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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assembling urban worlds: always-becoming urban in and through Bir al-Saba'

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Abstract

The ordinary city of Bir al-Saba', situated within an urban world stretched across southern Palestine, has a story to tell, of dramatic spatiotemporal transformations, presence and absence, capture and resilience. Such connected urban history is profoundly shaped through the world-making relations of those who lived and dwelt within the always-becoming material and ideational spatial geography of the Naqab. Research gathered from diverse archival sources and interview data offers insight into the voices, actions and imaginaries of the Saba'awi as they worked the shifting assemblages of this landscape between 1840 and 1936, making Bir al-Saba' a thick multiscalar cosmopolitan place of meaning and opportunity.

> It is impossible to tell the story of any individual city without understanding its connections to elsewhere. Cities are essentially open; they are meeting places, the focus of the geography of social relations.[1]

Introduction

Across the *longue durée*, some urban places have a complicated story to tell of ephemeral presence and spectral absence, of moments of transition into and out of physical existence and memory, only to materialize again in and through their urban worlds. Those who inhabit and dwell in such landscapes of spatiotemporal rupture and stability are world-makers, continually improvising an everyday urban way of life despite the comings and goings of empires and guardians.

The Palestinian city of Bir al-Saba' is just such a situated place, 'ordinary' like so many other cities around the world whose story of making and remaking has rarely

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[1]D. Massey, J. Allen and S. Pile (eds.), *City Worlds* (London, 1999), 2.

been told.[2] Most scholarship on Palestinian urbanism focuses on particular celebrity cities as sites within global imaginaries or conflict, leaving ordinary places like Bir al-Saba' significantly understudied and 'off the map'.[3] In fact, most Palestinian cities in the period before 1948 are 'absent' from global urban scholarship and memory of the processes of Palestinian urbanization has been lost.[4]

Those setting out to situate cities like Bir al-Saba' into global urban history must negotiate a number of analytical difficulties.[5] One is that most stories of particular Palestinian cities fail to conceptualize them within their wider regional city-systems, choosing rather to tell their story through a 'methodological cityism' lens.[6] This choice, as Doreen Massey suggests, misrepresents the fundamental relational nature of the urban and its processes of change. Trans-local socioeconomic relations have not usually been considered as the ontological foundations of Palestinian urban life, although recent studies on Palestinian cities have begun to do so.[7] Other than sparse mentions about agricultural trade with Gaza, historical relational data has not been readily available to stitch Bir al-Saba'[8] back within southern Palestine, leaving it 'under networked', conceived primarily as a bounded, territorialized place of questionable agency.[9]

There are related problems when working to resituate Bir al-Saba'. Biographies of particular cities often narrate transition through a macro-structural lens, valorizing 'the context of contexts' and the causal power of geopolitical economy, absenting the cities from world-making everyday social relations and undervaluing the role of their inhabitants in urban transformation.[10] In addition, a colonialist urban/rural dichotomy often shapes stories of urban worlds, throwing those not considered 'inside' the city 'outside' urban history since they fail to evidence a Western form of 'urbanism as a way of life'.[11] In this case, those beyond the city walls in southern Palestine and thus somehow Biblical are dismissed from urban history, subjectivized as 'nomadic Bedouin', assumed to lack 'urbanism', erased under a stereotypical narrative of chaos[12] and devitalized such that urbanization

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[2]J. Robinson, *Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development* (Abingdon, 2006).

[3]M. Nasasra, 'Beersheba and the dynamics of a Palestinian city: Bedouin networks with Gaza, Jerusalem and Istanbul', in H. Yacobi and M. Nasasra (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Middle East Cities* (Abingdon, 2019), 121–35.

[4]M. Hasan, 'Palestine's absent cities: gender, memoricide and the silencing of urban Palestinian memory', *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 18 (2019), 1–20.

[5]E. Hart and M. Dantas, 'Digging down into the global urban past', *Urban History*, 48 (2021), 424–34.

[6]P. J. Taylor, *Extraordinary Cities* (Cheltenham, 2013).

[7]M. Lecoquierre, 'Hebron: challenging the urbicide', in Yacobi and Nasasra (eds.), *Routledge Handbook on Middle East Cities*, 319–33; R. Barakat, 'The Jerusalem fellah: popular politics in Mandate-era Palestine', in R. Khalidi and S. Tamari (eds.), *The Other Jerusalem* (New York, 2020), 213–28.

[8]We use the place name Bir al-Saba' (بئر السبع) instead of the contemporary Beersheva since the former is the term used by those who inhabited this landscape for over a thousand years and by our interviewees and in the Ottoman archives.

[9]B. Stanley, 'Middle East city networks and the "new urbanism"', *Cities*, 22 (2005), 189–99.

[10]N. Brenner, D.J. Madden and D. Wachsmuth, 'Assemblage urbanism and the challenges of critical urban theory', *City*, 15 (2011), 225–40.

[11]L. Wirth, 'Urbanism as a way of life', *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (1938), 1–24.

[12]A. Meraiot, A. Meir and S. Rosen, 'Scale, landscape and indigenous Bedouin land use: spatial order and agricultural sedentarisation in the Negev Highland', *Nomadic Peoples*, 25 (2021), 4–35.

must be forced upon them.[13] When combined with a modernist infatuation with spectacular urban morphology and city planning, studies of places like Bir al-Saba' tend to be ahistorical and statist, in this case choosing to start with 1901 or after 1948 thereby attributing its emergence and vitality to imperial, Zionist or capitalist forces.[14]

Our empirical research led us in a different direction, towards a decolonizing counter-narrative of Bir al-Saba's spatiotemporal assembling and transitions. Through a focus on the activities and practices performed by those who 'inhabit and dwell',[15] the activism and imaginaries of the Saba'awi as they worked/reworked regional urban assemblages begin to weave them back into the story of Bir al-Saba'.[16] Their ordinary relations in and through this place, their connectivities and imaginaries transform the 'landscapes of the metropolis'.[17] Re-interpretations of Bir al-Saba's embeddedness in Palestinian urban history are a recent trend in scholarship[18] and we seek to contribute to this literature. Additionally, this article responds to the call for studies 'from elsewhere' of historically and geographically specific urban transitions, in order to enhance our global comparative analysis of urban change.[19]

This article tells a story of a situated Bir al-Saba' through 'process geography', stressing the 'world-making' inherent in particular initiatives, mechanisms and practices that make urban space an open building site.[20] AbdouMaliq Simone affirms this perspective, arguing that city-ness 'refers to the city as a thing in the making…[where] people, spaces, activities, and things interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them'.[21] Thinking through rhythms of endurance and experimentation rather than theory directed our investigation towards both the material and ideational components which contingently assemble and disassemble this assemblage of assemblages.[22] Peter Taylor suggests a particular focus on acts of

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[13]In 1963, then Israeli Minister of Agriculture Moshe Dayan told *Haaretz*: 'We should transform the Bedouin into an urban proletariat in industry, services, construction, and agriculture…The children will go to school with their hair properly combed. This would be a revolution, but it would be fixed within two generations…The phenomenon of the Bedouins will disappear', *Haaretz*, 31 Jul. 1963.

[14]J. Ben-David and G.M. Kressel, 'The Bedouin market: the axis around which Beer-Sheva developed in the British mandatory period', *Nomadic Peoples*, 39 (1996), 3–27.

[15]R. Rodger and S. Rau, 'Thinking spatially: new horizons for urban history', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 372–83; T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (Abingdon, 2000).

[16]C. McFarlane, *Learning the City* (Malden, 2011).

[17]T. Boissière and Y. Morvan, *Un Moyen-Orient ordinaire: entre consommations et mobilités* (Marseille, 2022).

