

INTRODUCTION

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Geographical Context and Topography

Tell Izṭabba is located on the upper slopes of the northern part of the Beth-Shean Valley, north of the Naḥal Ḥarod streambed and south of modern-day Road 71 (Figs. 1.1–1.2). Geologically, its area is characterized by the so-called Beth-Shean Travertine (Horowitz 1979: 166), a Late Pleistocene or Holocene calcareous sinter ca. 20–30 m thick, comprising chalky and calcareous sedimentary rocks deposited by the numerous springs in the vicinity. The surface of the site is flat (hence its Arabic name, Izṭabba = *maṣṭaba*, meaning “bench”) and inclines slightly to the south and east. It is dominated in places by lacustrine sediments—brownish clay and silt soils rich in *Melanopsis* shells, attesting to a more humid Atlantic period in the area’s geological past (Horowitz 1979: 145–146). This layer of marl over the rock formation is leached of salt and mixed with the eroded lime and basalt that have washed down from the hills of the Lower Galilee. The site’s elevation ranges roughly between -120 to -150 m below sea level; the climate of the region is semi-arid and is characterized by extreme fluctuations in temperature, with a low level of rainfall manifest in brief intense downpours and resulting in a variable annual average rainfall (see, in general, Nir 1962; Harel and Nir 1973: 77–78, 137).

Situated on a crossroads in the northern Jordan Valley, in the eastern extension of the Jezreel Plain, Beth-Shean, with its main settlement hill of Tell el-Ḥuṣn, is known for its long history of intensive occupation, extending from proto-historical periods through to modern times (cf. Rowe 1930: 1–6; Mazar and Mullins 2006: 3–9; Mazar 2006). It is one of the main settlements of the eastern Jezreel Plain and the Beth-Shean Valley, the latter rich in natural springs and waterways (given its lower elevation compared to the Jezreel Plain), making it one of the most important agricultural areas in the region. Beth-Shean was located on several major ancient routes, one south–north through the Jordan Rift Valley and another one east–west from the Transjordanian highlands (and the important south–north King’s Highway) to the Mediterranean coast through the Jezreel Plain to Aké (‘Akko) and other harbor cities. This ecological and economic situation explains the prominence of the Beth-Shean settlements.

The ancient settlements of Beth-Shean are enclosed by a chain of hills north of Naḥal Ḥarod—the watercourse that crosses it. To the south is Tell el-Ḥuṣn, to the east is Tell Ḥammam, where one of the main cemeteries of the Roman and Byzantine city is located, and to the west lies Tell Izṭabba, comprising three hills that slope steeply towards Naḥal Ḥarod and more moderately towards the plain north of the city. The two western hills of Tell Izṭabba are dominated by Byzantine remains: the Kyria Maria monastery, the Church of the Martyr, the Church of Andreas and the Byzantine city wall, which crosses the entire mound. The Hellenistic remains on the eastern hill appear to have been less disturbed by later activities, as revealed during excavations at the site.



Fig. 1.1: View of Tell İztabba (East) to the south; to the left, Tel Beth-Shean (Tell el-Ḥuşn), summer of 2019 (© GITIEP)

History of Research

Beth-Shean has been continuously inhabited since antiquity and was visited throughout the Islamic and Crusader periods.¹ The first western traveler of the 19th century to come to Beth-Shean was Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, who reached the site in 1806 (Seetzen 1854: II, 159–165). Seetzen identified the site with Scythopolis but left no detailed description of the ruins, describing only the inhabitants at the time of his visit. In 1812 Johann Ludwig Burckhardt came to Beth-Shean, but he too left no detailed description of the ruins and makes no mention of Tell İztabba (Burckhardt 1822: 343–344).

The first travelers to report the presence of ruins on Tell İztabba came to Beth-Shean in 1818: Charles Leonard Irby, James Mangles and William John Bankes visited the site, and Irby and Mangles left a description not only of Tell el-Ḥuşn but of Tell İztabba as well. They report (after describing the Roman theatre):

The other remains are the tombs, which are interesting enough; they lie to the N. E. of the Acropolis, without the walls; the sarcophagi remain in some of them; we were interested in finding the niches, of a triangular shape, for the lamps; some of the doors were also hanging on the ancient hinges of stone, in remarkable preservation. Two streams run through the ruins of the city, almost insulating the Acropolis; there is a fine Roman bridge over the one to the S. W. of the Acropolis, and beyond it may be seen the paved way which led to the ancient Ptolemais, now Acre. The plains extend in this direction to the sea-coast, without any intervening mountains. On the other side of the town cross the rivulet (a little below where both unite in one stream) in a singular manner; one high arch in the centre, with a smaller on each end of it, appear to have formed a bridge, and on the outside the wall of the city was continued to the edge of the bridge. It would appear as if the centre arch had been blocked up by a grating, allowing the stream to pass through; the outer part of the other two smaller arches was walled up. On the hill near this arch the ruins of one of the gates of the city are very

¹ For the history of research and for the medieval testimonies regarding Beth-Shean, see Rowe 1930: 53–61.



