

V - Beersheba Sub-District (Negeb)

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THE 'VILLAGE STATISTICS 1945' shows that the Beersheba sub-district covers a total area of 12,577,000 dunums — nearly half the total lands of Palestine — and classifies its ownership as follows:

Arabs (including 5 dunums appearing under 'Others')	1,936,380 or 15.39%
Jews	65,231 or 0.52%
Public	2,279 or 0.02%
Uncultivable land (ownership undefined)	10,573,110 or 84.07%

The area was never surveyed by either the Ottoman Government which occupied Palestine for over 400 years or by the British Mandatory during its thirty years of occupation. The only plans available of the area were those prepared by a British archaeological survey party before World War I. Hence there are no reliable records of land classification or registers of ownership except in and around the town of Beersheba.

The first estimate of the 'cultivable' lands of the area was put at 1,500,000 dunums which the Government Department of Surveys admitted was mere 'guesswork.' When Sir John Hope Simpson visited Palestine in 1930 to study the land situation, the estimate quoted to him was raised to 1,640,000 dunums. This figure remained in use and was eventually quoted in the 1943 edition of the 'Village Statistics.' The 1945 edition showed the area of 'cultivable' land as 2,000,000 dunums.

The land experts of the Jewish Agency challenged these figures on every occasion; and, in the opinion of this writer, rightly so.¹ For example, Mr. A. Granovsky, writing on behalf of the *Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael* (Jewish National Fund), criticized the figure of the Palestine Government of 1,640,000 dunums, and said: "What applies to the rest of the country also applies to the Beersheba sub-district: that the size of its cultivable area is not identical with that already cultivated. In that region, also, the areas brought under cultivation become more extensive every year. From the figures of the Agricultural Department of the Palestine Government, it appears that the cul-

(1) In 1944 this writer visited Beersheba and discussed with the district authorities the possibility of applying the Rural Property Tax Ordinance to the area. That year saw an abundance of rainfall with a corresponding increase in areas ploughed. On the basis of the schedules of production prepared for the Food Controller, the 'cultivated' area was then estimated to be closer to 4,000,000 dunums.