worked with European and local architects educated in Europe and adopted mainly simple systems of gridiron pattern in order to build a chain of new towns.

Keywords: Ottoman town planning, 19th and 20th centuries, Palestine

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century, major changes took place in the Middle East, particularly in Palestine. These evolved major changing in the landscape, establishing new agriculture settlements and founding of new towns.

The planning problem of the "pre modern" period in Ottoman towns was essentially concerned with defense and Islamic ideas. These problems were solved earlier by principles of military planning, such as walls and entrance to the town through gates compact size. The towns have narrow twisted street pattern surrounded by wall; central covered market place, central mosque and residential areas separated according to religious and tribal origin (1). The causes of these features continued to be present until the later years of the last century but a new era brought new ideas of town planning into the empire. During the late nineteenth century the economy of many areas in the Middle East was transformed from a largely self-sufficing subsistence economy into an export-oriented economy tied to the industrial economy of Europe and North America. This, and the changes in the Ottoman's attitudes to their role as governors of the area, and the opening of the Middle East for western activities, led to marked change in the location pattern, the size and the internal structure of cities in the Middle East. One of the upshots of these trends was the establishing of new towns in the Middle East. The building of new towns was part of the overall planning developed during the years of the Turkish sultan Abed al Hamid the second (1876-1909), which aimed for resettling the desert frontier of the empire. Thus Beisan, Beersheba, Auja al Haphir (Nizzana) and Caesarea in Palestine, Jerash (Roman-Greek Gerasa), Amman (Roman - Greek Philadelphia) in today Jordan as well as Kunitra and Daraa, in today Syria were built as new towns at that period. The aim of this article is to present the establishing of the new towns in Ottoman Palestine, namely Baisan, Caesarea, Beersheba, Auja and Acre. (Fig. 1)

The new town of Baisan

The first project in western Palestine was the resettling of the old city of Baisan. The city, which governs northern Palestine up to the great earthquake of 742, was at mid 19th century merely a small village with about 300 people. The Ottoman sultan bought in 1870 the land from

its owners, who failed to pay the taxes, and plan there a new town to be built (2). Although we do not know who design the town plan we do know that roads were built in the area and the town itself had a gridiron street pattern. Some public buildings (government house, market, hotel, warehouses) were built while newly arrived people built houses and shops according to the overall plan (3). A railway station was built in 1906 north of the town, which helps the expansion of Baisan. In 1914, the town had a population of some three thousands people (Fig. 2)