[18]S. Abu-Rabia-Queder, 'The biopolitics of declassing professional women in a settler colonial context', *Current Sociology*, 67 (2019), 141–58; Nasasra, 'Beersheba and the dynamics of a Palestinian city'; A. Amara, 'The Ottoman Tanzimat in the Palestinian frontier of Beersheba (1850–1917)', in H. Kiliçaslan, O.F. Can and B. Çağlar (eds.), *Living in the Ottoman Lands: Identities, Administration and Warfare* (Istanbul, 2021), 126–55; S. Kedar, A. Amara and O. Yiftachel, *Emptied Land: A Legal Geography of Bedouin Rights in the Negev* (Stanford, 2020).

[19]Hart and Dantas, 'Digging down into the global urban past'; O. Sayín, M. Hoyler and J. Harrison, 'Doing comparative urbanism differently: conjunctural cities and the stress-testing of urban theory', *Urban Studies*, 59 (2022), 263–80.

[20]I. Farías and T. Bender (eds.), *Urban Assemblages* (Abingdon, 2010).

[21]A. Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar* (Abingdon, 2010), 3.

[22]C. Durose, M. van Ostaijen, M. van Hulst, O. Escobar and A. Agger, 'Working the urban assemblage: a transnational study of transforming practices', *Urban Studies*, 59 (2021), 2129–46; McFarlane, *Learning the*

networking and agglomeration, mechanisms of practical knowledge production which are central to assembling a multiscalar urban world.[23]

Sensitive to such suggestions, our empirical research sought out both the spatial imaginaries and world-making acts undertaken by the Saba'awi across the geohistorical period between 1840 and 1936.[24] We conducted oral interviews[25] with those rooted in its social relations; reviewed diaries and traveller reports of those who witnessed Saba'awi activism; carried out original archival research in the British Library, the UK National Archives, in the Başbakanlik Ottoman Archives (BOA) in Istanbul and in Jerusalem across Arabic, British and Ottoman newspapers and diplomatic records available in Arabic, Hebrew and English; and conducted on-site surveys of urban morphology.

The results of our research are stories and oral history of layered spatial and temporal relations offering insights into moments of everyday change and transition.[26] The first section of this article employs our findings to discuss the always-becoming urban world of the Naqab after 1840 and the key ideational and material components in and through which the Saba'awi contributed to its (re)making. The second section focuses on multiscalar practices, relations and circuits undertaken by Saba'awi as they worked the shifting urban assemblages under the territorial shadows cast by the coming and going of the Ottoman and British empires. The third section summarizes our findings, highlighting mechanisms of connection and agglomeration which helped generate moments of urban transition. The conclusion suggests how this case contributes to rethinking such connected urban history.

An always-becoming urban world

Bir al-Saba' ya baladna mn turabik injabalna
(Our land, from your soil we are made)

The always-becoming urban world of southern Palestine experienced both continuity and change across the hundred years following the Egyptian withdrawal. Within this regional spatial geography, four ideational and material components – a spatial imaginary; sociotechnical infrastructures; agricultural production; and knowledge production/service provision – provided both stability and generated reconfiguration as those who dwelt and inhabited scaled-up Bir al-Saba's 'placeness' and identity; agglomerated socioeconomic relations; and facilitated increased connectedness.

City; M. Woods, F. Fois, J. Heley, L. Jones, A. Onyeahialam, S. Saville and M. Welsh, 'Assemblage, place and globalization', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 46 (2021), 284–98.

[23]Taylor, *Extraordinary Cities*; P.J. Taylor, *Advanced Introduction to Cities* (Cheltenham, 2021).

[24]We begin with the end of Egyptian rule across southern Palestine and end in 1936 when the next transition, the political uprising across Palestine, unfolds.

[25]Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 Saba'awi from communities in the Naqab, Saba'awi refugees in Jordan, Gaza and Hebron, villagers from Gaza and a number of Saba'awi and Gazan family members overseas who were born and lived in Bir al-Saba' before 1948. Relevant insights were also taken from interviews conducted with the British district commissioner who served in Bir al-Saba' in the 1940s (Julian Asquith, Lord Oxford).

[26]A. Lindón, 'The lived city: everyday experiences, urban scenarios, and topological networks', *Geographica Helvetica*, 74 (2019), 31–9; Boissière and Morvan, *Un Moyen-Orient ordinaire*.

A vibrant spatial imaginary

There is evidence at this conjuncture of a *shared spatial imaginary* at work which entangled Bir al-Saba' in and through the Naqab as a multiscalar space of distinction and uniqueness. This included areas north-east of Bir al-Saba' into the Hebron Hills as far as Hebron, south to Aqaba, west to Wadi el Arish, south-west to 'Auja al-Hafir, north-west to Gaza and up the coast to Yafa, and east across Wadi 'Araba to Ma'an. This 'crumpled' relational space had an intensity and cognitive coherence through memory and agency concerning reachability, presence and absence, actors, routes and realms, places, landscapes, praxis, governance, complex communities, possibilities and constraints. Oral narratives, as well as Ottoman and British sources, indicate that Bir al-Saba', the Naqab, and Bilad Gaza were terms used by communities of the southern Palestine region to describe their relational world and reflect its sense of place. The Bir al-Saba' Bedouin referred to themselves as the Arabs or the 'Urban of Bir al-Saba'' (or Saba'awi, the term used until today by the Bedouin in the Naqab and Bedouin refugees in Jordan). In this article, we take a relational 'dwelling perspective' and so use the broader and self-constituted term Saba'awi to refer to all those Bedouin, villagers and others such as Gazans, Majdalawyis' Hebronites, merchants, officials who 'dwelt and inhabited' this material and ideational space, created intentional worlds and made their social 'place'.[27]

The Saba'awi lived their own version of connected urbanism, imagining and assembling as if they were fully within and belonging to this urban world and its constituent life-worlds. For them, this assemblage was imbued with both deep Abrahamic significance and communal place practices. The existing materiality and associated heritage of both buildings and ruins scattered within the Bir al-Saba' space and stretched across the landscape provided an urban morphology which continually whispered of past and future socioeconomic potential. An extensive complex of communal wells, such as the wells of Tal al-Milh (City of Salt) and Bir al-Meshash (The Water Pits) 10 miles east of Bir al-Saba' (see Figure 1), are just one example of how the value and 'placeness' of this urban world were enhanced through the labour and social capital expended by the Saba'awi. Such value was acknowledged by outsiders who traversed this space.[28] A regional sociotechnical history of on-going investment and maintenance of runoff farming systems and associated infrastructural assemblages (cisterns, burial plots, stone fences, terraces) gave this indigenous land system a temporal continuity grounded in the tribal spatial governance of land and water, cultural customs and accepted allocation for agriculture.[29]

In and through this relational world, Bir al-Saba' as 'place' had a historical nodal role in circuits of trade, pilgrimage and services which generated myriad opportunities. Interviewees affirmed this: 'the police post and the two strategic wells of Tal al-Milh (City of Salt), east of Bir al-Saba', became key sites for gathering of merchants from Hebron, Jerusalem and Gaza and the local tribes, buying and selling

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[27]Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*.

[28]E.R. Sawer, *Annual Report 1926*, *Department of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, Palestine*, Greek Conv. Press (British Library, London).

[29]Meraiot, Meir and Rosen, 'Scale, landscape and indigenous Bedouin land use'.

Figure 1. The wells of Tal al-Milh village (Wadi al-Malah-al-Meshash) during the 1880s. The Palestine Exploration Fund Archives: PEF/P/GAR/61385,1387.

goats, barley, sheep, camels, tobacco and milk products'.[30] There was, in other words, a significant degree of what Peter Taylor calls 'town-ness' here before there was density, city planning or monumental buildings – and there was 'city-ness' at work before there were railroads and the telegraph, materializing Bir al-Saba' as a central connected place of imagined possibilities, mobility and stability.[31]

Sociotechnical infrastructures

Other material infrastructures with their associated sociotechnical imaginaries were significant. Urban studies emphasize the spatial materialization and cascading effects of technological infrastructures in creating city-ness/placeness,[32] while people with 'the Knowledge' are infrastructures as well.[33] In their material, institutional and discursive aspects, inter-urban sociotechnical infrastructures play a powerful multiplier role in transforming urban relations and facilitating transitions.

