

## Bet She'an. Vol. 1, Nysa-Scythopolis: The Caesareum and the Odeum

By Gabriel Mazor and Arfan Najjar, with contributions by Edna Amos, Rachel Bar-Nathan, Ariel Berman, and Débora Sandhaus (Israel Antiquities Authority Report 33). Pp. xxii + 289, figs. 180, tables 4, plans 39. Israel Antiquities Authority, Jerusalem 2007. \$40. ISBN 978-965-406-201-5 (paper).

Ancient Beth She'an—from the Hellenistic period onward Scythopolis and then Nysa-Scythopolis—is located above the western bank of the Jordan River at the convergence of natural roads and played a crucial role in the area from the Bronze Age to the Early Middle Ages. Its appurtenance to the group of 10 cities (the Decapolis) established by Pompey (it was the only one of the 10 cities located on the western bank) was of great importance for the city during the Early Roman and Roman Imperial periods. After initial investigations by both foreign and Israeli institutions, it was included in a national archaeological project from 1986 to 2002. Two main teams carried out intensive excavations and research: the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Thanks to these activities, the site is today one of the most popular national parks in Israel.

One should therefore welcome the first of a series of nine volumes planned by the IAA team dealing with various areas at both Tel el-Husn and Tel Iztabba from the Hellenistic period onward. Reports of the Hebrew University activities seem to be still in preparation.

It is worth noting that for the first time since Avigad's major work *Ancient Monuments in the Kidron Valley* (Jerusalem 1954 [in Hebrew]) and some smaller reports previously published on architectural monuments of Graeco-Roman character (e.g., Qedesh, Caesarea, Ascalon), we are now in possession of a volume fully dedicated to the presentation of two architectural complexes. Identified by the excavators as an odeum and a *caesareum*, all the archaeological and architectural material is presented,

including pottery, coins, and metal finds, but architectural items and their analysis are given preference. A glance at the city plans and aerial views demonstrates the central place of these two complexes/buildings within the urban fabric. This publication thus represents an important step forward in the development of classical archaeology in Israel in general and for the Decapolis in particular.

The book is well organized; it starts with an outline of the additional volumes planned by the IAA team, followed by the history of research, historical background (partly repeated in ch. 1), and a bibliography of select works on Beth She'an, which is impressive per se. After presenting the urban background and the excavations of the buildings, the authors enter into a detailed description of the stratigraphy and finds as a background for the architectural analysis of the two buildings. The latter is thoroughly carried out and accompanied by photographs and accurate drawings emphasizing the design and workmanship of the construction components. The graphic reconstructions are highly professional, though lacking explanatory remarks regarding their hypothetical and artistic character. This review focuses on the presentation and interpretation of the architectural material, which comprises the bulk of the book.

The authors start their description with the evidence of a "Pre-Odeum Complex," the character of which is rather scanty and unclear. The authors, however, characterize this first stage of the complex as "Public Halls" (179–80). The "Caesareum and Odeum Complex" follows in the next chapter. From both the description

of the architectural remains and the accompanying illustrations, it seems that the whole complex was planned at the same time and its construction carried out in stages accordingly. The remains of the *cavea*, including some seats (although these were found dispersed and in secondary use) and evidence for the roofing, are critical to the odeum's reconstruction and meaning. An accurate and detailed description leads the reader from the odeum's north wall through a portico to the *caesareum*, emphasizing the close connection between the two buildings. A rather convincing picture is offered by presenting remains of the southern portico and the southern part of the basilica of the *caesareum*, parts of which are even in situ (such as the heart-shaped column). Then the odeum is exhaustively described, followed by a chapter detailing the Post-Odeum Complex. Further description of the *caesareum* comes later, which weakens the narrative continuity. The presentation of the post-odeum phases attributed to the fifth and sixth centuries C.E. is important for our knowledge regarding the post-Roman phases of Scythopolis. It seems that both the odeum and *caesareum* were intensively dismantled and their building stones and architectural items reused for various purposes not always matching their original roles. Many were found reused in the sigma complex built in the early sixth century C.E. as part of a whole rebuilding phase along the western side of the earlier Palladius street (to be published in the future by the IAA team). That the odeum and *caesareum*—two outstanding monuments of Graeco-Roman character—were now dismantled seems archaeological evidence for diminishing the idea of a continuous pro-Graeco-Roman attitude manifested among the Byzantine-period Scythopolitans.