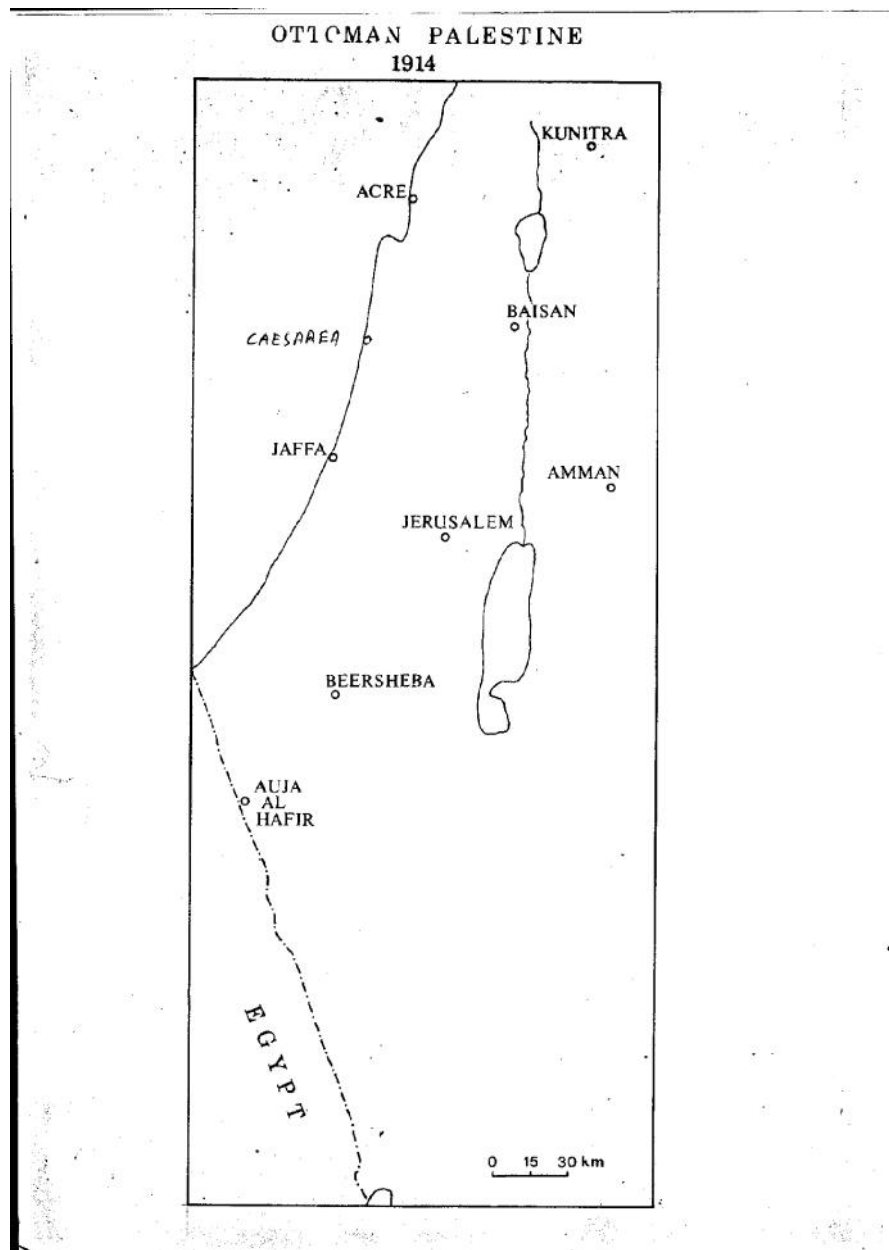


Fig. 1 – Ottoman Palestine 1914



Fig. 2 – The center of Baisan 1934.

The Bosnian town of Caesarea

At the same time, mid 1880's, another ruined city was restored as a new town. The old city of Caesarea, built by Herod the Great in the first century BC, was later (1265) destroyed by the Moslem Mamluks, after they had conquered it from the Crusaders. For about 400 years the site was abandoned. In 1884 when the Balkan province of Bosnia was taken from the Ottoman Empire and handed over to Austria, the Slav- Moslem aristocracy, finding themselves persecuted by their former Christian peasants and the Christian power which protected them, migrated to the more congenial rule of the Ottoman sultan. The refugees from Bosnia, having been allotted the ruins of Caesarea and the land surrounding it by the Ottoman government, built a nucleus of a new colony. Although the town had no general plan at the beginning, the Bosnians laid out broad streets right across the ruins using the old foundations. Within five months of arriving, about twenty good stone houses have been built, some of three stories high, others with vaults for merchandise and storing grains. The dwellings were built on the plan which rendered the towns of the Moslem Slaves in the Balkans, all enclosed with courtyards, using high walls which guard the harems of the proprietors (4). In 1887 about 22 well built houses with tiled roofs were built by the Bosnians (5) and a year later about 45 families had houses there (Fig. 3). The roads remain in a basic stage and no plots were given to public houses. In 1888 the government ordered its engineer to lay out the place in equal lots, not exceeding one third of an acre each, and to construct roads, reserve a market place, a lot for the custom-house and a municipality. Caesarea was divided into 75 lots, some of them already been built, others were reserved for future immigration from Bosnia (Fig.4).



Fig. 3 – Caesarea in 1893.

An old ruined Crusader's fortress had been pulled down and a modest Government building replaced it (6). Some mosques and Khans (Motels) were also been built (7) and in 1910 a large private house was built for the Bosnian governor of the area. In 1931 about 700 people lived in Caesarea, 331 of them were Bosnians (8).