Fig. 1.2: map, showing two of the mounds of the Beth Shean (Nysa/Scythopolis) sites

distinguishable, and amongst the remains are prostrate columns of Corinthian architecture. (Irby and Mangles 1823: 302–303 [= Irby and Mangles 1844: 92]).

This report, characterizing the topography of Beth-Shean and also noting the necropolis on Tell Izṭabba and/or Tell Ḥammam, as well as the Roman bridge and the city gate and fortification walls, remains the most detailed description of the area prior to the excavations of the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia (see below). William John Banks drew plans and views of the ruins. These drawings and

notes are currently archived in the Dorset History Centre (D-BKL/H/J/7/2/15–18), and only the plan of the theater has been published to date, by Arthur Segal (1999: 51–52, n. 80, Fig. 52). In the same year, 1818, Robert Richardson came to Beth-Shean, but did not describe any ancient remains at the site. Rather, he sought (in vain) to arrange a trip from Beth-Shean to Jerash in Transjordan (Richardson 1822: 419–422).

A subsequent traveler to Beth-Shean, Jules de Bertou, who arrived there in 1839, was mostly interested in geography and did not describe the ruins (de Bertou 1839: esp. p. 155). Eli Robinson, who visited the biblical site in 1852, mentioned the area of Tell Izṭabba and paraphrased the description by Irby and Mangles (Robinson 1856: 329). Claude Reignier Conder and Herbert Kitchener too, undertaking the major and systematic *Survey of Western Palestine* on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund, continued to refer to Irby and Mangles’ description of the area of Tell Izṭabba (Conder and Kitchener 1882: 103).

Nonetheless, Conder and Kitchener took the knowledge about the area to a new level. They were the first to note the toponym of Tell Izṭabba, calling it “Tell el Mastabah” (namely, “the mound of the ‘bench’,” probably meaning the “plateau”), and they provided the first detailed map of the area showing the ancient remains and the topography (Fig. 1.3). They also mentioned Tell Ḥammam and characterized the area as follows: “The northern section beyond the stream, but within the walls, includes the church,