For the inner compound of the *caesareum* (covered in ch. 5), the authors point out from the beginning that this complex was only partly excavated (by both IAA and Hebrew University expeditions), thus offering much less archaeological evidence relevant to defining the character and role of the building. After a short description of the remains of the *caesareum* (which, in fact, do not belong to the *caesareum* but to the later "Post-Caesareum" phase of the complex), the authors present the finds (pottery, coins, and metal) and attempt to correlate them stratigraphically with the architectural evidence.

The architectural elements (chs. 9–10) presented by Mazor and Amos occupy much of

the report. They are of tremendous importance, drawing an accurate architectural picture, which is facilitated by a detailed table at the end of the book. The authors have presented a wonderful picture of art and architecture in one of the remote areas of the Roman empire.

Two points should be made in addition to what the excavators have said regarding the architectural decoration. The first refers to the fact that both buildings were built almost exclusively with local limestone from the Gilboa quarries (ca. 10 km west of the city). Interestingly, the excavators distinguish between soft limestone (*nari*) elements apparently used for the earlier stage of the complex (dated to the first century C.E.) and hard limestone used by the builders of the second-century C.E. main stage. Unfortunately, only a few constructive and artistic elements were preserved from this earlier phase, which otherwise would have made an important contribution to the issue of using various materials for building and decorative purposes through different periods, a sort of a close analysis and correlation of the "symbolism" and chronology of stones in antiquity. The fact that imported marble is missing in both complexes dated to the early to mid second century C.E. seems to indicate a phase predating the massive import of marble to Scythopolis' two major structures: the theater and the so-called Monument. I agree with the authors' conclusion that fragments of the few marble capitals found in the odeum that could have been dated to later phases should probably be attributed to one of the monuments using marble from the Severan stage of the city's development (e.g., the theater).

A second point refers to the use of both Corinthian and Ionic style in decorating various parts of the buildings. Corinthian style became the most popular option in the Hellenistic and especially the Early Roman (Herodian) periods. As for the Ionic style, although popular in pre-Roman and Early Roman Palestine, it was less preferred in the second century C.E.; just a few Ionic pieces of imported marble have been registered from all of Israel. However, Late Roman Palestinian architectural decoration often preferred the Ionic style, as evidenced, for instance, by many Jewish synagogues. Almost all examples were made of local materials, even difficult-to-work basalt. It would be reasonable to assume that workshops making Ionic capitals in second-century C.E. Scythopolis had a great impact on the later production of this style. Ionic

elements are extensively used in the graphic reconstruction of the *caesareum*.

The presentation of the architectural elements takes into account comparative material from other sites in Roman Palestine and abroad. As to the authors' attempt to limit the dating of certain elements to "the reign of Hadrian (117–138 C.E.) or the early years of Antoninus Pius (138–161 C.E.)," should this be considered the building period or only the starting period for the erection of the complex? Surely "pottery from critical loci" (181) should not mean more than a terminus post quem for the initial phases. The architectural decoration (mainly the capitals) seems to point to a rather longer *durée*. The architectural elements have Hellenistic characteristics, but they also display Roman (Flavian-Trajanic) influence that probably came from Asia Minor via Syria. This is a worthy subject for future research. As a whole, the chapters regarding architectural decoration represent a real advance in understanding the developmental process of local stone-based architectural decoration in Roman Palestine.

After presenting the archaeological and architectural evidence, Mazor attempts to reconstruct and interpret the buildings. He does so by emphasizing the place and role they had in the framework of similar structures in the Roman world generally and the Mediterranean koine in particular (chs. 11–15).

