

# CHRISTIANIZATION, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON URBAN PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE IN BETH SHEAN (SCYTHOPOLIS), FROM THE FOURTH TO SIXTH CENTURY CE<sup>1</sup>

CLAUDIU STOIAN

**Keywords:** Beth Shean, fourth century CE, late Roman Empire, Byzantine Empire, public and cultic buildings, figural art.

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to present the relations between Beth Shean communities and the city itself, trying to see how people inside this city relate with the public buildings, with a special emphasis on the fourth century CE, the transition from the late Roman Empire to the new Byzantine Empire. We will explore, even briefly, the impact of the evolving of Christianity in this Hellenistic-Roman city at different levels: on public and cultic buildings and figural art.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Beth Shean, sec. IV p. Ch., Imperiul Roman târziu, Imperiul Bizantin, construcții de cult, construcții publice, artă figurativă.

**Rezumat:** Scopul acestui articol este prezentarea relațiilor dintre comunitățile Beth Shean și cetate, în încercarea de a arăta cum interacționau locuitorii din interiorul cetății cu clădirile publice, în special în sec. IV p. Ch., în perioada de tranziție de la Imperiul Roman târziu la Imperiul Bizantin. Articolul cuprinde o analiză succintă a impactului avut de creștinism în ascensiune asupra cetății elenistice romane cu referite la Imperiul Bizantin și de cult, ca și în ceea ce privește arta figurativă.

## A short history of Beth Shean

Beth Shean is situated near the junction of two important roads, one running via the Jezreel Valley from the coast (and from Egypt) to Syria and Mesopotamia, the other leading from Syria to Jerusalem along the Jordan Valley. It is located some 27 km S to the Sea of Galilee (Fig. 1). The fertility of the land and the abundance of water led the Jewish sages to say in Talmud, "If the Garden of Eden is in the land of Israel, then its gate is Beth Shean".<sup>2</sup> The ancient Tel Beth Shean was occupied from the Chalcolithic to the Islamic period. This mound was located above the junction of two streams, Nahal Harod and Nahal Amal, protected by steep slopes on northern, southern and eastern sides.

Beth Shean was founded as a Hellenistic city in the first half of the third century BC, probably under Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-245 BC). The city gained the status of *polis* perhaps a century after Seleucids. The name of this new city was Nysa - Scythopolis. The question of this unique name remains a mystery. In the Roman period the name Nysa was explained by a local tradition: Pliny<sup>3</sup> and Solinus say

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on our lecture delivered on December 2008 at W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research (AIAR), Jerusalem, and it represents our research as Andrew W. Mellon Research Fellow at AIAR between October-December 2008. With this occasion we should like to express our gratitude to AIAR for entitled us the Andrew W. Mellon Research Fellowship for the academic year 2008/2009.

<sup>2</sup> *Bibilonian Talmud, Erubim*, 19a.

<sup>3</sup> Pliny, *Natural History* 5:74.

that the city was founded by the god Dionysos, who buried his nurse Nysa here. The full name appears on the city's coins and in official inscription, but usually the city was called only Scythopolis.



Fig. 1. Map of Palestine in the fifth century CE with Scythopolis, capital of Palaestina Secunda.

The Hellenistic city suffered destruction by the Hasmoneans in the latter part of the second century BC (104 BC), but continued to exist.<sup>4</sup> Pompey's conquest of Judea in 64 BC opened a new era for Scythopolis, in a literal sense too, which continued till the end of the Byzantine period. From the time of Pompey, Scythopolis became part of the Decapolis, and it was the only city of the Decapolis on the west side of the Jordan River. The city returned to its Hellenic citizens, although a large Jewish minority continued to live in the city. During the early stages of the Jewish war against Rome in the year 66 CE according to Josephus many thousands of these Jews were massacred.<sup>5</sup> Later on, at the beginning of the fifth century CE (409 CE) Scythopolis was chosen as the capital of the new founded province Palaestina Secunda. This choice expressed official recognition of the position of Scythopolis as the most important city in northern Palestine. In the year 749 CE an earthquake destroyed the city. Beth Shean became a pile of ruins, and was rebuilt only as a small settlement.

<sup>4</sup> Evidence of the destruction in the form of ash layers in Hellenistic houses in the northern part of Tel Iztaba was recently uncovered in the excavations. See R. Bar Nathan and G. Mazar, *Beth Shean during the Hellenistic Period*, Qadmoniot 107-108, 1994, p. 87-92.1

<sup>5</sup> Flavius Josephus, *BJ*, 2:468.

The first excavations in Beth Shean were conducted by the University of Pennsylvania from 1921 to 1933 on Tel Beth Shean.<sup>6</sup> After small excavations in 1960, large scale excavations of the Roman city were conducted since 1986 by the Hebrew University (under the direction of Gideon Foerster and Yoram Tsafrir) and the Israel Antiquity Authority (under the supervision of Gabi Mazor and Rachel Bar-Nathan).<sup>7</sup>

### Town planning in the Roman Period

After Pompey's conquest, especially during the first century CE, a major change took place; the settlement which was situated previously on the Tel Beth Shean and on Tel Iztaba, during the Hellenistic period, now began to expand from the peak of the mounds to the valleys around it, mainly to the wide basin of Nahal Amal and the saddle between it and the deeper valley of Nahal Harod (Fig. 2). Tel Beth Shean became the acropolis of the larger Roman city; the public monuments and the civic centre were located in the Valley of Nahal Amal and on its margins. The residential areas of Roman Scythopolis were probably located on the slopes around the main valleys. The new conception of occupation reflected the atmosphere of security and confidence of the citizens under the Roman rule.



Fig. 2. Aerial view over Beth Shean (Scythopolis), looking southeast.

Although there are not many remains from the early Roman period, we can certainly say that some of the most important buildings which characterize a typical roman city must have existed from its early stages.

There are some public buildings vestiges of the Roman city, from the first century CE (Fig. 3). Among them a basilica, which abutted a street (ca.12 m wide, with shops at its side) along its south-eastern wall; the theatre (in its early phase of construction); a bathhouse (later covered by the building of Valley Street) and perhaps early stages of the eastern bathhouse; the first stage of the temple with the round *cella*; and basalt pavements on street and squares as well as other structures. A comprehensive map

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Fischer and G.M. FitzGerald wrote the first archaeological reports about Beth Shean (Scythopolis). Some of the most important are: *The Four Canaanite Temples of Beth Shean*, 2 vol., Philadelphia, 1940 and *Beth Shean Excavations 1921-1923: The Arab and Byzantine Levels*, Philadelphia, 1931.

<sup>7</sup> The recent preliminary reports were published by Gideon Foerster and Yoram Tsafrir in *Excavations and Surveys in Israel*, vol. 6-9 and vol.11, between 1987-1990 and 1992. The final reports are still to be published. There is an exception, Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), have published the final report for *The Cesareum and Odeum*, Jerusalem, 2007, under the coordination of Gabriel Mazor and Arfan Najjar.

of the first century CE Scythopolis cannot be drawn precisely, but it is clear that some of the public buildings of the second century CE Scythopolis already existed in the first century CE.