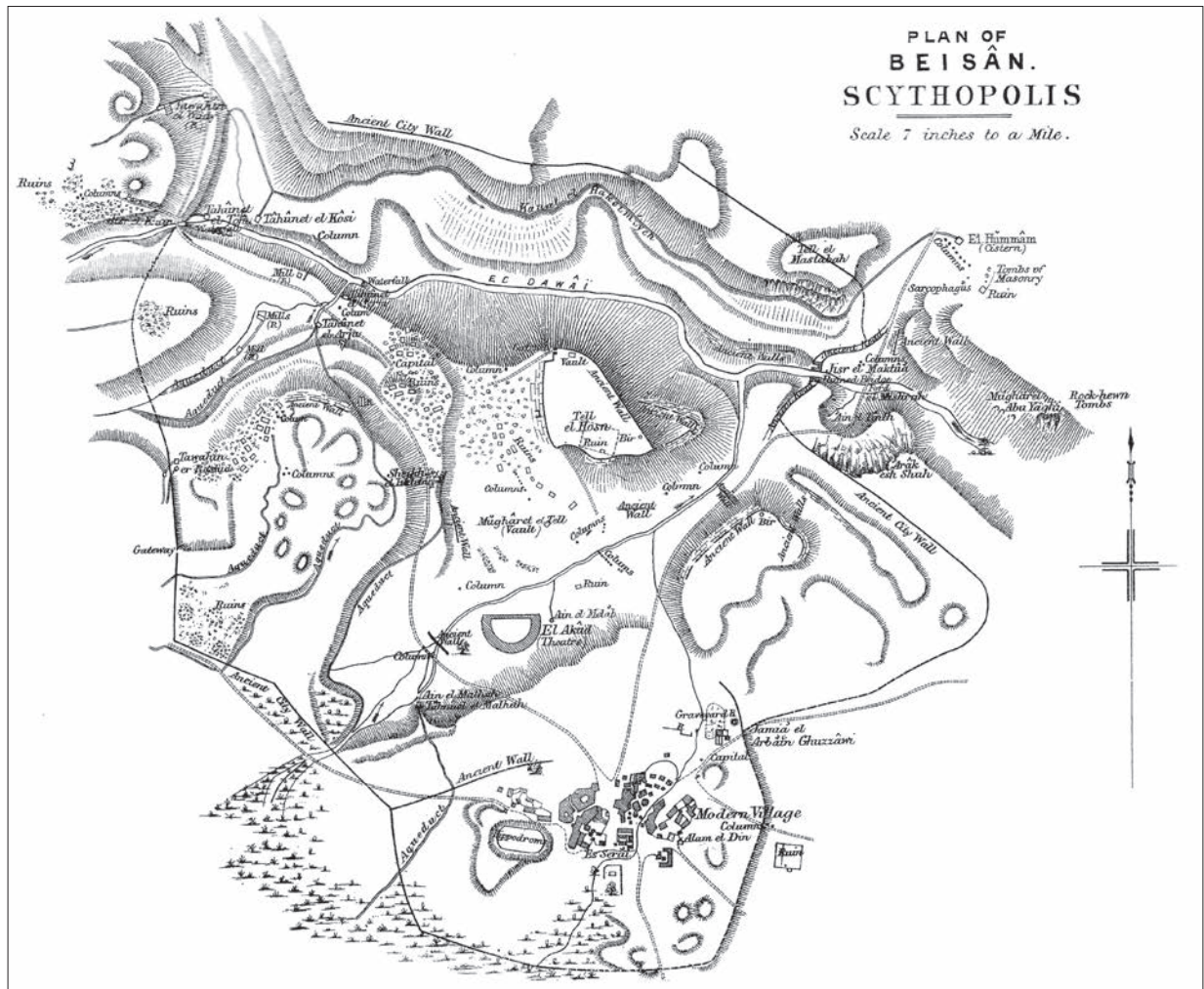


Fig. 1.3: 1882 map of Beth-Shean area from *The Survey of Western Palestine* (from Conder and Kitchener 1882: image following p. 104) (courtesy of the Palestine Exploration Fund)

the tombs, the fort called Tell el Mastabah, and the Hummam. The bridges on the north-east and north-west, and the cemetery to the south of the town, must finally be noticed” (Conder and Kitchener 1882: 105). Their publication also presents an engraving with a view eastward from Tell Iẓṭabba (East) to Tell el-Ḥuṣn, which shows parts of Tell Iẓṭabba in the foreground (Fig. 1.4).

The next travelers to visit Beth-Shean were R.A.S. Macalister and E.W.G. Masterman, who toured the site in 1907 and contemplated its excavation, having already related to the heavy looting in the necropoleis of Tell Iẓṭabba and Tell Ḥammam (Macalister and Masterman 1907: 100–105). In 1910, F.M. Abel arrived at the place and not only wrote a detailed historical account of the city but also published a photograph depicting a view from Tell Ḥammam to Tell el-Ḥuṣn and Tell Iẓṭabba (Fig. 1.5). The so-called *Zeltreise* (“tent journey”) of the German Institute in Jerusalem also visited Beth-Shean in 1909, 1910, 1912 and 1914 (Dalman 1909: 21–22; 1910: 17; 1913: 35; 1914: 49), staying there overnight each time, but Dalman left no detailed description of the site or of Tell Iẓṭabba.

The first excavations were undertaken in Beth-Shean from 1921–1933 by the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. The excavations focused on biblical Tell el-Ḥuṣn, with some investigations into the Early Bronze Age and Roman-Byzantine necropoleis on Tell Iẓṭabba and in adjacent areas (Rowe 1930:

Fig. 1.4: 1882 engraving with a view to Tell el-Ḥuṣn from the northeast; in the foreground, parts of Tell Iẓṭabba (from Conder and Kitchener 1882: engraving following p. 106) (courtesy of the Palestine Exploration Fund)



Fig. 1.5: 1910 view from Tell Ḥammam to Tell el-Ḥuṣn and Tell Iẓṭabba (from Abel 1912: 410, Fig. 4) (courtesy of École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem)



2, 52–53; Oren 1973; see also Chapter 3 of this volume). During this period, the Byzantine monastery of Kyria Maria on Tell Izṭabba was also excavated (Fitzgerald 1939), and a Hellenistic volute capital in secondary use was found (Fitzgerald 1939: Pl. V.4; Fischer 2021: 198–201). It was at the beginning of the excavations by the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia that, in 1923, a photo was taken from Tell el-Ḥuṣn toward the northeast, depicting Tell Izṭabba (East) before the modern interventions (Fig. 1.6). It was during this period that Michael Avi-Yonah published a mosaic pavement from Tell Ḥammam (Avi-Yonah 1936; Foerster 1993: 235).

In 1924 the British Royal Air Force (RAF) took a series of aerial photographs for the systematic spatial cartography and reconnaissance of Palestine. They also covered the Beth-Shean area, and two of these photos include Tell el-Ḥuṣn and Tell Izṭabba (Figs. 1.7–1.8). Another set of RAF aerial photographs, taken in January 1945, include an overview of Beth-Shean (Fig. 1.9). Zooming in shows Tell Izṭabba and considerable constructions in the western part (Fig. 1.10).