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[30]Interview with Hajj Fankhor Mustafa al-Nasasrah al-Ma'any, Tal al-Milh, 2021.

[31]'City-ness' is a relational result of expanding networking, trade, exchange and infrastructural connectedness which remake a 'place' and its strategic role through entanglement with a dispersed system of related settlements/nodes. 'Town-ness' is intensification, concentration or implosion of dense socioeconomic networks of local commerce and sociality in a place through agglomeration and concentration. Taylor, *Advanced Introduction to Cities*.

[32]Woods *et al.*, 'Assemblage, place and globalization'.

[33]A. Simone and E. Pieterse, *New Urban Worlds* (Cambridge, 2017).

The Saba'awi created and held unique practical spatial knowledge not readily available to city dwellers on the periphery. This was knowledge of real-world mobility – route planning, logistics of movement, possibilities available through innovation and effort, location points and topographic transitions, wayfinding rules and heuristics, alterity, resources and dangers. Saba'awi relational practices imagined an urban world where Gaza and Hebron, Majdal Asqalan, the Wadi 'Araba and Ma'an were geographically proximate, reachable, with attractive opportunities. Their concept of the 'local', of where the 'edges' of their world lay socially, economically and symbolically and how it continually stretched and folded, crafted a distinct agentic urbanism. We can see this in a wide range of decisions to embark with determination and to commit resources in order to access and claim potentialities by working the assemblage.[34] The regular selling of Bedouin products in the markets of Hebron, Gaza, Majdal, Burayer and Falluja, and their purchases there, are emblematic of an urban world political economy, with the services they provided and the products they produced shifting as relations fluctuated.

Over the *longue durée*, the Saba'awi helped produce the inter-urban trade and pilgrim assemblages running south, west, east, north-west, north-east and south-east of the Naqab. Providing transport, protection, guiding services and provisions to merchants, caravans, pilgrims and travellers stitched Saba'awi into urban circuits entangling Cairo and Gaza with Transjordan as well as south to 'Auja al-Hafir and Aqaba. For example, they were crucial to pilgrim mobility along the Muslim routes of both the Darb al-Hajj al-Masri, which cut south-east across the southern Naqab to Aqaba and the Darb al-Hajj al-Shami, running south from Damascus to the Hijaz. The materiality and imaginary assemblages of connected fortresses, khans, wells, holy ruins and resting sites crucially included the materiality of the caravan itself; the al-Hajj al-Masri required between 800 and 1,600 camels per year, along with camel drivers and shepherds hired for the journey; other pilgrim routes crisscrossed the Naqab and required their services.[35] After 1840, tourism to the Holy Land offered new opportunities for Saba'awi employment: for example, international tourism companies like Thomas Cook and Son's office in Yafa, opened in 1874, offering itineraries 'in the footsteps of Abraham' to Bir al-Saba' via Hebron or Gaza. As early as the 1850s, Bedouin guides for Western tourists transiting the Naqab knew well enough to substitute Biblical place names for local sites, understanding the power of the sacred geography these visitors imagined.[36]

Particular sites where diverse routes converged, often at wells or prominent wadis, increasingly became nodally significant in expanding regional circuits, while gaining greater place meaning. These included Bir al-Saba', Simsim, Falluja, Majdal Asqalan, Ruhaibeh, Tal al-Milh, Dahariyeh, Beit Jibrin and Yatta. The village of Burayer, for example, was central to the regional economy, connecting Gaza to Hebron, and serving Bedouin communities.[37] Bethlehem's expanding

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[34]Durose *et al.*, 'Working the urban assemblage'.

[35]R. Schick, 'Who came on pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the Mamluk and Ottoman periods? An interreligious comparison', *Für Seelenheil und Lebensglück* (2018), 243–60.

[36]A.P. Stanley, *Sinai and Palestine* (London, 1875), 101.

[37]B. Saidel, R. Hallote, T. Erickson-Gini, B. Schecter and J.W. Hardin, 'An archaeological survey of the Arab village of Bureir: perspectives on the late Ottoman and British Mandate period in southern Israel', *American Schools of Oriental Research*, 383 (2020), 141–73.

global trade in mother-of-pearl religious objects depended on shipments from the Red Sea via the Naqab. Southern Transjordan communities traded east–west through the regional entrepôt of Karak – with its dyadic ties to Hebron and Bir al-Saba' – and through Ma'an, as the gateway to Gaza or the Hijaz.[38] Huweytat from around Petra went to Cairo to 'transport the Pasha's army across the desert to Aqaba and Yanbo', while locals bought provisions in Hebron and Gaza so that they could sell them 'with great profit to the weary pilgrims' along the Hajj route.[39] In the early twentieth century, tribes were paid by the Ottomans to protect the new telegraph and rail infrastructure.[40] As a result of such agglomeration and connectivity, the Naqab (translated as 'a route' or 'entrance') was an interstitial space where the Saba'awi marketed their unique specialist spatial knowledge of the multiple routes and realms (niqabs) making up this world.

Agricultural production

Between 1840 and 1900, activities of place-making, aggregation, expanded capital investment and the facilitation of connectivity across southern Palestine intensified, and with it, so too did Bir al-Saba's place identity and centrality. Agricultural production for export increased in response to expanding possibilities; partnerships were agreed; and money lent.[41] European travellers commented on the agricultural production, the placeness ethos of Bir al-Saba' and the extensive role of the Saba'awi in arms shipments and policing roles. One traditional assemblage had long been centred around livestock, primarily camels and sheep, raised across the southern district and sold in the markets of Gaza, Majdal, Falluja, Burayer, Asdud and Hebron. From Gaza, livestock were moved onward to Egypt, Yafa and Jerusalem. Livestock merchants from beyond the Jordan linked into this expanding trade, enhancing the Bir al-Saba' market's centrality with their sheep and wool.[42] Hebron increasingly served as a central market and shopping centre for Bedouin from the south and east, with Naqab commodities brought in for sale.[43] Bedouin-owned clothing and sewing shops in Bir al-Saba', Gaza and Burayer helped make southern Palestine famous;[44] others traded or dyed the wool and performed the weaving.[45] 'Abayes were sold in Gaza, Falluja, Burayer and beyond',[46] a trade subsequently scaled-up by the al-Shurafa family who established a number of shops in Gaza and Bir al-Saba';

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[38]E. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850–1921* (Cambridge, 2002).

[39]J.L. Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land* (London, 1822), 415.

[40]Rogan, *Frontiers of the State*.

[41]Amara, 'The Ottoman Tanzimat'.

[42]Ben-David and Kressel, 'The Bedouin market', 3–27.

[43]J. Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem 1872–1908* (Leiden, 2011).

[44]Interview with Hajj abu 'Ammer al-Sana, Lakiya, 2019.

[45]E. Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine, and in the Adjacent Regions. A Journal of Travels in the Year 1838*, vols. I and II (Boston, MA, 1874).

[46]Interview with Hajj Khalid al-Tetti, al-Fawar refugee camp, Hebron, 2021.