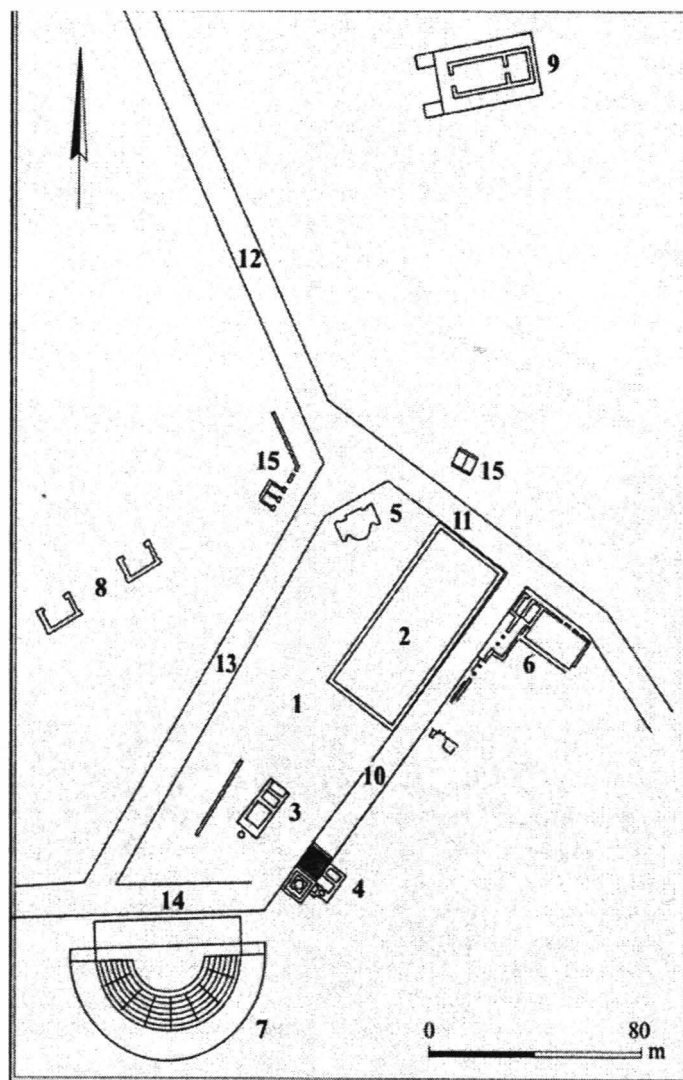


Fig. 3. Nysa-Scythopolis: civic centre, plan of the first century CE:

1. Agora; 2. Basilica; 3. Agora Temple I; 4. Agora Temple II; 5. Temple;
6. Bathhouse; 7. Theatre; 8. Public halls; 9. Temple of Zeus Akraios; 10. Street of Agora Temples; 11. Street (Pre-Monuments); 12. Street (Pre-Northern);
13. Street (Pre-Palladius); 14. Theatre Street; 15. Shops.

Roman Scythopolis was reshaped in the second century, mainly during the days of Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE). In this period, Scythopolis, like other cities in the region, reached its formative stage. In the second century CE, during the *pax Romana* in the East, the conditions for development of the cities and the atmosphere for investment in public monuments building was much better. Scythopolis is one of the best examples of Roman urbanism in Palestine. The high quality of the construction and the architectural decoration of Roman Scythopolis affected the shape of the city for generations. Some of the monuments survived through the Byzantine period, while columns and other architectural elements were reused for new building and monuments of later periods.

In the Roman period, although many of the citizens were of Semitic origin, the city preserved its Hellenic character. During the second century CE, many Jews, who probably lived in rural settlements in the region, returned to live within the city limits of Scythopolis. Probably, also Samaritans settled in the city. An altar with a dedicatory inscription, dated to the middle of the second century CE, may illustrate the process of Hellenisation within the city. The altar was dedicated to Zeus Akraios by a certain

Theogene, daughter of Tobios.<sup>8</sup> The father's name is without any doubt Semitic, while the daughter's name is Greek. We may assume that Aramaic remained the popular spoken language of many of the citizens. Greek was the language of the educated and was the only written language: only a few administrative inscriptions were in Latin and none in Aramaic. Another inscription incised on a pedestal of the statue of Marcus Aurelius, which was installed in front of the temple in the civic centre, contains the full list of the city: it was a holy city and a sanctuary (ιερά καὶ ἄσυλον) and also one of the Greek city from Coele Syria (κατὰ Κοίλεν Συρίαν Ἑλληνίδων πόλεων).<sup>9</sup> This is the only inscription inside Scythopolis which shows directly the citizens' pride for their city, and, at the same time, it was a city's leading class declaration of loyalty to the classical heritage in view of existence of non-classical trends in the culture, ethics and art practiced by the non-Hellenic citizens.

Before analyzing the impact of Christianity on the city beginning with the fourth century CE, first we will show a general picture of what the city might have looked like from the second century CE onwards.

Scythopolis was one of the best examples of Roman urbanism in the East; however it did not utilize the common model of the Roman town planning which was the orthogonal pattern, because of the special topography of the site. Although there was no *cardo* or *decumanus* in Scythopolis, the main streets of the city run through the civic centre and were connected with its city gates. The streets were wide (18 m wide), with colonnades and roofed porticoes with shops at their sides. The average width of the streets was about 24 meter wide. The city was adorned with colonnaded streets and squares, porticoes, public monuments, fountains and pools. Among the public monuments there were: four temples, a theatre, a hippodrome (which later was transformed into an amphitheatre), an odeon (which might have been used as a bouleuterion), at least two bathhouses and a basilica (Fig. 4). These monuments were richly decorated and ornamented with statues.

With the demographic growth of the fourth century CE, the city expanded gradually beyond its limit. Surveys of existing remains around the core of the Roman city show that the Byzantine quarters were founded almost everywhere. A wall (ca. 4.8 km long) encircled the city of almost 134 ha; many buildings however remain outside the wall.<sup>10</sup> In the Byzantine period, Scythopolis reached its peak of building activity during the reigns of emperors Anastasius (491-518 CE) and Justin I (518-527 CE).

### **Christianization, Social and Cultural Changes, and Their Impact on Urban Planning and Architecture, from the mid-fourth to mid-fifth century CE**

The fourth century CE was a period of transition and change. Besides the demographic growth and economic factors, the radical religious and cultural change, which was the Christianization, became a major force in reshaping the city and the community's life. The change was slow and gradual, and, in many aspects, continuity of social order and cultural values can still easily be recognized. However, the transition from the Roman to Byzantine period was above all influenced by the triumph of the Christianity over pagans. By studying the process of Christianization of Scythopolis we can understand the deep change in the social, political life of the city and the daily behaviour of the urban community. This gradual transformation is reflected in the archaeological finds.

Before we turn to the changes of public and cultic building, we shall first see what the literary sources say about Christianity in the fourth century CE in Scythopolis.

The first mentioning of a Christian from Scythopolis we find in Eusebius<sup>11</sup>. He tells the story of Procopius, a native from Jerusalem, who held the office of the reader, translator (probably from Greek to Syriac-Aramaic),<sup>12</sup> and exorcist of the Christian congregation from Scythopolis. He suffered martyrdom

<sup>8</sup> Y. Tsafir, *Further Evidence for the Cult of Zeus Akraios at Beth Shean (Scythopolis)*, Israel Exploration Journal 39, 1989, p. 76-78.