Fig. 1.6: 1923 photo taken from Tell el-Ḥuṣn toward the northeast, depicting Tell Izṭabba (East) (PMI No. 41801) (courtesy of the Penn Museum)

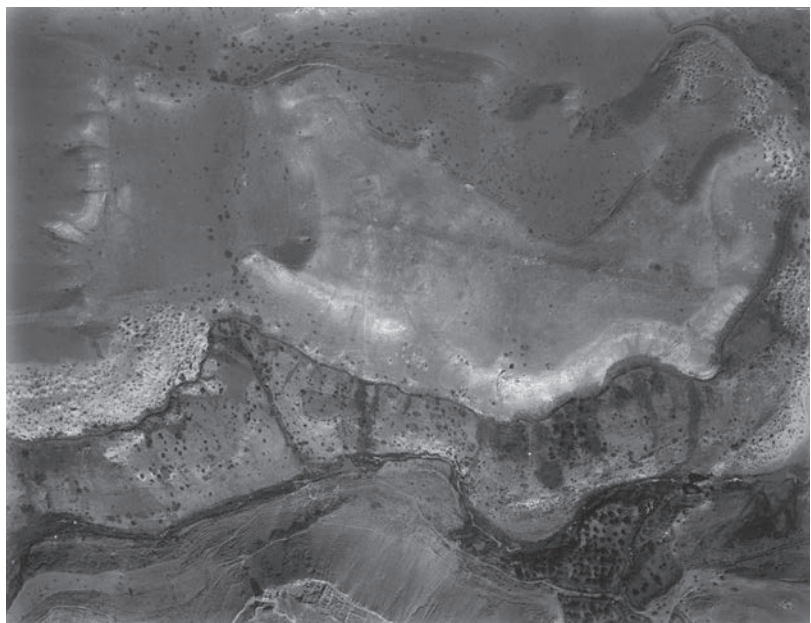


Fig. 1.7: 1924 RAF aerial photograph of Tell Izṭabba and Naḥal Ḥarod (AP1051) (courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology)



Fig. 1.8: 1924 RAF aerial photograph of Tell el-Huşn with parts of Tell Iztabba (East) in the foreground (AP1062) (courtesy of UCL Institute of Archaeology)



Fig. 1.9: 1945 RAF aerial photograph of the Beth-Shean area (Sequence: PS 18-S; 6020) (courtesy of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Aerial Photography Archive)



Fig. 1.10: 1945 RAF aerial photograph of the Beth-Shean area (Sequence: PS 18-S; 6020), detail of Tell Izṭabba (courtesy of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Aerial Photography Archive)

Excavations in the Hellenistic settlement of Tell Izṭabba were carried out in 1962 and 1977 and again from 1991 to 1994. N. Tsori noted important Hellenistic finds on the mound's southeastern slope when a new water pipe was being dug in the area. These largely unpublished remains include buildings, cisterns and fortifications, as well as Ionic capitals carved together with fluted column shafts, and local and imported pottery vessels (including Rhodian amphorae) (Tsori 1962: 152, Pls. 15:24, 16:1). Tsori also excavated a Samaritan synagogue ca. 200 m northeast of the monastery of Kyria Maria (Foerster 1993: 234).

A major intervention on Tell Izṭabba took place in the early 1970s, when the Israel Defense Forces constructed several fortifications and tunnels on Tell Izṭabba (East), which affected the upper layers of the archaeological site (Fig. 1.11). Subsequently, in 1977, V. Tzaferis conducted a small salvage excavation on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums, opening two squares (A and B) in the southern part of the mound. Square A revealed Roman and Byzantine remains, together with a secondary use of decorative items (an Ionic capital and a column shaft), while Square B exhibited architectural remains of the Hellenistic period, along with characteristic Hellenistic pottery, including a considerable number of stamped Rhodian amphora handles, attesting to the site's occupation in the 2nd century BCE (Landau and Tzaferis 1979).