'some of them were for traditional men and women clothing'.[47] Sheep manure and furs were traded in the Bir al-Saba' market while milk products went to the Falluja market.[48]

By the 1870s, Saba'awi producers were taking advantage of new market options for their agricultural crops by increasing production and expanding the infrastructures which facilitated wadi and field cultivation.[49] Primarily grain (wheat and barley) from fields scattered across the Naqab east of Gaza and the south Hebron Hills were sold in Gaza's markets or for export across the Mediterranean.[50] Bedouin exported much of their barley to supply Britain's beer industry, valued in 1906 at $600,000, greater than the trade in Yafa oranges.[51] British archives confirm the importance of this trade: 'The barley produced in the Southern District of Palestine is of excellent quality…[and] almost entirely depends on the early spring rains of March and April…in the year 1908, 38,000 tons were actually exported… and the prices paid in 1908–1909 were 24/9 to 25/9, and even 26/ per quarter.'[52]

Other cash crops, including tobacco, were cultivated north-east of Bir al-Saba',[53] with Saba'awi producers responding to increased demand for medium-quality (*baladi*) tobacco in the Cairo markets. Exports increased after 1900 as cigarette production in Cairo, Hebron and Jerusalem expanded.[54] One local Bedouin narrated: 'we grew fields of tobacco in our land, as many other families did, and we used to sell it in the market in Bir al-Saba', Gaza and Falluja, despite the British and Ottoman restrictions on marketing tobacco'.[55] Bedouin supplied *qilw* (ṣābūn Nābulsi) both to the soap-making industries of Hebron, Yafa and Gaza and to the glass industry of Hebron.[56]

Date palm groves at Deir al-Balah and Gaza anchored the coastal economy. Majdal's people cultivated date palms and other cash crops, including figs, apricots, almonds, lemons, olives, oranges, grapes, mulberries, cotton and the famous scallion (named after Asqalan).[57] Dried grapes from east of the Jordan, produced by the Refaya and Saoudye tribes south-west of Shoubak, were sold in the markets of Gaza and the Naqab.[58] Ma'an markets during the Hajj depended on crops imported from Gaza and Hebron.[59] Charcoal was produced for the Cairo market,[60] and the herb *baytheran* was collected and sold at Gaza and Hebron. The expanding sugar industry was crucial in deepening economic relations between Gaza and Bir al-Saba', with merchants responding to new opportunities by facilitating its regional

[47]Interview with Hajj Nabil al-Shurafa, Bir al-Saba', 2019.

[48]Interview with Ahmad abu 'Awadd, Amman, 2021.

[49]Meraiot, Meir and Rosen, 'Scale, landscape and indigenous Bedouin land use'.

[50]Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine*, vols. I and II.

[51]R. Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914* (London, 1993).

[52]The National Archives, UK (TNA), CO 733/44.

[53]C.R. Conder and H.H. Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine*, vol. III: *Judaea* (London, 1883).

[54]R. Shechter, *Smoking, Culture and Economy in the Middle East* (London, 2006).

[55]Interview with Hajj Ahmad Abu Hamid, Kseifa, 2018.

[56]G. Krämer, *A History of Palestine* (Princeton, 2011).

[57]Conder and Kitchener, *The Survey of Western Palestine*, vol. III.

[58]Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*.

[59]E.J. Van der Steen, *Near Eastern Tribal Societies during the Nineteenth Century* (Sheffield, 2013).

[60]Burckhardt, *Travels in Syria and the Holy Land*.

distribution.[61] Gaza and Yafa were key centres for olive oil soap production, while the village of Simsim, with its sesame production, was regionally famous. Such aggregation and network facilitation linked the Saba'awi into wider regional and global circuits of exchange.

Saba'awi investment in diversifying agriculture increased, expanding output and boosting sales.[62] Gaza and Yafa served southern Palestine as ports for expanding export and import trade; the British, Greeks and Italians recognized the region's trade potential by appointing consular agents to Gaza.[63] Exports in 1905 filled 25 ships, plus many sailboats, with 'barley, durra [Egyptian wheat], colocynths, sesame, dates, fruits, poultry, wool, skins and hides'.[64] By 1914, however, traffic via Gaza had fallen far behind that of the booming port of Yafa. Yet agricultural and handicraft inter-relationships continued to expand, being fed by and contributing to a population boom across southern cities, increased urbanization in response to Palestinian investment, new construction, industrialization and agricultural expansion. Ruptures such as the outbreak of World War I transformed many trans-local assemblages, however: Bir al-Saba's barley exports were suspended and recovered under the British Mandate.

Knowledge production and service provision

Knowledge assemblages of expanding educational, training and service agglomeration and facilitation further intensified both the 'town-ness' and 'city-ness' of Bir al-Saba'. During the late Ottoman period, schools became more widely accessible across southern Palestine, partly driven by expanding state provision, but primarily by the desire of the Saba'awi middle class. Education was highly valued, such that Bedouin donated money to set up their own schools for their tribes.[65] Two junior high schools al-Madrasa al-Ameriya (Bir al-Saba' al-Ameriya) were opened in Bir al-Saba' in 1904 (one for boys and another for girls), providing accommodation, health services and libraries. Students enrolled in the schools from the local tribes and families from Gaza, Bir al-Saba', Hebron and nearby villages. An agricultural school and an industrial school were also established;[66] by 1913, the new agricultural school already hosted 30 Bedouin students.[67]

Bedouin parents actively sought educational possibilities beyond southern Palestine as well. An early option for some was the Imperial School for Tribes (*Aserit Mektebi*) established in Istanbul in 1892 with some students receiving grants and travel money from the Ministry of Interior. Some Saba'awi students were employed in Istanbul and stayed there for many years.[68] Students from Bir

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[61]*Falastin*, 19 Sep. 1942.

[62]C. Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent 1800–1914* (Oxford, 1988).

[63]D. Halvey, 'Gaza's happy hour? When Late Ottoman Palestine met the Victorian drinking culture', 2018, https://seeingthewoods.org/2018/06/08/the-taproom-dotan-halevy/?fbclid=IwAR1t98JnkOKm4HOX1zqJe69D6BdS7ZckuxisXtvgNRihS25nqpnBB18A-l0, accessed 21 Mar. 2022.

[64]M.A. Meyer, *History of the City of Gaza*, Columbia University Oriental Studies, V (New York, 1907), 107.

[65]*Falastin*, 6 Jun. 1913.

[66]*Musavver Çöl*, 1 Feb. 1917.

[67]TNA, FO 195/2287.

[68]*Musavver Çöl*, 15 Feb. 1917; Başbakanlik Ottoman Archives (BOA), MF.MKT: 967/66, and 663/41.

al-Saba' also ended up in high schools in Safad, Jerusalem, Beisan, Yafa and Bethlehem.[69] Others attended religious studies courses in Cairo at Al-Azhar.[70] The American University of Beirut and Damascus University both received students from Bir al-Saba' after World War I; others attended the Arab College in Jerusalem, a branch of the University of London.[71]

High schools did not exist in Bir al-Saba', but Gaza offered opportunities for boys and girls, attracting students from villages and Bir al-Saba'.[72] Bir al-Saba's junior high school continued under the Mandate with around 340 students. Colonial Office documents demonstrate that improving training and educational facilities for their children was of utmost importance to Bedouin, who pressed the British for increased provision. The British continued to grant free education since 'the precedent of granting free education in certain circumstances was established in Ottoman times'.[73] The community generated substantial funds to enhance local education, but the government failed, as noted in a 1932 report, to commit sufficient resources to expand the system.[74]

Some British officials tried to do more. Lord Oxford, assistant district commissioner of Bir al-Saba' from 1943 to 1945, founded three Bedouin schools in the district, assisted Bedouin to improve local education facilities and facilitated students travelling to Gaza and Yafa for further education.[75] Lord Oxford, when interviewed in September 2009, stressed that the Bedouin were very eager to educate their children but that their economic situation did not allow them to enrol all their children in higher education.[76] Bedouin who had strong relations with British officials would solicit help in obtaining advanced opportunities abroad, for example, to send their sons to study at Oxford or Cambridge.

The education system was transformed by the introduction of teachers from Hebron, Jerusalem, Gaza, Falluja, Yafa and Egypt, facilitating transactions with local teachers, who were Bedouin from various tribes;[77] some of these trained in Yafa.[78] Al-Madrasa al-Ameriya for girls in Bir al-Saba' included 150 female students and was run by principals who came from the American University of Beirut, Qalqilya or Bethlehem.[79] A few of the girls who graduated finished their higher education in Istanbul and Cairo.[80]

Traditional judicial and conflict-resolution services also knitted this urban world together through circuits of trust and governance. The role of tribal courts and elders conducting *sulha* to resolve conflict interlinked communities across the Sinai, the Naqab, Transjordan, Hebron and Gaza. *The Illustrated London News*

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[69]Interview with Wassil Abu Jaber (Jubarat), al-Biqa'a refugee camp, Jordan, 2019.