For the *caesareum* (ch. 12), the picture remains somewhat unclear, partly as a result of excavations carried out by other expeditions (which remain unpublished and uncorrelated) and partly because evidence is missing for the main issue: the complex's eventual role as an imperial cult place. Thus, "the grand temenos . . . was surrounded by magnificent porticoes . . . although the area was constantly renovated . . . its original plan was retained . . . and is still clear today" (182). We also read about "the inner compound . . . with an *assumed temple*" (184 [emphasis added]). The identification of the colonnaded building as a *caesareum* dedicated to the emperor's cult (in the authors' opinion, that of Hadrian) is in fact a conclusion based mainly on the monumentality of the complex and several comparisons. It is an *ex silentio* attribution, since statues, inscriptions, coins, and literary evidence for an imperial cult structure are missing or not presented. This building ought not be presented—at least for the time being—as a *caesareum*.

Comparative insight could have been gained from research in the western Mediterranean (D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*. Vol. 3, *Provincial Cult* [Leiden 2002–2005]) and Asia Minor (S. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* [Cambridge 1984]). Burrell has advised against overinterpretation ("False Fronts: Separating the Aedicular Facade from the Imperial Cult in Roman Asia Minor," *AJA* 110 [2006] 437–69), and Evangelidis has addressed the question for Greek cities (*The Architecture of the Imperial Cult in the Agoras of the Greek Cities* [Thessaloniki 2008 (in Greek)]).

The authors' argument that Hellenistic culture in Nysa-Scythopolis was deeply rooted in late antiquity might be right (though undermined by their own evidence of the abandonment and dismantling of these two monuments), but the assumption that "the *caesareum*, though stripped of its central temple still retained much of its emperor-cult significance throughout the fourth and fifth centuries CE despite the fact that the city was long Christianized" (188) seems weak and rather contradictory. Moreover, on page 184 the author himself calls this temple an "assumed temple."

The archaeological and architectural evidence in favor of the odeum is convincing, though here, too, epigraphic, historical, artistic, and numismatic evidence is lacking. Therefore, we should take the rather simplistic definition that any covered theater is an odeum *cum grano salis*, and perhaps we should call such a structure a "small theater." As to the issue of the roofing, special consideration is given to it, including a thorough comparative analysis (199–206). One small matter could be questioned regarding the roofing, which is described as "presumably of Cypress wood" (202), not cedar, given the beam length of 30.7 m. Archaeobotanists could have resolved the question by analyzing extant remains from the excavation (31). But the use of buttresses for strengthening the walls to improve superstructure and roofing is an interesting contribution. An exhaustive comparative examination of odea completes the study. The book concludes with useful appendices, including lists of loci and tables of architectural items with all the data necessary for further study.

Some comments should be dedicated to editorial issues, emphasizing the most strik-

ing facts. Many “Graeco-Latin” uses, or rather, misuses/misspellings, are spread all over the book. For example, “scaenae” is misused when the singular meaning “scaena” is intended, and “temenae” (181) is used for the Greek plural “temenē.” On pages 210–11, we read about “auditoriae,” again a term that should have been “auditoria” (plural of *auditorium*). “Dia Roma” (223) should be “Dea Roma,” and “Palestina Secunda” (177, 187) should be “Palaestina Secunda.” Herod was king of Judea, not Provincia Syria (186). And does Hadrian’s appearance on coins as Hadrianus Augustus mean his divinization (186–87)? The glossary, the necessity of which in a professional report is questionable, also has a number of misspellings.

Despite numerous editing, proofreading, and transliteration problems and inconsistencies, this book is an important contribution to our knowledge of architectural achievements in ancient Israel during the Roman Imperial period. Compared with the architectural achievements of other Decapolis members, the monumental buildings of Nysa-Scythopolis demonstrate the proud appurtenance of the city as the only representative from the west bank

of the Jordan River. The detailed and accurate presentation and analysis of the material, as well as its interpretation, are exemplary.

Yet the *caesareum* and odeum (reviewed here) and the agora (to be published by the IAA team) are presently divorced from other monuments belonging to the same urban texture (e.g., temples, basilica, thermae), which have been excavated by other expeditions (with publication still pending). One hopes that further volumes will appear soon and that the Hebrew University Expedition publications will take into account the IAA’s chronological and historical terminology. Such correlation should be a *conditio sine qua non* for further publications, and the authors of this volume have made the first step.

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