In 1989 a major excavation project began in various locations at Beth-Shean (called the "Bet She'an Excavation Project") as a multi-year touristic enterprise under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA). The IAA was also in charge of the conservation and reconstruction of the archaeological remains of the site, as well as its development as a national park, together with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The latter worked side by side with other expeditions—two from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and one from the University of Haifa. One of the Hebrew University expeditions, under the direction of Amihai Mazar, excavated the biblical mound of Tell el-Ḥuṣn, and the other, under the direction of Gideon Foerster and Yoram Tsafrir, excavated the northern part of the Roman and Late Antiquity city center. The Foerster-Tsafrir excavations have, in fact, supplemented the work of the IAA expedition, directed by Rachel Bar-Nathan and Gabi Mazar, in the southern part of the city center. The University of Haifa excavation, directed by Ruth Gertwagen, focused on the site's medieval citadel and Ottoman *seraya* south of the Roman and



Fig. 1.11: IDF interventions in the 1970s on Tell Izṭabba (East) (© GITIEP)

Late Antiquity city center (Bar-Nathan and Mazor 1993; Gertwagen 1993; Mazor and Bar-Nathan 1998). The findings from these excavations enabled the preparation of a new map of the site, integrating Tell Izṭabba with its churches and monasteries and the Byzantine-period city walls (Fig. 1.12) and replacing the earlier plan drawn up by Conder and Kitchener. From 1991 to 1994, Bar-Nathan and Mazor conducted a large-scale excavation of Tell Izṭabba within the framework of the “Bet She’an Excavation Project.” The substantial Hellenistic remains uncovered in their excavations were mostly confined to two areas, W and Z (Figs. 1.13–1.14); in other areas such remains were only found beneath later remains.

Area W revealed a partially unearthed Hellenistic residential quarter, the plan of which could not be fully determined. The quarter was bordered by two intersecting streets (one ca. 70 m long), with two construction phases in their pavements. The dwellings in this quarter were designed as courtyard houses, with rooms of varying sizes arranged around an open space, a layout typical of other sites in Hellenistic Palestine. The building technique revealed mudbrick walls on top of basalt foundations. The remains of several ovens were found in the stone-paved courtyards, as well as cisterns. Pieces of colored and molded stucco fragments attest to the design of some of the internal walls imitating ashlar masonry. Some of the excavated spaces exhibited up to three architectural phases. The entire quarter was destroyed in a huge fire, which, based on the finds, has been dated to the end of the 2nd century BCE (Bar-Nathan and Mazor 1993: 51; Mazor and Bar-Nathan 1998: 33–34), probably in 108/07 BCE (Finkielsztejn 1999; Mazor and Atrash 2018a: 3). We later narrowed down this date to the spring/early summer of 107 BCE (Lichtenberger *et al.* 2022).

Area Z exhibited Hellenistic architectural remains of an unclear building plan just below the remains of the later Roman and Byzantine periods. These remains were attributed to a “severely ruined public building” erected in the 2nd century BCE, with two architectural phases. Its identification as “public” was suggested due to the thickness of its walls (ca. 1 m), their building technique, some stucco remains and, moreover, the fact that the walls of a presumed Roman-period building in the area featured Ionic capitals, as well as bases, column drums and other decorative items, which the excavators assumed had originated from a Hellenistic building (Bar-Nathan and Mazor 1993: 50–51; Mazor and Bar-Nathan 1998: 33). Another

