

Welcome to Tel Beer Sheva National Park World Heritage Site

Tel Beer Sheva National Park is located east of the modern city of Beer Sheva near the communities of Omer and Tel Sheva. The mound represents an urban ruling center from the biblical period in the southern part of the country, where excavations revealed a system of walls and gates along with public and residential buildings, a storehouse, water systems and more. Tel Beer Sheva was declared a national park in 1986, covering a total area of 180 dunams (18 hectares). In 2005, UNESCO listed the biblical tels, including Tel Beer Sheva, as a World Heritage Site.

Geographical Structure

Tel Beer Sheva rises to a height of 307 meters above sea level, and about 20 meters above its surroundings. It is located in the center of a wide valley on the northern bank of the Beer Sheva streambed near its confluence with the Hebron streambed.

Together with the Arad Valley, the Beer Sheva Valley, identified with the biblical region of "Negeb of Judah," is a wide plain covered with loess soil. These two valleys divide the Judean Mountains in the north from the Negev Highlands and the Sinai in the south.

In the past, streambeds served as main passageways through the



A general view of Tel Beer Sheva from the observation tower

region, because they were both easy to traverse on foot and had underground water sources readily available (by digging wells). The moderate topography of the Beer Sheva Valley made it a convenient thoroughway – from the Arava and the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean, and from the Sinai and the Negev toward the central and northern parts of the country.

The Beer Sheva Valley receives an average annual rainfall of approximately 200 millimeters. In it are cultivated areas irrigated by

13. The observation tower – From the top of the tower you can get a good idea of the plan of the city, as well as a view of the Beer Sheva Valley, modern Beer Sheva, and the communities of Omer and Tel Sheva. At the foot of the tower you can see the remains of the fortress (outlined in green on the map) built during the Roman period and restored in the Early Arab period.

14. The storehouse – This roughly 600-square-meter complex consists of three storerooms, each divided by two rows of stone pillars into three long halls. Hundreds of pottery vessels found in the ruins of the building support the identification of the complex as a storehouse, a term that appears in the Bible.

Various items and food products were stored in the side halls, while the middle space served as a passage for caravans of donkeys laden with supplies. A group of well-dressed stones were found incorporated into a wall of the northern corner of the storehouse. These stones were reconstructed as a four-horned altar (see station 1 – the altar).

15. The water system – The water system was established as part of the city's fortifications, and was intended to ensure the inhabitants' access to the water reservoir within the city in time of siege. The water system consists of three parts:

- 1) A shaft 17 meters deep lined with stones with a flight of steps along its sides.
- 2) A reservoir, hewn into the chalk rock and thickly plastered, divided into five spaces, with a total capacity of about 700 cubic meters.
- 3) A winding feeder channel that led flood waters from the Hebron streambed into the reservoir.

While the water system was built to serve the inhabitants of the city mainly in time of siege, the well hewn near the city gate met their ordinary daily needs. The water system collapsed and became blocked at the end of the Hellenistic period, apparently due to an earthquake.

After taking in the view from the top of the stepped shaft, descend the stairway to the underground reservoir. You will be amazed at the size of the chambers, the thick plaster that prevented the water from seeping out, and the ancient support walls built to hold up the ceiling after its partial collapse. Take the stairs over a narrow channel to the wide feeder channel, through which water entered the reservoir. The exit from the water system is via a secondary opening hewn during work on the system in antiquity and blocked after its completion. It was reopened during excavations and now serves as an exit from the mound.

16. The stone-built channel – Near the exit, you can see a portion of a stone-built channel that led flood water from the Hebron streambed to the reservoir feeder channel.



The outer city gate (strata 5-4)

rain, while to the south and the east, the desert begins. The history of Tel Beer Sheva and the other settlements in the valley reflects periods in which settlement was possible either due to a more comfortable climate or through initiative by the central government.

The History of Tel Beer Sheva

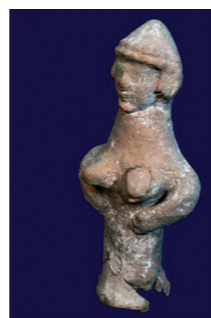
Remains of early settlement at Tel Beer Sheva attest to its habitation in the fourth millennium BCE (the Chalcolithic period). Finds from this period include sherds, although no architectural remains were found. Numerous settlement sites from this period were found along the Beer Sheva and Besor streambeds.