<sup>9</sup> G. Foerster and Y. Tsafir, *Nysa-Scythopolis: A New Inscription and the Titles of the City on Its Coins*, Israel Numismatic Journal 9, 1986, p. 53-58. The geographical meaning of the term Coele Syria may simply reflect the Decapolis of the past.

<sup>10</sup> Idem, *Urbanism at Scythopolis-Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 51, 1999, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Eusebius, *De Martiribus Palaestinae* 1.1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Procopius's task as a translator followed the Jewish custom of reading the Hebrew scriptures in the synagogue followed by an oral translation into Aramaic, which was the language better understood by the members of the congregation.

in Caesarea in the year 303 CE, in the time of Diocletianus (284-305 CE). After that, he was commemorated as a martyr in Scythopolis.

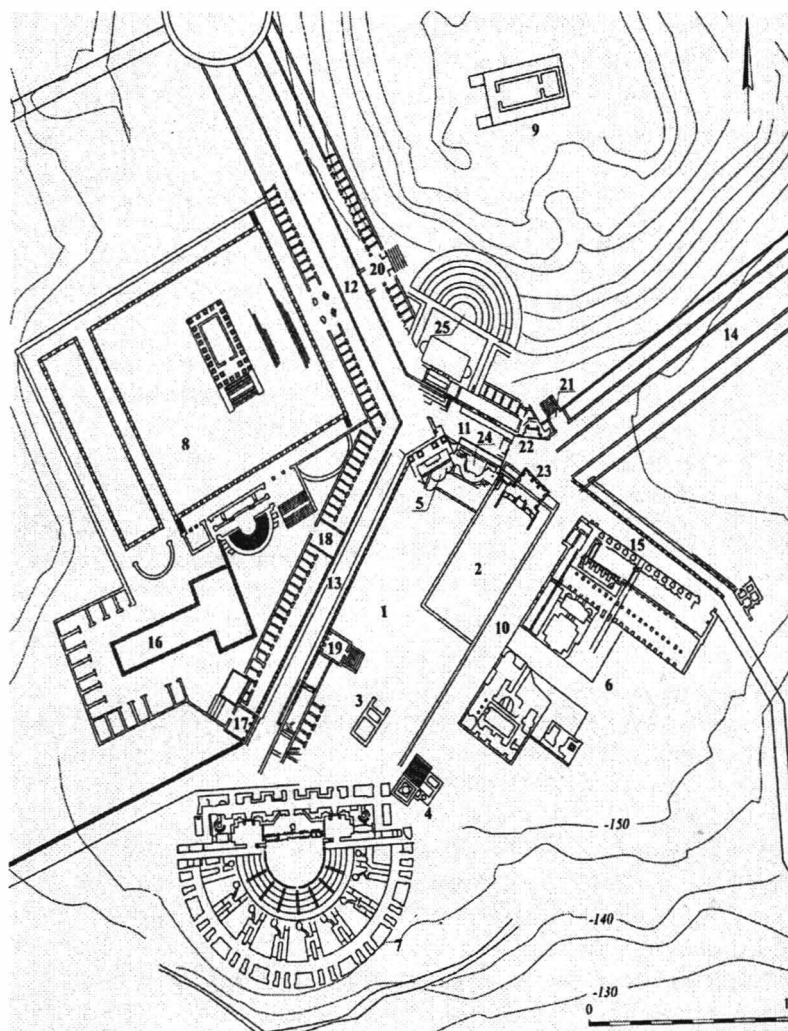


Fig. 4. Nysa-Scythopolis, civic centre: plan of the second century CE:

1. Agora; 2. Basilica; 3. Agora Temple I; 4. Agora Temple II; 5. Temple; 6. Eastern thermae; 7. Southern theatre;
8. Caesareum / Roman Temenos; 9. Temple of Zeus Akraios; 10. Street of the Agora Temples; 11. Street of Monuments;
12. Northern Street; 13. Palladius Street; 14. Valley Street; 15. Street of the Eastern thermae;
16. Western thermae; 17. Thermae propylaeum; 18. Caesareum propylaeum; 19. Agora propylaeum; 20. Temple of Zeus propylaeum;
21. Valley Street propylaeum; 22. Monument of Antonius; 23. Altar/ Central Monument; 24. Nymphaeum; 25. Northern theatre.

Epiphanius<sup>13</sup> give us information about Joseph, the *comes*, a converted Jew who devoted much effort to convert the Jews in the Galilee, without real success. According to this story, Josephus retiring to Scythopolis declared to Epiphanius that the entire population from the city was Christian Arian with two exceptions: himself and Eusebius, an exiled bishop from Vercelae in Italy, who were the only orthodox. It is evident that this is just an exaggeration, because Ammianus Marcellinus at the same time tells us about some trials and interrogation under tortures that were carried out in Scythopolis to suspected enemies of the regime, but says nothing of its Christian predominance within the city.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that in the middle of the fourth century CE there was a large community of Christians, mainly Arians in Scythopolis, but it is hard to believe that the ruling class of Scythopolis had already converted to Christianity.

<sup>13</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion seu Adversus LXX Haereses* 30.4-12.

<sup>14</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri* 19.12.8.



The excavations showed that Scythopolis was damaged by the earthquake of the year 363 CE.<sup>15</sup> This specific destruction was observed in some cases in the rebuilding of several Roman monuments in various locations of the site. The reconstruction after the earthquake was inferior to the second century construction, but the classical character of the restoration proves that the classical tradition was still alive in the fourth century CE (Fig. 5).