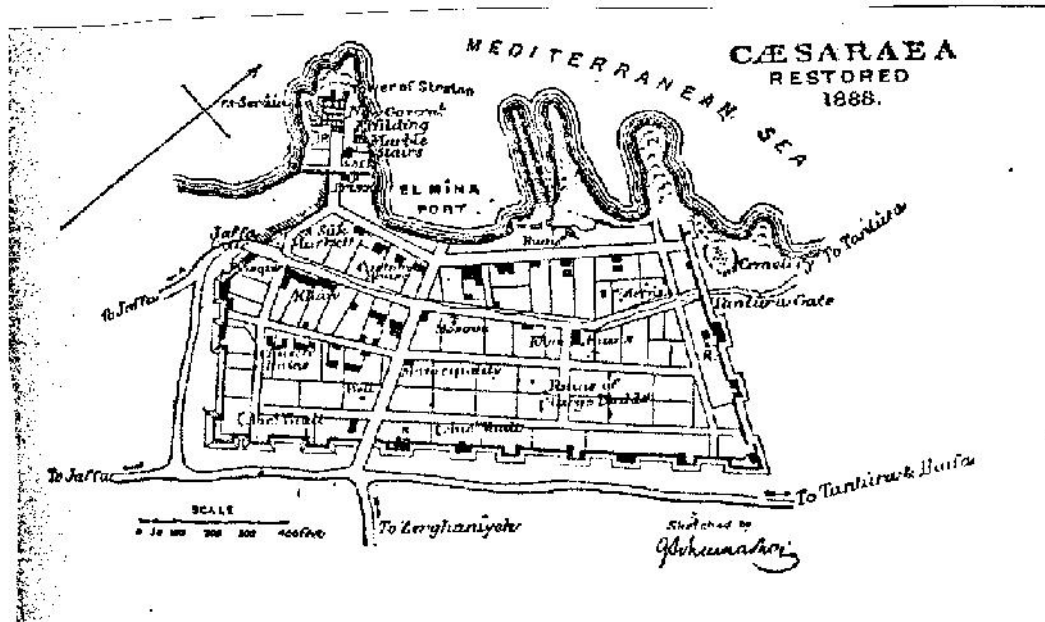


Fig. 4 – Caesarea plan of 1888.

In 1948 the whole settlement was abandoned and most of the houses were later demolished in order to help the archaeological excavation of the city.

Beersheba - A new town in the desert

In 1900, the Ottoman government decided to build a new town in the southern part of Palestine, near the site of old, ruined, Beersheba. The new town was constructed for two purposes: better control and governing of the Bedouin tribes in those areas, and also because of the British occupation and rule of nearby Egypt (9). Politically and culturally influenced by the German empire, the ottoman authorities consulted four architects, two of whom were Turkish educated in Germany, the other two were a German and a Swiss architects (10), for the purpose of drawing a master plan for the new town (11). The architects made a plan for a new town in the middle of the desert (12). The original plan was lost but some air photographs (Fig.5) and maps (13) (Fig.6) taken and produced during World war I, seventeen years later, and the actual buildings still survived provide us with evidence of the actual master plan. The plan called for a grid pattern city, which was foreign to the Middle Eastern City landscape. The area of about 520 dunams (130 acres) was divided by ten longitudinal stets, crossed by nine latitudinal ones. 75 meters separated each street from the nearby ones, creating about 60 plots of approximately an acre each. The width of each street was approximately 15m and each fronted 60m. Every plot then divided into four additional plots which were given an area of approximately 1 Turkish Dunam (919- sq. meters) for building plot. There were no zoning regulations but most of the public buildings such as the mosques, the seraia (government house), the governor's residence,

the police station, the school and the post office were located side by side in the northwest part of new Beersheba. The main street of the city, 20m wide, ran from that area to the wide, dry stream (wadi Beersheba) that marked the city limit. Four large public gardens, two of which were near the public buildings, the others near the dry stream, were later added to the planned town (14).



Fig. 5 – Air photograph of Beersheba 1918.

The building of Beersheba during the Ottoman period was done accordingly with the city plan presented here. Later on, during the British Mandate era (1918-1948), Beersheba grew on the same lines. It was marked as a town in which the new outline scheme, prepared in 1937 by H. Kendall, Palestine's town planning adviser, just gave a formal legitimization for the Ottoman plan (15).

Auja - The new town on the Egyptian boundary

In 1908 the Turks extended their town building southward by planning and establishing a new town in Auja al Haphir, near the site of the ruined Byzantine city of Nissana, on the newly established boundary between Egypt and the rest of the Ottoman empire. The plan, which is again can be seen by examine later photos (16) (Fig.7), called for a wide, central road, a gridiron pattern of other roads, some public buildings, a government house and even a small public garden. The small town was built gradually between 1908 and 1914. Some geographers and archaeologist (E. Huntington, C.L.Wooley, and A.T. Lawrence (17)) visited the site and reported on the building activities, which used the worked stones from the ancient city for the new buildings. Later on, during World War I, the Turks built a railway station, a telegraph house, warehouses and large hospital, all according to the basic plan.