After a gap of more than 2,000 years, at the end of the second millennium BCE (the Iron Age, also known as the Israelite period), settlement on the mound was renewed. The mound was then continuously occupied for about 500 years. Excavators identified nine strata from this period, representing the stages in the building and destruction of the site.

Pits, used mainly for grain storage and dating from the beginning of the Iron Age settlement (Stratum 9), were found hewn into the southern slope of the hill. One such pit was made into a dwelling and was found to contain ceramic vessels and an oven. The deep well discovered near the city gate may have been hewn as early as this time.



A pillar figurine with a stylized face, Stratum 2



A female figurine, Stratum 2



A stone incense altar from the Iron Age



A seal with a Southern Arabian inscription, attesting to Beer Sheva's function as an international commercial way station during the Iron Age

Rules of Behavior in Tel Beer Sheva National Park

- Use marked paths only.
- Do not enter areas that have not been opened to the public.
- Do not damage the antiquities and the archaeological finds.
- Do not climb walls.
- Follow instructions of park personnel and signs.
- Faucets for drinking water, garbage bins and toilets have been installed at the site for your convenience.
- Please keep the area clean.

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Production: Adi Greenbaum
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Over the years, stone dwellings were built in the settlement (Stratum 8). During the 10th century BCE, a new settlement was established at the site, whose dwellings were set close to each other in an oval belt around an open courtyard (Stratum 7). These dwellings were "four-room houses" typical of the period (three parallel spaces and a fourth one perpendicular to them). The settlement consisted of approximately 20 dwellings, and had an estimated population of about 100. Similar settlements found elsewhere in the Beer Sheva Valley attest to a wave of habitation, apparently due to a temporary increase in rainfall.

The first fortified city at Tel Beer Sheva (Stratum 5) was established at the beginning of the ninth century BCE as one of the important administrative centers of the Kingdom of Judah. The city from this period featured a solid, four-meter-wide wall, and its slopes were reinforced with a glacis (a smooth, slanted structure to prevent attackers from mounting the walls). A complex gate was built, including a main entrance with an outer square protected by an additional outer gate. In addition to segments of the city wall, this stratum revealed the city gate, water system and a residential area. The city was rebuilt after its partial destruction (Stratum 4).

Table of Strata

Period/Stratum	Date	Type of settlement
Early Arab	7th–8th centuries CE	Fortress
Roman	2nd–3rd centuries CE	Fortress
Herodian	1st century BCE–1st century CE	Fortress
Hellenistic	3rd–2nd centuries BCE	Temple
Persian	5th–4th centuries BCE	Fortress and storage pits
Iron Age – Stratum 1	Beginning of 7th century BCE	Aborted attempt at reestablishment
Iron Age – Stratum 2	8th century BCE	Administrative city – casemate wall
Iron Age – Stratum 3	8th century BCE	Administrative city – casemate wall
Iron Age – Stratum 4	9th century BCE	Administrative city – solid wall
Iron Age – Stratum 5	9th century BCE	Administrative city – solid wall
Iron Age – Stratum 6	9th century BCE	Work camp of Stratum 5 city
Iron Age – Stratum 7	10th century BCE	Enclosed settlement
Iron Age – Stratum 8	12th–11th centuries BCE	Pits and first dwellings
Iron Age – Stratum 9	12th century BCE	Settlement of pits and huts
Chalcolithic	4th millennium BCE	Sherds, settlement?

Some scholars link the earthquake that destroyed Beer Sheva to the one mentioned in the Book of Amos:

"The words of Amos...who prophesied concerning Israel in the reigns of Kings Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake" (Amos 1:1)

The prophet Amos also denounced the temple built at Beer Sheva:

"Those who swear by the guilt of Samaria, saying 'as your god lives, Dan,' and 'as the way to Beersheba lives' – they shall fall to rise no more" (Amos 8:14).