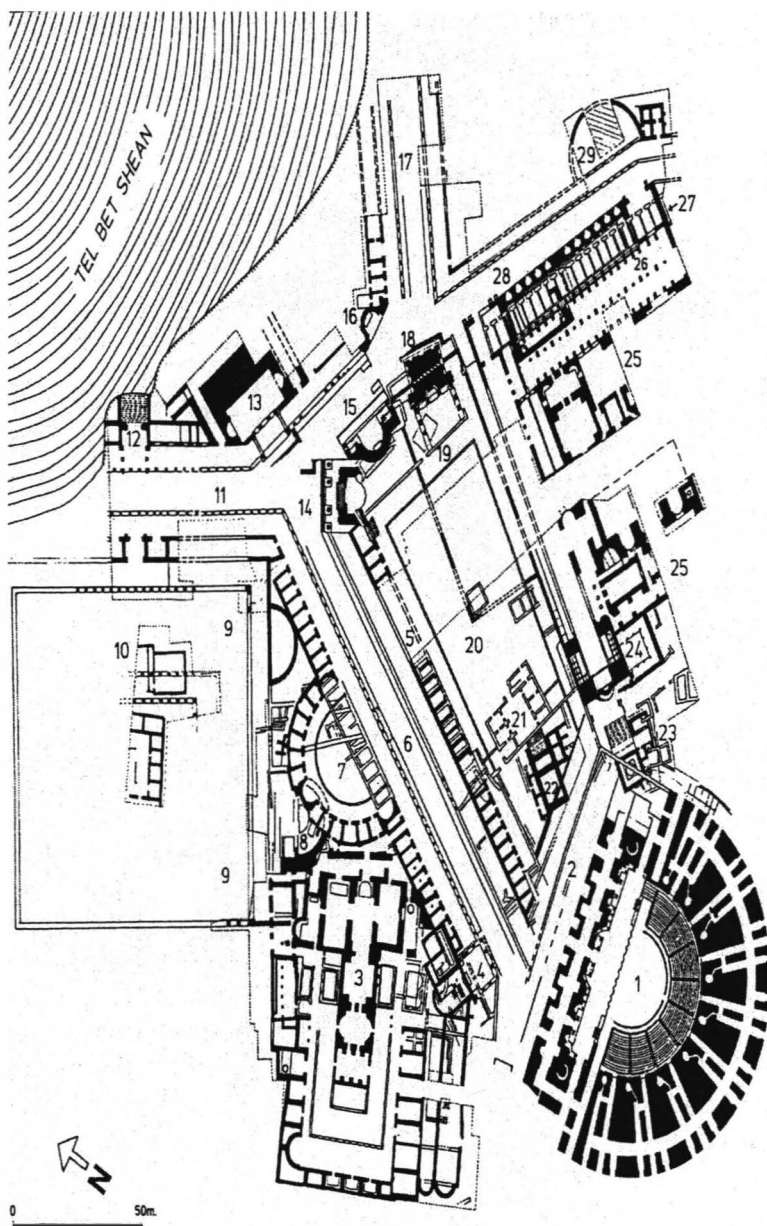


Fig. 5. Plan of the central area of Nysa-Scythopolis in the Roman-Byzantine period:

1. Theatre; 2. Portico in front of the theater; 3. Western bathhouse; 4. Propylon in Palladius Street; 5. Shops of the Roman Period; 6. Palladius Street; 7. Sigma; 8. Odeon; 9. Colonnades and reconstructed area of Roman temenos / Caesareum; 10. Dismantled Roman colonnades, with a Byzantine public building above them; 11. Northern Street; 12. Propylon and stairway to the tell; 13. Propylon between the temple esplanade and the tell; 14. Temple with the round cella; 15. Nymphaeum; 16. Monument of Antonius; 17. Valley Street; 18. Central Monument; 19. Roman basilica, with porticoes of the Byzantine agora above it; 20. Byzantine agora; 21. Umayyad ceramic workshop; 22-23. Roman cult structures; 24-25. Eastern bathhouse; 26. Roman portico, later Silvanus hall; 27. Roman decorative pool, with Umayyad shops above it; 28. Silvanus Street; 29. Semicircular plaza.

<sup>15</sup> For the earthquake, see K.W. Russel, *The Earthquake of May 19, A.D. 363*, BASOR 238, 1980, p. 47-64.

The situation of each monument, whether restored or left in ruins, is significant for seeing not only the priorities of the city's administration but it also reflects the mentality towards the public and cultic buildings in fourth century CE Scythopolis. It is very likely that the Christian administration of the city together with the bishop welcomed the damage caused by the earthquake to the pagan temples. Within the city, four or five temples were discovered; they were abandoned no later than the fifth century CE; but no specific date for their destructions can be given.

The first temple which was discovered was the Hellenistic-Roman temple on the tell, probably dedicated to Zeus Akraios; it was excavated and dismantled in the excavation of the 1920s.<sup>16</sup> The excavators showed that a Byzantine church with a round plan was built near the temple and partly on top of it. The date of the church's foundation, which could have been used as a *terminus ante quem* for the destruction of the temple, is unknown; but it is likely that the church was built between the second half of the fifth century and the early sixth century CE.<sup>17</sup>

The temple near the theatre was probably deserted in the fourth century CE, possibly because of the newly built wing in the eastern bathhouse. It is interesting to note that the altars were not destroyed but carefully covered with soil before the new building was constructed, although other elements such as building blocks and limestone slabs from the stairway were taken for secondary use. This aspect of carefully preserving the altar by covering it could prove that in the fourth century CE there was still some respect for the ancient pagan cults maybe because there was still a small polytheistic community living in the city, or just maybe because there was still some degree of superstitious fear of the gods. But apart from that, the Byzantine builders did not have any problem in reusing some of the non-cultic parts of that same temple in the fourth century CE. And this is not the only example in Scythopolis or in Byzantine Palestine.

Another temple was discovered under the level of the Byzantine agora of the second half of the fifth or early sixth century CE. The same *terminus ante quem* is valid for the destruction of what is supposed to be a Roman *temenos* or *Caesareum*<sup>18</sup> between Nahal Harod and Nahal Amal. One of the colonnades was completely dismantled during the Byzantine period; a new public building paved with mosaic floors with geometric patterns was built around the ruins, whose function is unknown.<sup>19</sup>

The case of the temple with the round *cella* (the round temple), situated close to the nymphaeum is different. A propylon consisting of a monumental stairway and a triple gate was built between the temple and the acropolis in the northeast. Although the propylon was partly uncovered, it seems to be part of a processional road connecting the temple with the acropolis and more important with the supposed summit temple of Zeus Akraios. The nymphaeum, was severely damaged in the fourth century earthquake and rebuilt "from the foundations" by the governor (*archon*) Artemidorus the περιβλεπτος (*spectabilis comes*). This information comes from a decorated architrave above the podium in the central niche of the nymphaeum.<sup>20</sup> The inscription does not include a date, but the fact that it is adorned with crosses shows that it could not be earlier than the mid-fourth century CE. The name Artemidorus appears on another pedestal statue which mentions the Empress Aelia Eudoxia, described as the "Queen of all Earth". She was empress between 395 and 404 CE and the wife of Emperor Arcadius, and thus the renovation of the nymphaeum cannot be dated later than 404 CE.

<sup>16</sup> Rowe, *Beth Shean I*, p. 43-45.

<sup>17</sup> For the location of the temple and the round church that was built above the wing of the temple, see A. Rowe, *The Four Canaanite Temples of Beth Shean*, Philadelphia, 1940, pl. II. For the church and its dating, see Fitzgerald, *Beth Shean III*, p. 18-33.

<sup>18</sup> There are two interpretations for this excavated area: Israel Antiquity Authority team considered that it was a *caesareum*, and the other opinion, embraced by the Hebrew University (Jerusalem), is that the area was a sacred *temenos*. In fact, the only remains from this part of the town is just a massive colonnade, so the interpretations remains opened.

<sup>19</sup> A limestone block mentioning ἀπαντητέριον may indicate this area as an inn.

<sup>20</sup> For the inscription of the nymphaeum, see Foerster and Tsafir, *Israel Exploration Society (ESI) 6*, 1987-1988, p. 27-28. Artemidorus' high rank of *peribleptos* or *spectabilis* suggest that he was the governor of Palestine before its division into three parts and the foundation of Palaestina Secunda, which took place sometime between 400 and 409, the date of edict mentioning the three Palestine (*Codex Theodosianus* 7.4.30).