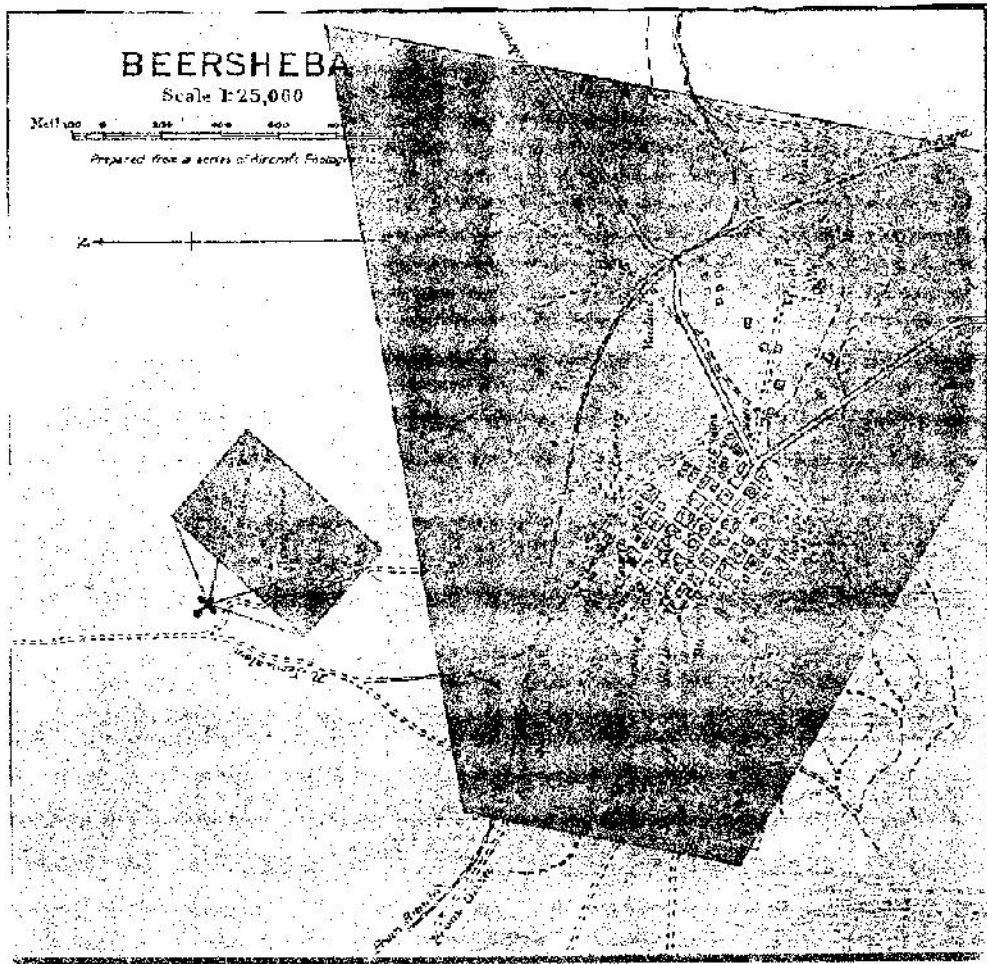


Fig. 6 – Map of Beersheba 1917.

The modern expansion of Acre

At about that period, new problems began to beset the Ottoman administration in Palestine, calling upon new guidelines for the development of the Ottoman urban areas. These new problems were the result of economic changes brought about by increased intercourse with European countries, and an affiliation of ideals and ideas that have been germinated in Europe for some time previously. These concepts brought about a new awareness of the responsibility of the state toward its citizens. However, the main difficulty in this period was the inability to cope with the responsibility and the demands that it brought. The principles applied to planning of Palestinian towns in this short period was practically nil, because of the lack of planning expertise available. Even though, during the first decade of the 20th century, Acre, then the resident place of the Ottoman regime in northern Palestine, which was a city closed inside its old wall, was designed for expansion. This was done by the Ottoman authorities in 1909 mainly for relieving the overcrowding in the old city which, at the turn of the century, had a population of about 8,000 - 10,000 people. The main problem was how to provide adequately for that growth. The Ottomans requested a German engineer, Gotlib Schumacher, then a Palestinian resident, to

draw up a development plan for the city (18). A gridiron pattern was the result of Schumacher's efforts to plan for Acre. In addition to the impression that this form of growth was highly efficient, it was motivated possibly by the fact that this type of development was as remote from the medieval morphology of the old city as an engineer could imagine.



Fig. 7 – Acre 1914.