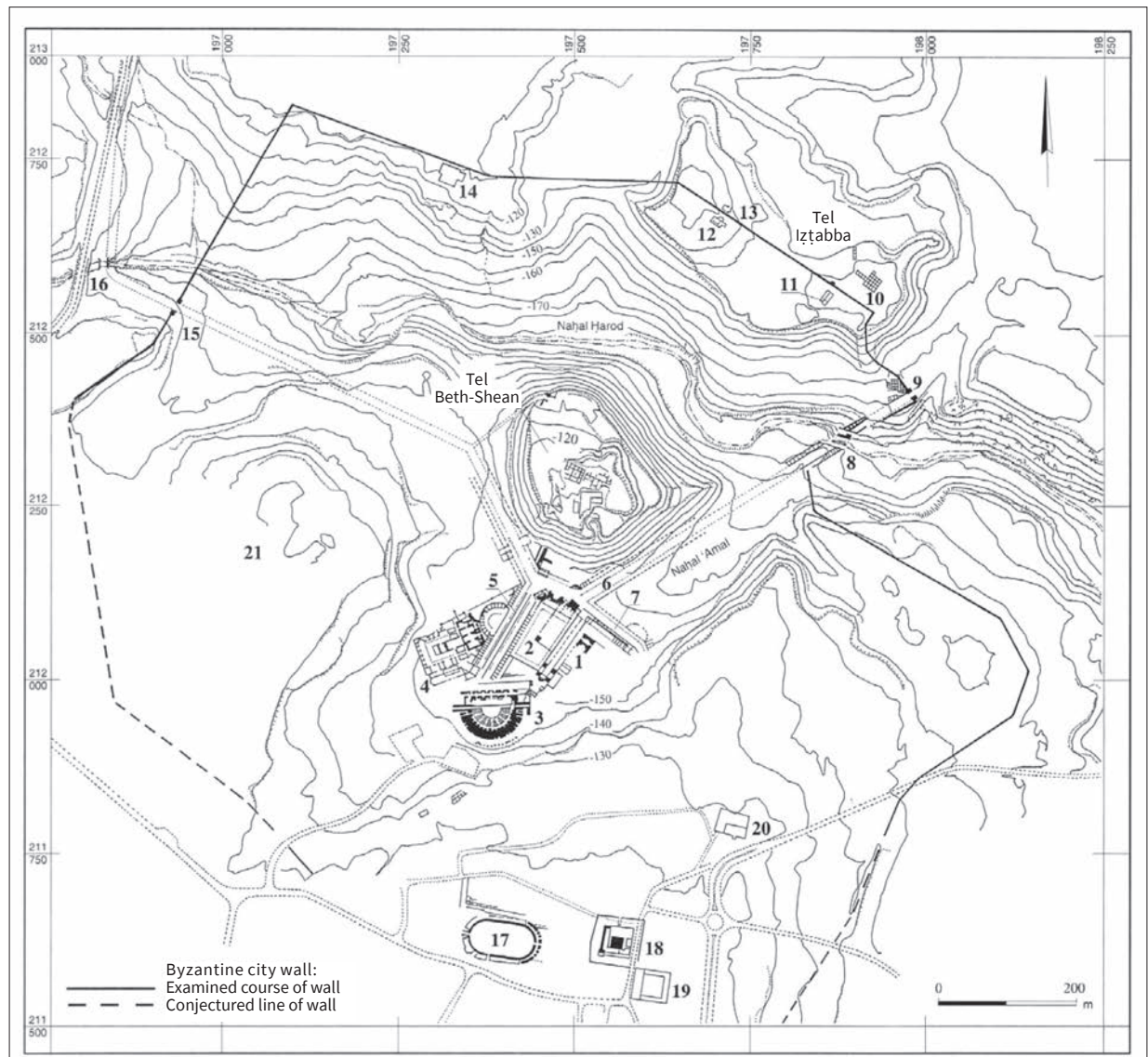


Fig. 1.12: 1998 plan of the Beth-Shean area from *Excavations and Surveys in Israel 17: 5* (courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority):

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|---------------------------|--|--|---------------------|
| 1) East bathhouse | 7) Sylvanus street | 11) Area Z—public Hellenistic building | 15) West gate |
| 2) Byzantine <i>agora</i> | 8) Truncated bridge | 12) Church of the Martyr | 16) West bridge |
| 3) Theater | 9) Northeast gate and bazaar | 13) “Church of Andreas” | 17) Amphitheater |
| 4) West bathhouse | 10) Area W—residential Hellenistic quarter | 14) Monastery of the Lady Mary (Kyria Maria) | 18) Crusader castle |
| 5) Palladius street | | | 19) <i>Serai</i> |
| 6) Valley street | | | 20) Mosque |

residential area was discovered on the western side of the tell (Area M/T), and fortifications assigned to the Hellenistic town were uncovered in the northeastern part of the mound (Area H) (Mazor and Bar-Nathan 1998: 34–35; Sandhaus 2014: 5–6; see also Mazor 2008: 1623–1628; Mazor and Atrash 2017; Mazor, Atrash and Finkielsteyn 2018).

Salvage excavations, in particular on Tell Iztabba (West), were undertaken between 2005 and 2015 by the IAA, revealing remains from the Intermediate Bronze Age (Yannai 2014; Har’el 2015; Horowitz and Atrash 2016), as well as the Hellenistic (Atrash 2016), Roman and Byzantine periods (Har’el 2015), which to date have remained only preliminarily published.

features prominently in the Amarna Letters (Mercer 1939: II, 718–719) and in the Bible, and it has also yielded some archaeological evidence from the Persian period (James 1966: 130–131; Tsori 1977; Stern 1982: 4, 158). The city seems to have been refounded by the Ptolemies in the 3rd century BCE. The first mention of Scythopolis is in the context of events in the second half of the 3rd century, suggesting that it was ruled by the Ptolemies (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.183). In 218 BCE it surrendered to the Seleucid King Antiochus III (Polybius 5.70.4–5), but was controlled by the Seleucids only after 200 BCE. The so-called “Hefzibah Inscription,” found northwest of Beth-Shean, is from this period. It deals with Seleucid land distributions, pointing to the Seleucid attempt to maintain the region under royal control (Landau 1966).