The transition from Stratum 4 to Stratum 3 in the eighth century BCE is manifested by the alteration of the city's entire fortification system: The solid wall was dismantled and replaced by a casemate wall (a double wall within which are rooms). A new gate was built over the ruins of the previous gate. The outer gate was done away with, and the water system was rebuilt after part of its ceiling collapsed. Extensive storehouses were built near the gate and next to the water

The campaign of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, is mentioned in 2 Kings and in Sennacherib's Prism, dating from 689 BCE. The inscription on the prism includes a detailed description of Sennacherib's third campaign to the land of Israel in 701 BCE. It also describes King Hezekiah's surrender to Sennacherib:

"As for Hezekiah the Judahite... forty-six of his strong, walled cities, as well as the small towns in their area, which were without number, by leveling with battering-rams and by bringing up siege-engines, and by attacking and storming on foot, by mines, tunnels, and breaches, I besieged and took them... His cities, which I had despoiled, I cut off from his land, and...I gave (them)... I added to the former tribute, and I laid upon him the surrender of their land and impost... As for Hezekiah, the terrifying splendor of my majesty overcame him, and the Arabs and his mercenary troops which he had brought in to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, deserted him. In addition to the thirty talents of gold and eight hundred talents of silver, as well as his daughters, his harem, his male and female musicians, which he had brought after me to Nineveh, my royal city. To pay tribute and to accept servitude, he dispatched his messengers..."



Ceramic vessels found in the storehouses

World Heritage Site Biblical Tels: Megiddo, Hazor, Beer Sheva

In 2005, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) inscribed the three biblical tels of Hazor, Megiddo and Beer Sheva as World Heritage Sites of outstanding universal significance. These mounds, mentioned frequently in the Bible, were chosen out of approximately 200 tels as the best examples of cities from the time of the Bible. The intensive archaeological excavations carried out at these mounds have produced exciting finds that shed light on the history of the various peoples of the land of Israel in general, and the history of the people of Israel in particular. Among the impressive archaeological vestiges are gates, walls, temples, storehouses, stables and water systems.

UNESCO determined six criteria for inscription, even one of which (other than Criterion 6) is enough to place a site on the World Heritage List. The biblical mounds were inscribed after having met four criteria, as follows:

- 2 The three tels represent an interchange of human values throughout the ancient Near East, forged through extensive trade routes and alliances with other states, and manifest in building styles that merged Egyptian, Syrian and Aegean influences to create a distinctive local style.
- 3 The three tels are a testimony to civilizations that have disappeared – that of the Canaanite cities of the Bronze Age and the biblical cities of the Iron Age. These cultures manifest themselves in town planning, fortifications, palaces, and water-collection technologies.
- 4 The biblical cities exerted a powerful influence on later history through the biblical narrative.
- 6 The three tels, through their mentions in the Bible, constitute a religious and spiritual testimony of outstanding universal value.

Photographs from other INPA World Heritage Sites:



Tel Megiddo – the Canaanite cultic site



Tel Hazor – buildings from the Israelite period



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The head of a figurine, Stratum 2

system. Such drastic changes may be interpreted as the result of the destruction of the Stratum 4 city in an earthquake.

The Stratum 3 city was restored in Stratum 2. A governor's palace was built at this time, the city's temple was dismantled and the stones of its altar were buried in one of the storehouse walls. A unique large house with deep cellars dubbed the "Basement House" was also erected at this stage. The destruction of the Stratum 2 city in a great conflagration has been dated to the end of the eighth century BCE, and was apparently connected to ruination by King Sennacherib of Assyria in 701 BCE. The exposed remains of Stratum 2 were preserved at the site and comprise the major sites along the touring route.

After the destruction, a partial and unsuccessful attempt was made to rebuild the city (Stratum 1). However it was soon abandoned and remained in ruin until the beginning of the Persian period.

During the Persian period (fifth to fourth centuries BCE), a small fortress was built at the site. Alongside it, dozens of pits were dug to store wheat supplies for soldiers and mainly fodder for horses.

During the Hellenistic period (third to second centuries BCE), a temple was built here. The stone base of its altar can be seen next to the Basement House.

During the time of Herod the Great and his successors (first century BCE to the first century CE), a large fortress containing a bathhouse was built on the mound. Two plastered pools belonging to this fortress can still be seen.