Artemidorus' nymphaeum was fed by a small aqueduct running from the west. This aqueduct, who reached the nymphaeum on its back side, was attached to the temple in a way which suggests that the cultic place was abandoned at that time, and that the year 404 CE is a *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of the temple.

The laws against the temples and heretical practices of pagan cults of Theodosius I (375-395 CE) and of the others emperors after him, demonstrate an official trend and create a legal background for the destruction of the temples.<sup>21</sup>

With all these legal texts against polytheism it is interesting to look at the ambivalent attitude towards pagan cultic monuments, also in Beth Shean. Although it is likely that the *naos* of the Round temple of the civic centre in Scythopolis was destroyed and dismantled by Christians down to the floor level, the *pronaos* was preserved throughout the Byzantine period and the Early Islamic period. Two of its four monolithic columns, with their enormous Corinthian capitals (one capital even represented Dionysos) together with the entablature and even the pedestal of the statue of Marcus Aurelius, continued to stand and beautify the city of Scythopolis until the earthquake of 749. The *cella* and the *adytum*, which were the impure parts of the temple so to speak, for the Christians, they were desecrated and destroyed, and the preserved decorative façade, proves that the inhabitants of the Byzantine period had not only a negative attitude towards paganism, but also a positive attitude toward the classical monuments for their artistic value; that they were full of admiration for the classical art and architecture, even if originally these parts were attached to the "impure" temple. The preservation of the temples' facade and the inclusion of it in later public building is not a singular case. We have also examples for the preservation of temples' *pronaos* together with porticoes around the temples in Jerash and Baalbek.

As a consequence for the abandonment of the temples, the *via sacra* which connected the temple and the acropolis change its function. At the end of the fourth century or beginning of fifth century CE, the *propylon* was occupied by a system of channels and pools. This installation blocked the gate of the *propylon* and changed the character of the area from being a part of the sacred complex to an area of utilitarian use and industrial activity.

Although Theodosius' laws forbade the pagan cults in the Roman Empire and so paganism officially ceased to exist at the beginning of the fifth century CE, one can think that many individuals continued to practice pagan cults, often in secret. We even have some information that some temples were used for pagan rites in remote parts of the Byzantine Empire as late as the sixth century CE. There is certainly a difference between the official involvement in trying to stop the polytheistic cults and the success of such a policy. These same laws against the pagan cults were repeated in fifth century CE, so we might say that in some cases there must have been few who still practiced their pagan faith. Even if some people continued to observe their pagan practices, the elite and the administration of Scythopolis converted to Christianity no later than the early fifth century CE.

Some of the constitutions from the time of Arcadius (395-408 CE), show the attitude towards the Roman public building and also towards the pagan temples within the Byzantine Empire. In 399 CE the Emperor decreed that the ornaments of public works (*publicorum operum ornamentata servari*) had to be preserved.<sup>22</sup> Another decree of the same emperor forbade the destruction of "temples which are empty of illicit things".<sup>23</sup>

The replacement of temples by the churches was not a mere external change but a powerful transformation in the social and cultural life of the city and its citizens.

The building of churches, or others private buildings, on the sites which were occupied previously by pagan temples, did not occur immediately after the desertion and destruction of the temples but after a long period of abandonment. This long time of abandonment could be an expression of the fear of the Christians to settle on these sites, which until the sixth century CE were considered places haunted by demons. In the case of Scythopolis a precise date for the reoccupation of these cultic places after their abandonment cannot be given.

Only two exceptional cases are known in Israel of the immediate construction of buildings after the destruction of a temple by Christians: the immediate building of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher

<sup>21</sup> Especially *Codex Theodosianus* (CTh) XVI.10.10 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Idem XVI.10.5.

<sup>23</sup> Idem XVI.18.

after the destruction of the Venus temple in the fourth century CE and the building of Eudoxia's Church above the Marneion in Gaza around 400 CE.<sup>24</sup>

In both two cases, the impure sites were first completely purified by removing the soil beneath the building in combination with a ritual service; only after that the church building project could begun.

Besides the building with a clear cultic purpose, it is interesting to see the impact of the transition from Hellenism (paganism) to Christianity in the fourth century CE Scythopolis looking at other architectural complexes.

After the earthquake of 363 CE, which destroyed Scythopolis to some extent, one of the monuments restored in its former shape, with little change was the monumental portico near the eastern bathhouse. The restoration was done with great care, but without reaching the quality of the second century CE architecture. The proof that such a restoration took place during the late fourth century or early fifth century CE, in the time of Flavius Artemidorus, who was the *archon*, is shown by replastering of the reflecting decorative pool lining the portico and the building of a decorative gate and stairway on each side of the portico, together with a new mosaic pavement in front of the south entrance which has an inscription mentioning the same Artemidorus.<sup>25</sup>

The restoration of the nymphaeum in the Roman style is significant not only for practical needs but also because it demonstrates the vitality of the classical tradition in Scythopolis and also it shows the appreciation for the aesthetical value of the Roman architecture in the late fourth and early fifth century CE.

The old Roman colonnaded streets continues to exist without little change in general appearance; only one important innovation was introduced, probably in the same period, that is the late fourth and early fifth century CE, by paving the porticoes with mosaic floors decorated with geometrical or flower designs.<sup>26</sup>

Among the buildings of purely utilitarian design that continued to exist was the eastern bathhouse, which was enlarged in the fourth century CE by adding a large *frigidarium* at the expense the temple area near the theatre.

Because of the demographic growth, a new bathhouse in the western part of the city was constructed; this complex was later expanded at the end of the fifth century CE. Another important innovation during the late fourth and early fifth century was the building of the new street, the so-called Palladius Street (perhaps situated on top on an earlier Roman street), stretching ca. 150 m between the theatre and the round temple. The street was repaired several times and remodelled in the sixth century CE. The purpose of this road was mainly commercial with some thirty shops discovered on its north-western side.<sup>27</sup>

The evolution of the Roman basilica in the Byzantine period is revealing, although it was not a religious building but a civil institution, with an important role in the social and economic urban life. The Roman basilica was built in the first century CE (30 m width, 70 m length) and then remodelled in the second century CE, when the central monument was built above the basilica's north-eastern wall. It is probable that the basilica was also damaged during the earthquake of 363 CE. When the Byzantine agora was established here, probably in the mid or late fifth century CE, during the time of the governor Rometalkes, the walls of the basilica were already dismantled (with the exception of the south-eastern wall which was incorporated in the substructure of the eastern bathhouse and the north-western part which was included in the foundations of the second century monument). Among the architectural elements of the basilica, one of the most impressive finds was a cylindrical monolithic altar depicting the masks of Dionysos, Pan and perhaps the mask of Sylenus, together with their attributes: the panpipe (*syrinx*), the shepherd's crook (*pedum*), and the *thyrsos*, and a dedicatory inscription of the year 141/142 to "Dionysos the Lord Founder" (κτίστης).<sup>28</sup> The altar was found in front of the apse, without the upper

<sup>24</sup> For the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, see Eusebius, *Vita Constantini* 3.4-30; for Gaza, see H. Grégoire and M.A. Kugener, *Marc le Diacre: Vie de Porphyre*, Paris, 1930.