The city was refounded as Nysa, named after a Seleucid princess, probably under the Seleucid King Antiochus IV (Rigsby 1980). It seems, however, that already in the 2nd century BCE the eponym was understood as referring to Nysa, Dionysus’ wet nurse, since her image was depicted on (recently published) seal impressions from the 2nd century BCE (Rosenthal-Heginbottom 2016: 212; Mazar and Atrash 2018b: 139–141, Nos. 21–25). This is remarkable new evidence, because it had previously been assumed that the mythological “redefinition” of Nysa was a phenomenon of the Late Hellenistic or Roman period (Lichtenberger 2003: 130). Later, in the Roman period, this Nysa-Dionysus tradition became very dominant in the public sphere of the city (Lichtenberger 2003: 137–141, 150, 161–164). It was at this point that the new Seleucid dynastic god, Zeus Olympios, was introduced into the settlement, as suggested by a Hellenistic inscription from Beth-Shean (Rowe 1930: 45; Applebaum 1989: 5; Lichtenberger 2003: 131). The foundation of Nysa by Antiochus IV was part of a proactive political process of Seleucid urbanization of Transjordan, the border zone to the Ptolemaic realm. Several other cities, such as Gadara, Gerasa, Abila and Hippos (Fig. 1.15), were similarly refounded around the same time and later formed the Decapolis, a geographical area of cities strongly characterized by Greek and Roman urban models (cf. Lichtenberger 2022). Since in most of the other excavated cities the Hellenistic settlement layers are covered by later Roman and Late Antiquity structures, an exploration of the Seleucid settlement of Nysa serves as a unique laboratory and case study of the excavation of an urban Seleucid settlement of that period, the formation phase of the later Decapolis.

The Seleucid-founded settlement covered the area of Tell Izṭabba, whereas the previous Ptolemaic-founded settlement seems to have been mostly located in the area of Tell el-Ḥuṣn. Like other sites in the region (Philoteria, Pella, Philadelphia), the Hellenistic settlement was most probably founded in the 25th year of Ptolemy II (i.e., 261/60 BCE) and in the context of the outbreak of the Second Syrian War. Beth-Shean was then renamed Scythopolis, and the hoard of 20 tetradrachms of Ptolemy II, found in Tell el-Ḥuṣn (Fitzgerald 1931: 51–56, Nos. 1–20), 11 of which belong to the 27th–37th regnal years (that is, 259/58–249/48 BCE), may provide evidence that the intensive Hellenistic reoccupation of Tell el-Ḥuṣn began during Ptolemy II’s third regnal decade (as suggested by Fuks 1983: 44–53; see also Tal 2011: 243–244, n. 7). The recently published Rhodian stamped amphora handles recovered from A. Mazar’s excavations at Tell el-Ḥuṣn lend support to this assumption (Ariel 2004; see also 2006: 596–597). From Ariel’s analysis of these handles, it seems that during the Hellenistic period activity at Tell el-Ḥuṣn was restricted to the 3rd century BCE, beginning in its second quarter, whereas the Rhodian stamped amphora handles from nearby Tell Izṭabba (as well as other ceramic evidence) point to its occupation at the beginning of the second quarter of the 2nd century BCE (Landau and Tzaferis 1979; Mazar and Bar-Nathan 1998).

The 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE saw important formation phases of the sites that later formed the Decapolis (Graf 1992). During the early 3rd century BCE, the region was under Ptolemaic control (Cohen 2006: 290–299; Tal 2011). Ptolemy II’s “foundation” or “refoundation” of settlements, such as Scythopolis and Philoteria, on the one hand, and Philadelphia and Pella-Berenice, on the other, attest to his strategy of connecting Transjordan to the Levantine coastal cities (and especially to Akko-Ptolemaïs). By the end of the 3rd century BCE the Seleucid empire had conquered the entire region, and during the first quarter of the 2nd century BCE a continued struggle to maintain their hold in the region resulted in the Seleucids