[70]*Al-Difa'*, 21 Mar. 1935.

[71]Interview with Frieh abu Sa'yleek, Jordan, 2021.

[72]*Huna al-Quds*, 22 Dec. 1940.

[73]TNA, CO 733/225/5.

[74]TNA, CO 733/220/5.

[75]The Gaza and Bir al-Saba' personal diaries of Julian Edward George KCMG (1964), 2nd earl of Oxford & Asquith (Lord Oxford), Frome, Somerset, UK (LO Private Papers).

[76]Interview with Lord Oxford (Julian Asquith), Frome, Somerset, UK, Sep. 2009.

[77]*Falastin*, 30 Jun. 1934.

[78]Interview with Hajj Ismael al-'Amor, 2018.

[79]G. Bell, *Shadows on the Sand: The Memoirs of Sir Gawain Bell* (London, 1983).

[80]*Al-Difa'*, 27 Apr. 1934.

observed: 'in Beersheba [*sic*], every Tuesday, Bedouin from surrounding districts gather to settle disputes…There are fifteen judges – shaikhs – of local tribes' dealing with taxation, land and family disputes.[81] As narrated by one Bedouin judge, 'sometimes the judges were accompanied by a British official and crossed the border to Transjordan and Sinai, meeting in tribal conferences for dealing with land and blood disputes'.[82] *The Times* reported that 'an international Arab conference, with representatives from Palestine, Sinai, and Transjordan had been fixed to take place at Beersheba [*sic*]. Leading tribes from Beersheba, Sinai and Transjordan, accompanied by British officials, attended the conference.'[83] Political boundaries rarely mattered during the period under review, with shaikhs of extraordinary reputation called upon to provide *sulha* and adjudicate for other tribes wherever requested; such relations connected the tribes and families of the Naqab and north Sinai with those in Gaza, Hebron and Bir al-Saba'.[84]

By the late nineteenth century, the dense multiscalar relations outlined above had transformed and stretched this urban space. Bir al-Saba' exhibited 'town-ness' with its market centrality, sense of place and its extensive watering facilities stabilized by communal governance. There was 'city-ness' derived from its nodal position in cross-cutting transport and trade routes connecting Majdal with Karak, Hebron with Gaza. Despite evidencing few buildings or traditional urbanization indicators, Bir al-Saba' was both a material and ideational assemblage of affect and meaning, where tribes, merchants, judges and agricultural producers co-produced its spatial geography. A Saba'awi urban 'way of life' that was innovative and self-reflective, assembled through contracts and finance, indigenous knowledge, complex security partnerships and layered trust networks helped materialize an urban political economy in southern Palestine.

Territorial shadows and cosmopolitanism

Distant states increasingly intruded into this southern Palestine complexity, seeking to impose their territorial logic and imaginaries of social control, economic practices, regulatory frameworks and modernized urbanism: a 'territorial shadow' haunting and reshaping this urban world.[85] Within this shifting arena, the Saba'awi continued to work in and through the new assemblages which emerged, contributing to the emergence of a more cosmopolitan urban world.

Imperial urbanization

Starting in the 1850s, a series of Ottoman municipal and territorial administrative reforms and new organizational principles, drawn from a modernist rationality, were introduced across the empire, including the land codes of 1856, the 1864 Provincial Law and the 1877 Municipal Law. A few years later, the Ottomans

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[81]*The Illustrated London News*, 9 Jul. 1938.

[82]Interview with Shaikh Wassil abu Jaber (Jubarat), al-Baqa'a refugee camp, Jordan, 2021.

[83]*Times*, 4 Jul. 1930.

[84]M. Nasasra, 'Ruling the desert: Ottoman and British policies towards the Bedouin of the Naqab and Transjordan Region, 1900–1948', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (2015), 261–83.

[85]Taylor, *Advanced Introduction to Cities*.

intensified efforts to encourage economic growth and stabilize their regional control by establishing two new administrative nodes – Karak in 1893 and Bir al-Saba' in 1901. The goal of such socioregulatory reconfiguration was to territorialize and spatially bind the 'informal' networks and practices of the inhabitants, transforming this urban world into a modern formal administrative/security city, province and extraction zone.

Negotiations with local notables were central to this reform process and local elites were usually willing participants in crafting this emerging hybrid imperial urbanism. Bir al-Saba' was attractive to the empire for its existing community governance, nodal significance, water and route infrastructures and 'placeness', making it an appropriate site in and through which to articulate 'circulations at the heart of institutional constructions'.[86] In June 1899, the sub-district named for Bir al-Saba' was established as a separate *kaza*, detaching it from the Gaza sub-district and from direct governance from Jerusalem.[87] Jerusalem architects Said and Raghib Bey al-Nashashibi designed its grid system, making Bir al-Saba' the first 'planned city' in Palestine.[88] In quick succession, a government office, school, state bank, a local newspaper, grid-planned roads, water tunnels, a telegraph line, a mosque, a mill, a park and gardens emerged due to a variety of public–private partnerships.[89]

Fundamental to the imperial project was the belief that urbanization required the sedentarization of those considered 'outside' the urban: thus, the Bedouin tribes moving between Sinai and Transjordan had to be bound and 'pushed' towards a modern 'way of life'.[90] Families from the district were encouraged to buy land and build houses in the town, with the government allocating one dunum for those who built according to government regulations; site preference was sometimes given to serving government or army officials. People who moved to town received subsidies and a reduction in taxes; according to Ottoman records, most of the tracts of land were registered by local Bedouin, merchants and government officials.[91] In exchange for land in Bir al-Saba' or in the new villages around it, the government asked recipients to send one fifth of their agricultural production to the government.[92] The government also encouraged people to invest in agriculture by providing loans from the Zira'at Bank (agricultural bank) in Jerusalem.[93] The government planned and facilitated the emergence of other villages and towns in the district, namely 'Asluj and 'Auja al-Hafir, as well as rail-stations, mosques,

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[86] N. Lafi, 'Mediterranean connections: the circulation of municipal knowledge and practices at the time of the Ottoman reforms, c. 1830–1910', in P. Saunier and S. Ewen (eds.), *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850–2000* (New York, 2008), 135–50; N. Lafi, 'Ottoman globalization and its regimes of historicity', in Boissière and Morvan, *Un Moyen-Orient ordinaire*, 28–52.

[87] TNA, FO 195/2106.

[88] S. Tamari, *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (Oakland, 2017).

[89] E.F. Bahadir, 'An attempt to establish a city: Beersheba Town (1900–1917)', Fatih Sultan Mehmet Waqif University Ph.D. thesis, 2018.

[90] M. Nasasra, 'The frontiers of empire: colonial policing in southern Palestine, Sinai, Transjordan and Saudi Arabia', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 49 (2021), 899–939.

[91] BOA, DH.MUI:11/5.

[92] *Musavver Çöl*, 30 Dec. 1916.

[93] BOA, DH.ID/44/18.

markets and houses.[94] Such practices contributed to fixing Bir al-Saba' as a geography of spatial value, but the buzz and scale of urban vitality it developed as a place was its own.