<sup>25</sup> Foerster and Tsafir, ESI 6, 1987-1988, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> Pavement mosaics in covered sidewalks and porticoes along the streets are known in Palestine as well in Sephorris and Caesarea.

<sup>27</sup> For Palladius Street, see Mazor, ESI 6, 1987-1988, p. 22-23, Bar-Nathan and Mazor, ESI 11, 1992, p. 42-47.

<sup>28</sup> For the basilica, see Foerster and Tsafir, ESI 6, 1987-1988, p. 31-32, L. Di Segni, G. Foerster and Y. Tsafir, *A Decorated Altar Dedicated to Dionysos, The 'Founder', from Bet Shean (Scythopolis)*, Eretz-Israel 24, 1996, p. 336-340.

part that is the sacrifice table. The analysis of the destruction level showed that the altar had presumably been installed in the basilica before earthquake of 363 CE, or, less certain, was part of the basilica from the beginning, and it was not installed here with the debris after the destruction. The preservation of the altar in the basilica in the middle of the fourth century CE, in a city with an important Christian population, might demonstrate that the inhabitants were still willing to honour their legendary founder, Dionysos. After removing the sacrificial table, the altar lost its ritual function, but could still have been tolerated for its artistic and decorative value. So the presence of this altar inside the basilica in the middle of the fourth century CE indicates that the triumph of Christianity was slow and gradual.

### SCYTHOPOLIS IN THE LATE FIFTH AND EARLY SIXTH CENTURIES CE: CULTURAL CHANGES AND CONTINUITIES

As we have already seen, the victorious march of Christianity in the fourth century CE was slow and gradual, not only in Scythopolis but also in other remote parts of the Empire.

Now we shall turn to the domain of art to see the relations between Christianity and the classical heritage in Scythopolis.

In the course of the fifth century CE the attitude towards sculptures was ambivalent. Officially the church preached destruction of the classical statues, but in fact there are sufficient examples which prove that some of the statues, which adorned the city's monuments were still preserved at that time, not only within Scythopolis. It is evident however that at some point which we do not know precisely the same statues were abandoned and buried.

In one case, the *terminus ante quem* for the removing of some of the sculptures inside Beth Shean could be established. During the excavations inside the caldarium of the eastern bathhouse, a large number of fragmentary marble statues were found. They were thrown into the hypocaust which proves that this was done intentionally when the bathhouse went out of use. This abandonment took place no later than 515/516 when the Silvanus Hall was built in that area. Among the statues were a headless Aphrodite with a cupid riding a dolphin (Fig. 6), and a headless nymph used as a fountain decoration.<sup>29</sup> Other statues were found under the Sylvanus Hall. A torso of a cuirassed emperor (with a height of 3.5 m and weighing more than 2 tons), possibly representing one of the emperors either Antoninus Pius (131-161 CE) or more probably Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE) and that because of the other dedicatory inscription from the temple in the civic centre, which was found in secondary use as a building stone in one of the structural piers of the halls (Fig. 7).<sup>30</sup> The cuirassed statues of the emperors flourished in the second century CE, when the cult of the ruler was practiced at a higher scale. Statues of the emperors were displayed usually in forums and bathhouses, but in our case, it is possible that originally this statue stood between the columns of the portico of the reflection pool. Another statue found in the same area, depicting a young Dionysos, with slightly effeminate features (measuring 1.24 m), dates to the second century CE, and was found lying on his back at the same level as the sixth century CE marble pavement of the eastern portico of the eastern bathhouse (Fig. 8).<sup>31</sup> It is possible that it was discarded here before, but with some care and maybe respect for the legendary founder of the city, although it was defaced and mutilated by the Christians previously. It is however one of the best preserved statues from Scythopolis.

It is possible that, like the other statues which we named before, the young Dionysos belonged to a sculptural decoration of the bathhouse. Inside the bathhouses of the Roman Empire, different sculptures were displayed, depicting gods, especially Dionysos, but also Roman Emperors. Taking into account the place where these statues were found, especially Dionysos, it is possible that the sculptures had just a decorative function, or maybe educational one for the visitors of the bathhouse, without any direct connection with a cult practice.

Another headless statue, representing Tyche, probably dated to the third century CE, was found in proximity of the theatre (Fig. 9).<sup>32</sup> Tyche was one of the patron goddess of the cities during Hellenistic

<sup>29</sup> Tsafrir and Foerster, Qadmoniot 107-108, 1994, p. 100-101, 109.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101; *idem*, ESI 6, 1987-1988, p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*, *A Statue of Dionysos as a Youth Recently Discovered at Beth-Shean*, Qadmoniot 89-90, 1990, p. 52-54.

<sup>32</sup> Mazor, ESI 6, 1987-1988, p. 21.

and Roman period, and especially in Scythopolis, where her image, wearing a turreted crown and holding a cornucopia appears on various coins and mosaics. The statue might have been part of the decoration inside the theatre, and later on was “decapitated” by Christians.

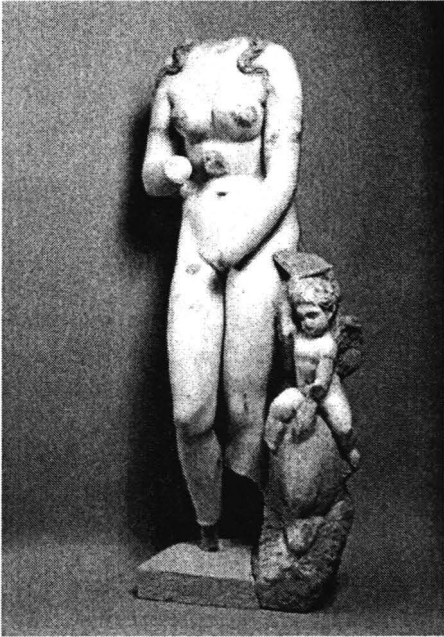


Fig. 6. Headless Aphrodite with a Cupid riding a dolphin.



Fig. 7. A cuirassed statue of a Roman Emperor.

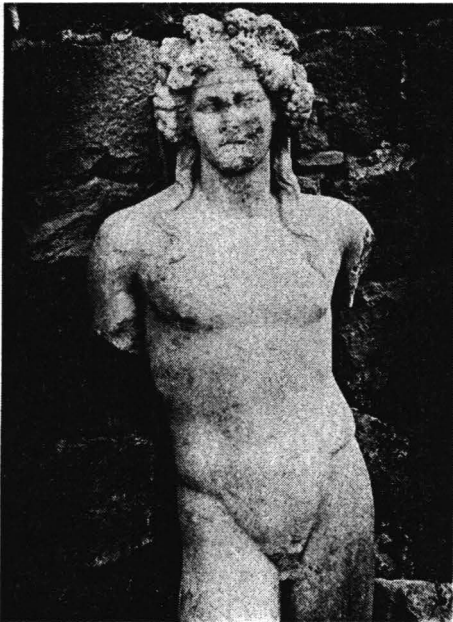


Fig. 8. A statue of the young Dionysos.



Fig. 9. Headless statue of Tyche.