Thus, aesthetic values in form may have played a small part, too, in the adoption of the gridiron pattern in Acre, in common with contemporary schemes for the development of other urban areas in Palestine. It was little but a plan on paper. The street system was simple, based upon a gridiron pattern, with rectangular blocks measuring 150 by 40 meters (Fig.8). These blocks were designed to include the main residential and commercial quarters of the town, and the plan show that the projected blocks extended indefinitely toward the north and the east. There were, however, a number of restraints toward the physical growth of the town.

The map of Acre town scheme gives no indication as to the planned function of each block. However it seems that Schumacher made adequate arrangements for the provision of public open space, gardens, mosques and other religious sites. Towards the north of the planned area and in the center of the block he designed a square and an oval, and these may be assumed to be civic center and public garden.

This plan never really left the planner table in the Ottoman period but later on, during the British era in Palestine, a new plan was design for the city expansion (19), in which Schumacher's idea played a major role in preparing the new plan (Fig.9). Thus, British mandatory Acre was developed according to that plan.

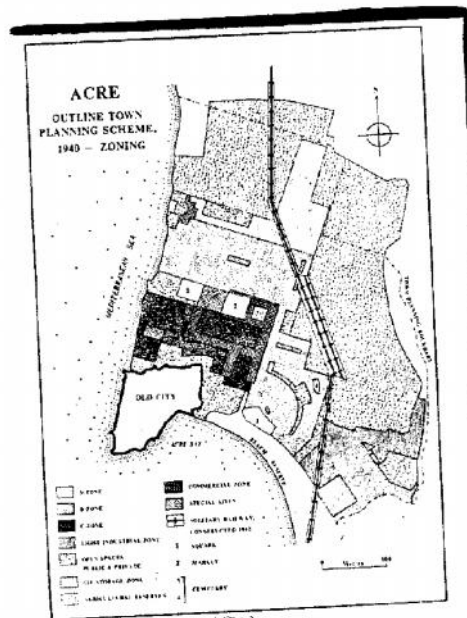
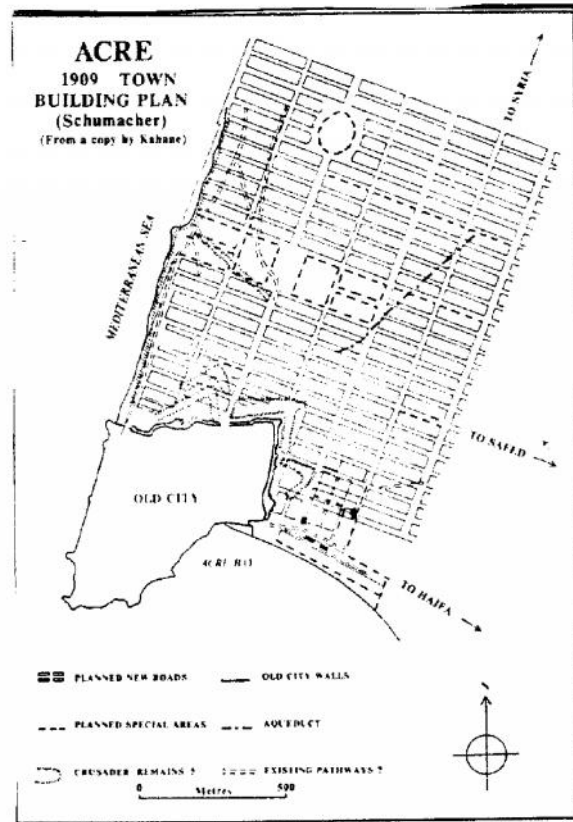


Fig.- 8(up) - Acre plan of 1909 and 9 (down) – Acre plan of 1940.

Conclusions

Modern town planning in Palestine began in the turn of the 19th century. Up to World War I it was a period which was characterized by unstructured planning ideas. This unsophisticated outlook to planning came into a prominence toward the end of Ottoman rule, when the towns of Palestine began to grow outside their historic areas in response to a variety of economic changes. The Ottomans were unversed in the art of modern town planning. To counter this ignorance they made use of German engineers and architects to draw up building plans for their towns. The main result of these efforts was the development of simple gridiron systems which appear to have had some appeal, both to those who commissioned the plans and to those who created them, as efficient working schemes.

Some of those towns continued their existence later on while others have gone. Even though, the overall Ottoman planning can still be seen in today's cityscape in Israel.

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