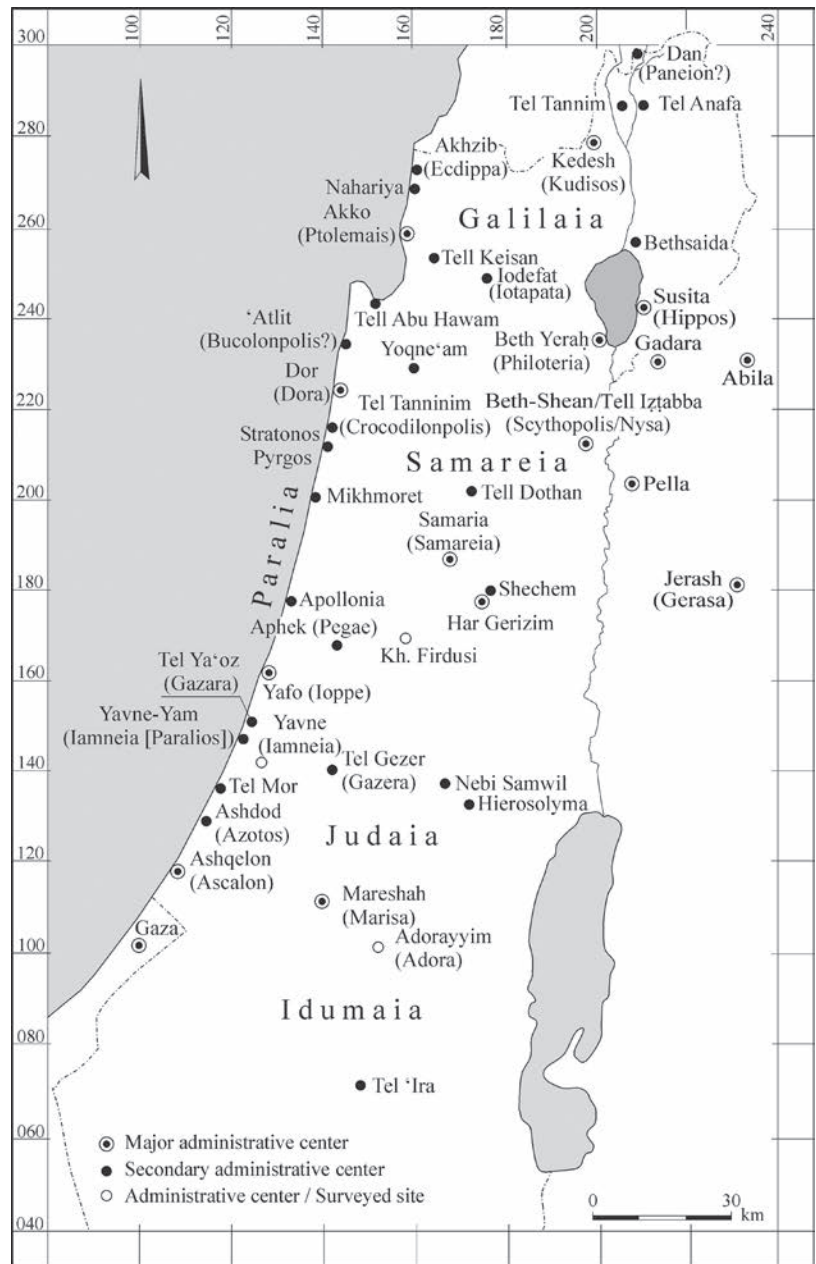


Fig. 1.15: Map of Hellenistic Palestine (© GITIEP)

finally gaining full control. The area that later comprised the Decapolis remained the southwestern border region of the Seleucid empire. Consequently, from the time of Antiochus IV onward, the Seleucid Imperial policy favored a higher level of direct involvement in the local administration in this sensitive frontier region (Thiel 2007a; 2007b; Lichtenberger 2008; 2017). This period seems to have been the most important phase in the establishment of Hellenistic cities, later called the Decapolis, as even during the later Roman period many of the names of cities (e.g., Antioch, Seleucia, Nysa) and civic panthea, in particular that with Zeus Olympios, had originated earlier during this Seleucid phase.

By the end of the 2nd century BCE, in the later days of John Hyrcanus (Finkielstein 1999), the Hasmoneans had conquered and destroyed several cities in the region, such as Nysa-Scythopolis (see, in general, Kasher 1990; Tal 2009a; 2009b). The destruction of Nysa-Scythopolis, the Seleucid settlement on

Tell Izṭabba, took place in 107 BCE; indeed, one of the results of our excavations and the bioarchaeological studies, among others, is that we are now able to pinpoint the destruction to spring/early summer 107 BCE (Lichtenberger *et al.* 2022). The Seleucid settlement was not rebuilt. Only after the Roman conquest of Pompey, in 64/63 BCE, and the establishment of the Province of Syria, was urban life reconsolidated in the area. Nysa-Scythopolis too was rebuilt under Roman procurators, but the settlement was moved away from Tell Izṭabba to the area south of Tell el-Ḥuṣn, where the Roman city—now belonging to the Decapolis—prospered throughout the Roman period and Late Antiquity. Tell Izṭabba, however, seems to have been outside the urban settlement and remained abandoned and used only as the city's necropolis. To date, very few remains of the Roman period other than tombs have been discovered on Tell Izṭabba.

Only during the Byzantine period do parts of Tell Izṭabba seem to have been rebuilt. The 5th-century CE city walls crossed Tell Izṭabba, and churches, monasteries and a Samaritan synagogue were erected on the western part of the mound. It seems, however, that Tell Izṭabba remained only a peripheral part of the Late Antiquity city, with some scattered religious buildings and fortifications. Beth-Shean was a prosperous city during the Umayyad period, whereas Tell Izṭabba seems to have already declined before this period, although the reasons for this remain largely unknown (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 135–146, esp. 140). Notably, however, two Abbasid coins retrieved from our excavations suggest some later activity in the area after Beth-Shean had recovered from the devastating earthquake of 749 CE.

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