It is interesting to note that during the sixth century CE when a new exedra with shops (called Sigma by the excavators) was built, Tyche continued to appear on a mosaic with her attributes (Fig. 10).<sup>33</sup> Also, maybe more surprising is the fact that she is surrounded by small crosslets. This appearance of a Christian motif (the cross) together with a mythological figure (goddess Tyche) may prove that in the

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

sixth century a *modus vivendi* between the classical heritage and the Christian faith was still possible. It is evident that in the case of the Tyche mosaic, the image of the goddess did not have a cultic purpose, but was just a fashionable decoration of a shop. The goddess of fortune at that time could also have been as a symbol of *Porte Bonheur* just like the little crosslets which surrounded the Tyche.

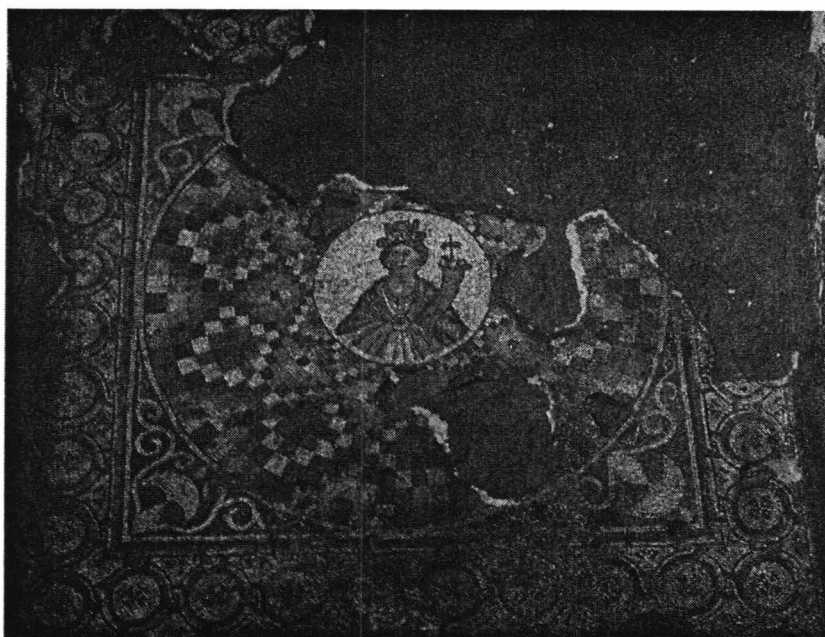


Fig. 10. Tyche mosaic inside Sigma, sixth century CE.

Analyzing all the statues found in Scythopolis, we can see that most of them are headless. Few of them have their heads preserved (like the young Dionysos and a Hermes found near the Odeon), but there were defaced. Other marble heads also defaced were found on different parts of the site, not in situ, like the one of Athena and of unknown goddesses (the ideal female head) found in Tel Naharon, dated to the second century CE, and the one of Alexander the Great, from Tel Beth Shean. Even the Medusa and the griffins from the cuirass torso of the emperor were partly destroyed.

Although we cannot have a date for the destruction of these statues, in most cases we could assume that they were mutilated and decapitated around the fifth century, or early sixth century CE. By destroying the face or by removing the head the Christian believed that the demonic powers of the statues were taken away. Depersonalization of these statues by mutilation could also be seen, as an ontological denial, removing the gods from Pantheon, as a negation of paganism by depriving them of their religious symbols. The mutilation of genitals was also common for the beginning of Christianity because nudity was seen as something irreverent. It is unlikely that these statues were defaced or decapitated at the moment of their burial, but it is more plausible that they were exhibited in the city for their beauty and aesthetic values but without any parts which could be seen as menacing power, or they could have been also despised or mocked.

From the end of the fifth century CE, we have some information regarding the public ridicule and destruction of some Isis statues from Memphis, discovered by the Christians after they were hidden.<sup>34</sup> Also in the middle of the sixth century CE, at Antioch statues of gods were hung on the streets for public ridicule.<sup>35</sup> These examples could give as some clues about what could have happened also in Scythopolis. Another possibility was that the burial of some of the heads, like the one of the Athena' statue, could have been the act of a worshipper who tried to rescue them after the destruction of the cultic places. Or, and that is more plausible, these statues were discarded in a refuse pit, far away from the sculpture torso, so that the demon who possessed the sculpture could not return into the sculpture.

<sup>34</sup> *Vie de Severe, Patrologia Orientalis* II, p. 27.

<sup>35</sup> *Vita S. Simeonis Junioris, Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 5, p. 371.

Regarding the ancient statuary, is interesting also to see how these were considered in the Byzantine Empire. The popular attitude was based on the assumption that the statues were animated, and early Christians believed that the sculptures were inhabited by demons. This belief, interpreted by one part of the clergy in a strictly manner, required immediate action: the destruction of the statues. But some of them survived and were later considered as talismans that could protect cities from calamities. So, the original significance of the statues was forgotten after the sixth -seventh centuries, and reinterpreted in a folkloristic manner.

One example demonstrates both the popular belief and the destruction of these sculptures. In 402 CE, a nude statue of Aphrodite which was object of veneration stood in the centre of Gaza. When bishop Porphyry, surrounded by Christians bearing crosses, approached the statues "the demon that inhabited the statue, being unable to contemplate the terrible sign, departed from the marble, with great tumult, as he did so, he threw the statue down and broke it, into many pieces."<sup>36</sup>

The ambivalent attitude towards sculptures in the Byzantine Empire could be also seen in fact that from the time of Emperor Constantine, different rulers adorned cities, and especially Constantinople, with sculpture having mythological motifs. Their impressive collection did not just have an artistic value but with time gained some magical power.

If we take all the things into account, we can say about the statuary from Scythopolis that even if they were preserved after the fourth century CE, only with a decorative purpose for the city, it is however likely that they were decapitated or defaced. Then in the fifth century CE, certainly not much later than the sixth century CE, these statues were then removed and discarded.

The abandonment of the sculptures implies a detachment from the explicit expression of paganism, but not from the classical heritage, because at the same time some mythological motifs continued to appear on different mosaics, in public and private buildings. Regarding the mosaics, we have already mentioned the Tyche representation in the Sigma. This mosaic has an inscription which mentions *archon* Theosebius, thus is dated to cca. 507 CE.<sup>37</sup>

From the middle of the same sixth century CE, there is a polychrome mosaic calendar from the Monastery of Lady Mary, on Tell Iztaba (Fig. 11); in its centre of the representation there are Helios (the sun) and Selene (the moon). The divine couple appears crowned as king and queen of heaven. We can suggest a Christian allegorical meaning for it that would transcend the natural forces who rule the world and its cycles: Christ would be represented by the sun and the Christian Church by the moon, according to Anastasius of Sinai, a writer from the seventh century CE. Another mythological theme was found in the known House of Leontis, depicting Odysseus and Syrens, as well as Nilotic scenes (Fig.12). It is possible that in this case the work of art was used to show and emphasize the status and education of the owner, Leontis.

But Scythopolis is not the only site where mythological representations appear on mosaics; its situation is similar to other sites in Palestine. These mythological representations were adapted and reinterpreted according to the needs and the philosophy of the new users.