The new administrative centre was built on 2,000 dunums purchased from the 'Azazma leader, Shaikh Hassan al-Malta'.[95] Following completion of the Konak-Saraya, 'people flocked to [it] to register themselves and settle around it. They requested that a mosque be built alongside it as an imperial gift and that all the buildings should bear the name of the August Personage.'[96] The mosque was built on waqf land donated by the Bedouin of Bir al-Saba',[97] while the tribes collected donations from their people to carpet the mosque.[98] Significantly, the Saba'awi drove the town's expansion: a journalist arriving in 1916 reported with awe on the resulting boomtown: 'most houses are newly built, and there are organized named streets, Ottoman hamams, public gardens, running electricity, factories, mills, government and military buildings, hospitals, newspaper and print, cinema, orange orchards and a light train/tram…Many houses were purchased and built by local Bedouin and Gazans from different places and backgrounds' (see Figure 2).[99]

Traditional tribal and Sharia' courts transitioned towards a formal official role and then continued to provide legal and regulatory governance throughout the period of British rule. Papers of the Sharia' court in Bir al-Saba' demonstrate the dense connectedness of this urban world through the cases they cite, which originated from across southern Palestine. The Qadi of Bir al-Saba' was from Jerusalem, and dealt with marriage and divorce matters arising from across the region, as well as from Istanbul, since there were marriages of locals with Turkish residents in the city. The records also show many marriages between Saba'awi tribes and Jerusalemites.[100] Juridical governance also required ad hoc committees be constituted for the adjudication of land disputes among tribes.[101]

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, there had been little Ottoman intervention to 'improve' the transport or communication infrastructures of southern Palestine, leaving provision to the private sector. After 1901, however, the state committed some funds, while encouraging further private initiatives to improve inter-city transport. By 1895, there were sailboats on the Dead Sea connecting Karak to Hebron and serving tourists; by 1910, there was a road from Jerusalem through Hebron to Gaza; and in 1913, the *mutasarif* of Jerusalem committed to linking the city to the rest of Palestine (see Figure 3).[102] An imaginary of inter-city roads leading out of the city towards Gaza, Burayer and Khan Younis, of telegraph

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[94]*Musavver Çöl*, 30 Dec. 1916.

[95]BOA, DH.MKT/2549/141.

[96]S. Deringil, 'They live in a state of nomadism and savagery: the late Ottoman Empire and the post-colonial debate', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45 (2003), 311–42, at 334.

[97]*Falastin*, 20 Apr. 1913.

[98]BOA, DH.TMIK.S/32/51.

[99]*Musavver Çöl*, 15 Feb. 1916.

[100]BOA, HR.UHM: 208/40/14.

[101]BOA, DH.TMIK.M/245/15.

[102]*Falastin*, 6 Jun. 1913.

Figure 2. Bir al-Saba' during the Ottoman rule. Library of Congress, American Colony (Jerusalem), Photo Department, 1914–17.
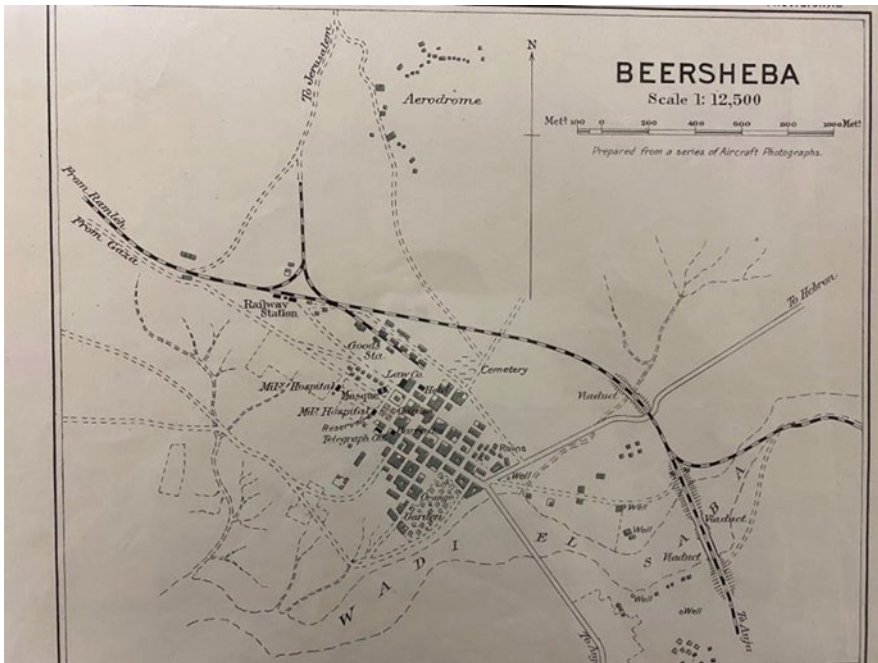

Figure 3. Map of Bir al-Saba', showing its links to 'Auja al-Hafir, Gaza and Hebron. TNA, WO 303/500.

and post offices and a monumental railway station was expressed; Saba'awi then helped actually create and exploit this vision.

The Ottomans promoted two megaprojects for the empire, the telegraph and the railroad, which enhanced existing regional connectivity and density. The telegraph came to Yafa in 1864, linking the port via Beirut to Istanbul and Jerusalem. Gaza connected in 1872; Majdal in 1899; Hebron in 1901; Bir al-Saba' and 'Auja al-Hafir linked into Gaza and the police post network in 1905; and Khan Yunis was connected in 1909.[103] Aqaba was included in the new Transjordan telegraph via Ma'an, Tafila and Karak by 1901.[104] The concurrent Egyptian/British expansion of the Egyptian telegraph system and the new Ottoman Damascus/Mecca telegraph route provided Saba'awi with opportunities for partnerships with, and salaries from, such infrastructures.[105]

The first railroads in southern Palestine were those built during World War I, such as the Ottoman line to Bir al-Saba' and onwards to 'Auja al-Hafir; and the British line connecting Deir al-Balah, and later Lydda, with al-Kantara. Geostrategic considerations meant the Ottomans repurposed and scaled-up Bir al-Saba' into a fortified security city, making it a staging camp for 20,000 troops. A military airbase was constructed, German water engineers and pumps were imported, a printing press and newspaper were established, the road to Hebron asphalted, bridges were built and intelligence personnel deployed.[106] Bir al-Saba' became a regional military-urban nexus of governmental and private investments, amplified army bases and infrastructural development including a defensive wall/trench system stretching west to Gaza, with local Bedouin serving the British and Ottomans armies. The city was captured by Edmund Allenby's troops on 1 November 1917 with its wells intact and significant stores of corn, water, train carriages and artillery.

The British occupation

The British conquest of Bir al-Saba' is so dominant an historical feature that it is easy to overlook the continuity of local relations and agency following this event. The British regime brought its own colonial imaginaries and practices of urbanism into this captured urban world, with British newspapers triumphantly lauding their 'rescue' of the city as 'an all-important initial step in the series of victories which have planted the British flag on Jerusalem'.[107] Bir al-Saba's status as the Naqab (gate) to Palestine was reaffirmed when the British incorporated its network centrality and relational governing arrangements into their own administration: local notables were treated as intermediaries and tribal members were recruited into the Palestine police – Bedouin Camelry-Hajjana' – who used them as Special Police to patrol the new police stations and the spaces between them.[108]

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[103]F. Al-Salim, *Palestine and the Decline of the Ottoman Empire* (London, 2015).

[104]Rogan, *Frontiers of the State*.

[105]M. Minawi, 'Beyond rhetoric: reassessing Bedouin–Ottoman relations along the route of the Hijaz telegraph line at the end of the nineteenth century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 58 (2015), 75–104.

[106]Tamari, *The Great War*.

[107]*The Illustrated London News*, 15 Dec. 1917.

[108]Nasasra, 'The frontiers of empire'.

The British imagined the future sociotechnical development of southern Palestine through the lens of a wider colonial spatial geography. They envisioned 'a road connection between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Mediterranean [that] would prove an invaluable alternative to the Suez Canal for the transport of mail, goods and passengers'.[109] Saba'awi were employed in helping to build infrastructures and roads financed by the British,[110] but this colonial development project failed to materialize and the British bungled the upgrading and maintenance of existing inter-urban infrastructures. Private companies, however, did offer inter-urban car or bus services, despite the poor road conditions. Road construction between Gaza and Bir al-Saba' only started in 1936, and was not entirely asphalted; the Khan Yunis–Gaza–Majdal–Yafa Road remained unfinished, leading local business and governing elites to continually complain about bias and the government's unproductive promises for regional economic development.[111] The British also dreamed of linking Palestine, Transjordan and Sinai into a connected colonial rail system.[112] Bir al-Saba' was soon reconnected with the railway infrastructure via a branch to the coastal line near Rafah allowing pilgrims to travel to Mecca by train.[113] Saba'awi found employment on the Palestine Railways and participated in union-organizing to build the Palestinian Arab labour movement.