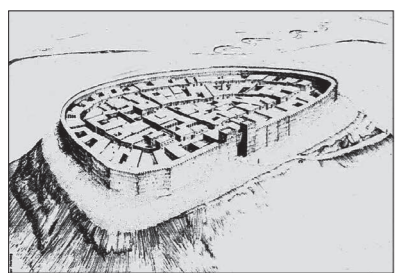
The last structure to be built on the mound was a diamond-shaped fortress built during the Roman period (second to third centuries CE). It was restored during the Early Arab period (seventh to eighth centuries CE).

During the Roman and Byzantine periods the main settlement moved westward and a large city was established in the area of modern Beer Sheva. That city was later abandoned, and rebuilt around 1900 by the Turks as an administrative center, where the present-day old city (the old Beer Sheva town center) now stands.

During World War I, Beer Sheva served as a staging ground for the Ottoman Turkish army, which was preparing to attack the Suez Canal. When the British Army advanced from Egypt to Palestine, the Turks fortified Tel Beer Sheva and placed a cannon position on it. An infantry unit of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) conquered the site on October 31, 1917.

The History of Research

Excavations at Tel Beer Sheva were carried out from 1969 to 1976 by the Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, under the direction of Professor Yohanan Aharoni, and in its last season under the direction of Professor Ze'ev Herzog. After the continuity and character of the strata were clarified, the expedition set the goal of uncovering large segments of the last city on the mound (Stratum 2). Remains from this stratum serve as a prime source for studying and analyzing the plan of the Israelite city.

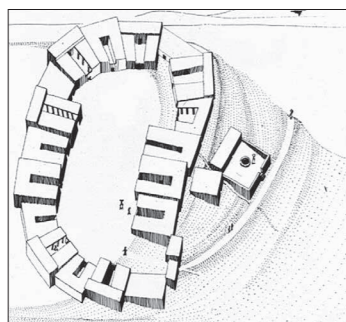


Artist's rendering of the Stratum 2 city

From the moment excavation began, conservation of the remains was taken into consideration and many activities were undertaken to preserve the vestiges of the mud-brick walls uncovered. This work was funded mainly by the Beer Sheva Municipality.

In 1990, extensive restoration was carried out at Tel Beer Sheva by the National Parks Authority, now the Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA), with the assistance of the Negev Tourism Development Administration. The work was done under the supervision of site director Eliyahu Even Haim.

The walls beneath the line appearing on many of the structures are original, and were found in their entirety during the excavation. Everything above the line was reconstructed from stones found in the rubble, or was rebuilt out of mud-brick. The reconstruction plan and the lookout tower were designed by the architect Lawrence A. Belkin with the assistance of Ze'ev Herzog as archaeological consultant.



Artist's rendering of the enclosed settlement of Stratum 7



Excavation on the mound was renewed from 1993 to 1995 by Professor Ze'ev Herzog in order to complete the uncovering of the water systems. During the first stage, directed by Dr. Tsvika Tsuk, the well near the city gate was excavated. It was hewn to a great depth; the water level was found 69 meters below the surface. During the second stage, directed by Ido Ginaton, the water system in the northeastern part of the city was revealed in its entirety. An impressive, stepped shaft some 17 meters deep was preserved almost to the top, and a plastered water system was uncovered intact as it was abandoned over 2,000 years ago. Following the completion of extensive conservation work together with experts from the Israel Antiquities Authority, the INPA opened the water system to the public in 2003.

The Tour of the Site

The visit begins at the altar square, continues in a loop route up to the city gate and the adjacent well and passes through the gate. It takes in interesting sites on the way to the observation tower, and ends at the exit from the water system. The visit takes about one hour. A complex of mud-brick rooms has been built at the base of the mound where groups can enjoy hands-on activities by reservation and at an additional charge.

The main gate leads to the city, where most of the structures you can see belong to Stratum 2 (see the table), which extended across the top of the mound over an area of about 11 dunams (1.1 hectares). The city's oval shape, suited to the contour of the hill, was expanded eastward to include the entrance shaft of the water system. Adjacent to the casemate wall enclosing the city are dwellings and a peripheral street. The dwellings were made out of sun-dried mud-bricks that were laid on a foundation of field stones. Urban planning reveals a combination of homes and administrative structures that attest to the city's use by administrative officials of the Negev region during the period of the Judean monarchy. Approximately 300 people lived in 70 dwellings, including the families of military commanders, tax-collectors, commerce officials and priests.