Now we turn briefly toward the mass entertainment structures: the theatre and the hippodrome-amphitheatre. In the Roman period, the theatre presented mostly different satirical shows with a vulgar character. The church fathers, like Cyril of Jerusalem, urged Christians to refrain from going to the theatres, circuses, amphitheatres, as they were all shows of Satan.<sup>38</sup>

We do not know precisely what happened to the theatre in Scythopolis after the fourth century CE. A major restoration took place during the fourth – the sixth century, maybe after the earthquake of

<sup>36</sup> Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyrii*, ch.59-61.

<sup>37</sup> This Tyche mosaic is not unique; it also appears in the Hippolytus Hall at Madaba.

<sup>38</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 19.6: "Now the pomp of the devil is the madness of theatres, and horse-races, and hunting, and all such vanity: from which that holy man praying to be delivered says unto God, "Turn away my eyes from beholding vanity". Be not interested in the madness of the theatre, where you will behold the wanton gestures of the players, carried on with mockeries and all unseemliness, and the frantic dancing of effeminate men — nor in the madness of them who in hunts expose themselves to wild beasts, that they may pamper their miserable appetite; who, to serve their belly with meats, become themselves in reality meat for the belly of untamed beasts; and to speak justly, for the sake of their own god, their belly, they cast away their life headlong in single combats. Shun also horse-races, that frantic and soul-subverting spectacle. For all these are the pomp of the devil."



363 CE.<sup>39</sup> In the early Islamic period, the theatre housed small private dwellings and a potters' workshop (as did the theatre in Jerash). The date of its abandonment as a place of entertaining is also unknown to us, but it is possible that this happened during the sixth century CE. As for the type of shows presented in the theatre during the Byzantine period, when we compare sources like Choricus from Gaza<sup>40</sup>, we can assume that they were singing, music and dance performances, devoid of any pagan character, but which could satisfy the human desire for entertainment.



Fig. 11. Mosaic from the Lady Mary Monastery.



Fig. 12. Mosaics from the house of Kyrios Leontis with mythological motif from Odyssey (left) and personification of the Nile (right).

The amphitheatre, on the southern plateau of the site has a complex history. It was originally a hippodrome, in the second century CE, and only later was transformed into an amphitheatre. This was obtained by building a new semicircular wall inside the arena of the hippodrome, probably in the fourth century CE. From Antiochia it is known during the fourth and fifth centuries CE that hunts (*venatio*) of wild beasts, or display of exotic animals and even athletic competitions were still held in the amphitheatre, and we can think that this was also the case in Scythopolis. It seems that the amphitheatre lost its importance during the fifth century CE. The entrances were narrowed by additional buildings and the whole area was surrounded by private dwellings. The construction of the Orestes Street in the north

<sup>39</sup> Mazor and Bar-Nathan, Qadmoniot 107-108, 1994, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Choricus, *Apologia mimorum* (eds. R. Foerster and E. Richsteig), Leipzig, 1929, p. 204-230.

even blocked totally the access to the amphitheatre from that part. During the fifth century CE the amphitheatre lost its role as an institution of mass entertainment.

Summarizing: the impact of Christianity from the fourth century CE was slow and gradual, but irreversible, affecting all the institutions of the classical world. Temples were usually destroyed, but architectural elements were still preserved and decorated the city until the earthquake of 749 C.E. Sculptures depicting gods were preserved for some time for their aesthetic values although mutilated until the church became more radical during the sixth century. The mass entertaining structures, like the theatre, soon declined. With all these transformations, the classical heritage was preserved for some time until the sixth century in the mythological themes on mosaics although with a different symbolic meaning.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Sources

- Ammianus Marcellinus, Rerum Gestarum Libri*, trans. by J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1935.  
*Babylonian Talmud*, trans. by Michael L. Rodkinson, New York, 1918.  
*Codex Theodosianus*, eds. Th. Mommsen and Paulus M. Meyer, Berlin, 1905.  
 Choricus, *Apologia Mimorum*, eds. R. Foerster and E. Richsteig, Leipzig, 1929.  
 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cathecheses*, trans. by E. H. Gifford, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. XXX, New York, 1893.  
 Epiphanius, *Panarion seu Adversus LXX Haereses*, trans. by Philip R. Amidon, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis*, Oxford University Press, New York 1990.  
 Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Martiribus Palestinae*, trans. by McGiffert, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 1, New York, 1890.  
 Idem, *Vita Constantini*, trans. and commentary by A. Cameron and S. G. Hall, Oxford, 1999.  
 Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyri*, Bonn, 1895.  
 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Wars*, ed. W. Heinemann, Loeb Classical Library, London, 1930-1965.  
 Plinius C. Secundus, *Naturalis Historia*, ed. H. Rackham, London, 1947-1963.  
*Vie de Severe, Patrologia Orientalis* vol. II, trans. by M. A. Kugener, Paris, 1907.  
*Vita S. Simeonis Junioris, Acta Sanctorum*, vol. 5, Paris, 1897.

### Articles

- Bar Nathan, Mazor 1994 – Bar Nathan R. and Mazor G., *Beth Shean during the Hellenistic Period*, Qadmoniot 1994, p. 107-108.  
 Di Segni, Foerster and Foerster 1996 – Di Segni L., Foerster G. and Foerster Y., *A Decorated Altar Dedicated to Dionysos, The 'Founder', from Beth Shean (Scythopolis)*, Eretz-Israel 24, 1996.  
 Fischer, Fitzgerald 1931 – Fischer C. S. and Fitzgerald G. M., *Beth Shean Excavations 1921-1923: The Arab and Byzantine Levels*, Philadelphia, 1931.  
 Fischer, Fitzgerald 1940 – Fischer C. S. and Fitzgerald G. M., *The Four Canaanite Temples of Beth Shean*, 2 vol., Philadelphia, 1940.  
 Foerster, Tsafir, Mazor 1987-1988 – Foerster G., Tsafir Y. and Mazor G., *Beth Shean Project*, Israel Exploration Society 6, 1987-1988.  
 Foerster, Tsafir 1986 – Foerster G. and Tsafir Y., *Nysa-Scythopolis: A New Inscription and the Titles of the City on Its Coins*, Israel Numismatic Journal 9, 1986.  
 Foerster, Tsafir 1999 – Foerster G. and Tsafir Y., *Urbanism at Scythopolis-Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries*, Dumbarton Oaks Papers 51, 1999.  
 Mazor 2007 – Mazor G., *A Statue of Dionysos as a Youth Recently Discovered at Beth-Shean*, Qadmoniot 89-90, 1990.  
 Mazor, Najjar 1940 – Mazor G. and Najjar A., *Beth Shean I Nysa-Scythopolis, The Cesareum and Odeum*, Jerusalem, 2007.  
 Rowe 1940 – Rowe A., *The Four Canaanite Temples of Beth Shean*, Philadelphia, 1940.  
 Russel 1980 – Russel W., *The Earthquake of May 19, A.D. 363*, Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research (BASOR) 238, 1980.  
*The Beth Shean Excavation Project (1989-1991)*, Israel Exploration Society 11, 1992, Jerusalem.  
 Tsafir 1989 – Tsafir Y., *Further Evidence for the Cult of Zeus Akraios at Beth Shean (Scythopolis)*, Israel Exploration Journal 39, 1989.