This urban world was also scaled up through interconnected service facilities. Tertiary health provision was available before 1914 from the Scottish Mission hospital in Hebron while Gaza had both a municipal and an English hospital.[114] Bir al-Saba' had a military hospital during Ottoman rule that recruited Arab doctors and local nurses[115] and doctors were employed in Bir al-Saba' by the municipality.[116] During the Mandate, Bir al-Saba' possessed a small hospital, an outpatient clinic and medical services for children.[117] Bedouin regularly visited Gaza for medical services: 'I remember visiting Ma'madani Hospital and staying there for a few days as part of medical treatment',[118] while Saba'awi also sought treatment in Hebron or Jerusalem.[119]

Corporate banking services became available in southern Palestine in the early 1900s, complementing the credit and loans provided by local *sarrafs*. In 1888. the Ottoman Agricultural Bank (OAB) began offering low-interest loans to farmers hoping to increase production; by 1910, OAB had offices in Gaza and Hebron. The Deutsche Palestina Bank had branches in Gaza and Hebron before 1914, while the

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[109]TNA, FO 371/20885.

[110]C. Parizot, 'Gaza, Beershebe, Dhahriyya: another approach to the Negev Bedouins in the Israeli–Palestinian Space', *Bulletin du Centre de recherche français à Jérusalem*, 9 (2001).

[111]I. Feldman, *Governing Gaza* (Durham, NC, 2008).

[112]TNA, AIR 20/612.

[113]*Falastin*, 5 Nov. 1942.

[114]K. Baedeker, *Palestine and Syria: Handbook for Travellers*, 5th edn (London, 1912; facsimile edn, New York, 1985).

[115]*Musavver Çöl*, 24 Oct. 1916.

[116]BOA, DH.SFR.391/92.

[117]TNA, CO 733/344/4.

[118]Interview with Amneh al-Sanjar, Wadi Shlala, 2019.

[119]Interview with Hajj Ali al-Nasasrah, Rahat, 2019.

Zionist Anglo-Palestine Bank opened branches in Hebron in 1907 and in Gaza in 1914, both branches closing by 1930.[120] During the Mandate, other British and European banks proliferated.[121]

Assembling and transitions

This urban world of southern Palestine was a vibrant space of deep relationality in the century after the Egyptian withdrawal, in constant ferment and transition. The Saba'awi, in and through their relating, contributed to both the physical re-embodiment of Bir al-Saba' and to the world-making of southern Palestine during the next 100 years.

Scaling up Bir al-Saba'

The research presented above suggests that modifications facilitated by the Ottomans and British were amplified by Saba'awi relationship-making as they invested labour, social and financial capital, generating both increased 'town-ness' (dense strong ties and agglomeration) and 'city-ness' (extensive connectedness and reach) in and through the boomtown that was Bir al-Saba' after 1901. By 1914, there were 1,000 inhabitants, 200 houses and 50 shops; and by 1935, the population had increased to approximately 3,500 people.[122] Gazan families (such as al-Shurafa and Shaa'th), including Christian families such as al-Tarazi and Sabba, moved to Bir al-Saba' and purchased houses.[123] Families from central Palestine migrated there, while merchants and government workers also relocated. Leading Bedouin shaikhs bought properties and built homes, mixing tribes within its urban spaces.[124] The city was run by a Bedouin mayor who held the title 'shaikh al-'urban', while various tribal and village representatives served as councillors.[125] Government officials came from Gaza, Hebron, Nablus, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and from among the Bedouin as part of an Ottoman commitment to diversification of the civil service.[126]

This surge of development in Bir al-Saba' and surrounding villages such as Burayer and Falluja created a buzz: 'Gazans and Hebronite merchants invested in Bir al-Saba' and the villages in the Naqab by buying land from the Bedouin and cultivating it with modern equipment, which led to economic prosperity in the district' said one interviewee. Local investment was crucial to economic growth: 'Gazan merchants and wealthy Bedouin families built flour mills in Bir al-Saba'

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[120]S. Mitter, 'A history of money in Palestine: from the 1900s to the present', Harvard University Ph.D. thesis, 2014, https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/12269876/Mitter_gsas.harvard_0084L_11308.pdf?sequence=4, accessed 27 Mar. 2022.

[121]A. Amara, 'Beyond stereotypes of Bedouins as "nomads" and "savages": rethinking the Bedouin in Ottoman southern Palestine, 1875–1900', *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 15 (2016), 59–77.

[122]A. Abu Rabia, *A Bedouin Century: Education and Development among the Negev Tribes in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2001).

[123]Interview with al-Nabil al-Shurafa, Bir al-Saba', 2019.

[124]Interview with Hajj Mosa Abu 'Ayesh, Lakiya, 2017.

[125]BOA, DH.TMIK.S/80/28.

[126]Lafi, 'Ottoman globalization'.

Figure 4. The flour mill of the village of Tal al-Milh (al-Malah) during the British rule in Palestine. Image by the author, 2022.

and other Bedouin villages like Tal al-Milh and 'Ara'ara' (see Figure 4).[127] Saba'awi agency deepened regional economic ties through their purchasing and productive power 'in the markets of Hebron, Gaza and Bir al-Saba".[128]

Such practices contributed to the viability of the emerging cosmopolitan mosaic which embraced Gazans, Bedouins, Hebronites, Jerusalemites, Nabulsis and those from hundreds of urban and agricultural communities. This thick, heterogeneous space of metropolitanism and alterity 'attracted Gazan and Hebronites merchants, Bedouin families, Jerusalemite officials, villagers and even medical doctors and nurses, signifying its economic centrality'.[129]

Regional connectivity intensified (and with it a growing sense of 'Palestinian' identity) through the entanglement of social relations: joint financial risk-taking and inter-marriages linked Bir al-Saba' into communities across the district.[130] Interviewees remember 'hundreds of marriages between the communities of Gaza, Bir al-Saba' and Hebron. My uncle was Jerusalemite, but was married to a Bedouin from one of the tribes of Bir al-Saba". Bedouin from Bir al-Saba' also married women from Gaza and Hebron.[131] Local tribal members purchased houses in Gaza, as a result of marriage with Gazans or sometimes having families or cousins

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[127]Interview with Shaikh Mohammad Ben Hassan Abu Rabia, Tal al-Milh, 2018.
[128]Interview with Hajj Abu Jodeh, Tal 'Arad, 2021.
[129]Interview with Abu Haidar- Ali Glibo, Jerusalem, 2022.
[130]*Falastin*, 19 Sep. 1942.
[131]Interview with Abu Haidar- Ali Glibo, Jerusalem, 2022.

there.[132] The records of the Sharia' court in Bir al-Saba' confirm such increased sociability.[133] This strengthened socioeconomic relationships between different components of society and opened avenues of education, cementing 'daily interactions among different parts of the Palestinian community'.[134] Bedouin women recall that Gazan women married to Bedouin men had a collective impact on production since they brought their skills of sewing for the wool industry into Bir al-Saba'.[135] Bir al-Saba's emerging cosmopolitanism reflected similar mobility, agglomeration and facilitation processes happening across the whole southern landscape: Gaza, Hebron and Bir al-Saba' were the result of people from places near and far 'doing' the assembling of these spaces, remaking this shared urban world.

Mechanisms of assembling

Two particular mechanisms of assembling emerge from the vignettes gathered in this study. The first is that of an increasingly dynamic agglomeration, where socioeconomic relations were boosted and layered with existing on-going circuits, enhancing density, strengthening ties and increasing opportunities. As outlined above, social and labour capital combined with an increase in financing and investment – and the circulation of knowledge – to expand place-based productivity, craft new contracts, build trust networks and compound services. New clusters of small- and medium-sized enterprises, educational opportunities, specialist services, particularly in and through Bir al-Saba', built upon Ottoman reforms with sociotechnical infrastructures reworked through Saba'awi agglomeration. This contributed to Bir al-Saba's accelerated 'town-ness' and intensification, particularly after 1901 and then again after 1917.