1. The altar – In one corner of the square stands a reconstructed replica of the large, sacrificial four-horned altar whose stones



The four-horned altar, reconstructed from stones found buried in the storehouse

were discovered incorporated into a storehouse wall. The original altar is on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The altar shows that the city had a cultic structure, built in the framework of the religious administration of the Judean monarchy. Its dismantling and burial attest to a change in the kingdom's ritual customs. Based on the dating of Stratum 2 at the end of the eighth century BCE, the abolishment of the cultic site was connected to the religious reform initiated by King Hezekiah of Judah according to the Bible. (The temple discovered at Tel Arad was also done away with in this reform.)

King Hezekiah's reform is documented, among other places, in 2 Kings:

"In the third year of King Hoshea son of Elah of Israel, Hezekiah son of King Ahaz of Judah became king... He did what was pleasing to the Lord, just as his father David had done. He abolished the shrines and smashed the pillars and cut down the sacred post" (2 Kings 18:1–4)

2. The outer gate – The outer gate, in use in strata 5 and 4, consisted of a stone foundation topped with mud-bricks. The reconstruction line is clearly marked.

3. The well – The well is located to the left of and outside the gate. Hewn to a great depth, its water served the inhabitants of the city as well as commercial and military caravans that passed this way.

Some scholars suggest that the well at the gate is connected to the one mentioned in Genesis in the story of the alliance of Abraham and Isaac with the Philistines at Beer Sheva. The oath sworn at the well gave the city its name (sheva means "seven" and "oath" in Hebrew):

"Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a pact... He replied, 'You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well. Hence the place was called Beersheba, for there the two of them swore an oath. When they had concluded the pact at Beersheba, Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, departed and returned to the land of the Philistines' (Gen. 21:27–32).

4. Drainage channel – This is marked by stone coverings incorporated into the pavement that leads from the main gate to the outer gate. The channel led surplus rain water away from the city to prevent damage to the walls. The channel exited via the outer gate, and apparently led to the water reservoir on the slope.

5. The main gate – Two high, thick-walled towers protected the front of the gate. On either side of the gate were chambers. Plastered benches found in one of these chambers served as seats for merchants or royal representatives. Currently the remains consist of two different gate structures: To the left of the passageway, you can see the left side of the strata 3–2 gate, while on the right side and at a lower level, is the right side of the earlier gate (strata 5–4). Benches erected in one of the gate rooms served the elders, merchants, judges or prophets while conducting their activities in the gate.

6. The city square – This was the only open space within the city. All streets led to this central plaza, where the local market could be held or the inhabitants could gather. In the Bible, such an entrance square is called a "square of the city gate."

7. The peripheral street – The peripheral street surrounded the oval outline of the city and was parallel to the wall. It was approximately two meters wide. Additional streets were also found, which crossed the city in a straight line through the center.

8. "The governor's palace" – This structure is outstanding in its size and plan, and is identified with the biblical house of the "city prefect" or the governor. It featured an entrance corridor and two paved halls that comprised the ceremonial wing, as well as residential units, a kitchen and a storeroom.

9. The early street – In the center of the peripheral street, you will notice an area dug to a depth of about three meters, in which the route of the earlier street was found. This find shows that the plan of the city was maintained from its beginnings in Stratum 5 until the end of Stratum 2. Farther on, to the left you will see the remains of a plastered pool from the Herodian period.

10. The Basement House – Farther along, you will see a building on the right whose foundations are four meters below the surface, two of whose rooms apparently served as cellars. Professor Aharoni believed that the unusual depth of the foundations was created during the cultic reform by the dismantling of the temple that stood here.

11. The residential quarter – To the left of the street you will see the residential area. The dwellings in this part of the city are integrated into the casemate city wall and were built in a uniform fashion. They included three or four rooms; an anteroom that apparently served as a courtyard and a cooking area and had steps leading to the roof; two storage rooms (one of which was apparently used for animals) divided by a row of columns; and a back room that was part of the casemate wall and served as a bedroom.

12. The casemate wall – The casemate wall was built along the edge of the mound. It consisted of two parallel walls divided by partitions into rooms. The rooms in the wall served as the back rooms of the dwellings.



The storehouse