Crucially, a related mechanism was central to the success of the first: the facilitation of connectedness across this regional city-system. Saba'awi modified the urban tissue by diffusing innovation, bridging gaps between communities, facilitating circulation among sites, combining extended social relations with economic partnerships. As brokers and facilitators, they worked a range of strong and weak ties to enmesh others in projects, taking chances to establish something new across the region. These two mechanisms in combination scaled-up Bir al-Saba's strategic placeness and helped re-world southern Palestine.

Moments of transition

Urban worlds are always-becoming, transitioning in unexpected ways. Three somewhat different episodes of urban vitality and expansion of Bir al-Saba' (1840–99, 1901–14 and 1918–36) and one of containment (1914–17) emerge from this study. Prior to 1901, this urban world was already multilayered and multiscalar, with Bir al-Saba' evidencing placeness and a degree of town-ness as well as city-ness.

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[132]Interview with al-Hajj Hassan al-Sana', Lakiya, 2016.
[133]BOA, MR. UHM: 208/30/14.
[134]Interview with Hajj Ismael al-Tori 2019, Rahat.
[135]Interview with Hajja Sarah Abu 'Assa, Tel al-Saba', 2018.

A hybrid imperial/Saba'awi urbanism, more expansive and generative, emerged after 1901, co-produced by Istanbul's dreams and actions of modernity interwoven with Saba'awi agency and expanding socioeconomic circuits.[136] Urban population growth across southern Palestine, new governance institutions, technological infrastructures, mobilization of new private and public resources, enhanced diversity and heterogeneity all served as crucial multipliers of Bir al-Saba's placeness within an accelerating urban world. One episode of confined intensification (1914–17), dominated by security mechanisms of social control and guardian power, followed. Bir al-Saba' was quickly repurposed as an enhanced guardian post and garrison base, its city-ness curtailed while its sociospatial intensity/town-ness was heightened to serve military necessity.

After the 1917 transition, *British colonial urbanism* cast a somewhat different shadow over a resurgent everyday life. Bir al-Saba's role as a central site could not be denied and so colonial governance reaffirmed the city's administrative and policing role. The city's town-ness and city-ness continued to evolve, due more to local initiatives of production, facilitation and infrastructural accumulation than to British agency. British commitments to reshaping the wider Palestinian political economy and securitizing the Mandate meant little attention was paid to southern Palestine and few resources were expended, allowing space for Saba'awi initiative and subversion. Ironically, Bir al-Saba' and the southern Palestinian urban assemblage, increasingly constrained in its traditional circuits to Transjordan and the Sinai, began to reorient their material and ideational relations more closely into an emerging 'Palestinian urban world', launching a shift in political identity and spatial imaginaries which would prove significant during the city's subsequent moments of urban transition (1935, 1948).[137]

Conclusion

This review of the always-becoming of Bir al-Saba' between 1840 and 1936 suggests four reconsiderations of connected urban history. The first is to acknowledge that the Saba'awi, relegated by many as 'outside' the urban history of southern Palestine, were actually formidable world-makers, linking, facilitating, bridging and agglomerating in ways which significantly co-produced Bir al-Saba' in and through this urban world. Over and over, interviewees and the archival data affirm this fundamental relational assembling, 'creating conditions' of urbanism in surprising ways.[138] The extraordinary growth of Bir al-Saba' as a node of socioeconomic value, crucial to the emergence of cosmopolitanism across southern Palestine, can only be understood if the Saba'awi are 'brought back inside' a narrative of transition. For students of connected urban history, listening to the world-making stories of those 'who dwell and inhabit' uneven spatial geographies illuminates the continual (re)stitching practices of enmeshing, bridging and brokering which assemble such worlds.[139]

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[136]Lafi, 'Ottoman globalization'.
[137]Parizot, 'Gaza, Beershebe, Dhahriyya'.
[138]A. Simone, *Improvised Lives* (Cambridge, 2019).
[139]Durose *et al.*, 'Working the urban assemblage'.

Secondly, the study reaffirms the centrality of spatial imaginaries of interconnected urban space to the emergence, stabilization and transformation of urban worlds.[140] Consistently, interviewees referenced what Edward W. Soja called 'interpretive grids through which we think about, experience, evaluate and decide to act in the places, spaces and communities in which we live'.[141] This location-specific awareness of space provided the context for the improvisation through which Gaza merchants, south Hebron Hills farmers, Majdalawyi merchants, Bedouin and urban migrants together produced or transported goods, provided services, invested in new homes or sought educational opportunities. Within this spatial imaginary, Bir al-Saba' was enfolded with Majdal, Isdud, Burayer, Falluja, Beit Jibrin, Rafah, Hebron, Aqaba, Kerak and the complex communities in-between; these 'places' were not 'far away' or elsewhere, but 'inside': reachable, proximate and very much present.

A third reconsideration arises from the on-going contentious politics of space generated through the everyday interaction of Saba'awi with practices of bounding and territorialization pursued by imperial and colonial urbanism. The Ottoman push to establish formal authority over the places and connections of southern Palestine carried over into the British colonial project. In both interventions, the people of the land responded by working around, in and through these territorializing sovereigntist projects, significantly transforming them through participation in and contestation around 'the right to the city' and access to political power. The emergence of a cosmopolitan Bir al-Saba', focused more on its northern circuits in the aftermath of the amputation of the Sinai and Transjordan from the spatial imaginary of 'the Naqab', suggests that a reconsideration of the timing and contributions of 'Southerners' to the Palestinian 'national awakening' and the construction of an integrated Palestinian urban world are in order.

Our findings also suggest that investigation of post-1936 episodes of sovereigntist intervention into the spatial geography of the Naqab and Bir al-Saba' might generate critical insights. The circuits knitting the Saba'awi together into an integrated community on the land may well prove more resilient and subversive in the face of subsequent disasters, sovereigntist boundary reterritorialization and urbicide than they first appear. It is already clear that the robust connectivity of 1936 meant that, following subsequent moments of transition, 'the circulation of people, goods and representations…(and) cross-border ties…(did) indeed reconstitute networks that existed before 1948' and would likely continue as a contra-sovereigntist practice into the future.[142]

In summary, Bir al-Saba's situated story suggests that the urban history of ordinary cities, especially those that slip in and out of history, may be narrated more fully in its complexity when viewed through a relational lens across a longer spatiotemporal frame. Efforts to capture moments of transition, ephemeral presence and spectral absence are enhanced through attention to the ever-changing mix of town-ness and city-ness crafted by those who inhabit and dwell as they flex relational space. Foregrounding practices of connecting and agglomeration, looking

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[140]A. Çinar and T. Bender (eds.), *Urban Imaginaries* (Minneapolis, 2007).
[141]E.W. Soja, *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford, 2000), 324.
[142]Parizot, 'Gaza, Beershebe, Dhahriyya', 110.

for emerging potentialities that reside beyond the state's reach and understanding, deepens insights into urban change.[143] Looking beyond modern global northern cities, their form and function and their particularized history allows the re-recognition that diverse urbanisms as a way of life emerge always and already during particular spatiotemporal conjunctures. The story of Bir al-Saba' reminds us to pay attention to the urban spatial imagination and ordinary practices of those who access, supply and make the urban – but may not live full time in densely populated neighbourhoods or in tall buildings. Many lives over the *longue durée* have been urban in ways that do not fit contemporary urban theory, drawing us to question the adequacy of our concepts, our fixation with an inside and an outside and to seek more rounded stories across urban history of always-becoming in and through assembled urban worlds.

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[143]E. Pieterse, *City Futures* (London, 2008).

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