The Visits of St. Sabas to Beth Shean

BY GABRIEL MAZOR

Palladius Street in ancient Nysa-Scythopolis.
Cyril of Scythopolis (ca. 525–559 CE), the distinguished historian of the Judean Desert monastic movement, was a native of Beth Shean. The leader of the movement, Sabas, was a friend of the family, and he subsequently adopted young Cyril and arranged for his religious instruction. At the age of 18, Cyril became a monk and he eventually moved to the community at the New Laura, founded by Sabas, where he completed his *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, in which he provided biographies of the main figures of the monastic movement.

In his narrative of the *Life of Sabas*, Cyril reports two visits by the venerable monk to Beth Shean. In 518 CE, Sabas came by way of Caesarea Maritima, accompanied by a group of abbots from the Judean Desert monasteries, to publish a letter from Emperor Justin and to end the religious policies of Severus of Antioch and Emperor Anastasius. The second visit in 532 CE followed the Samaritan Revolt of 529 CE; Sabas

What did Beth Shean look like in Late Antiquity? We have a much more complete image of the city following the Israeli excavations at the civic center beneath the tell (1986–2000). For a tour of the Late Antique city, Gabriel Mazor, Director of the Bet She’an Archaeological Project, leads us in the footsteps of St. Sabas the Sanctified, a venerable monk who paid official visits to Beth Shean twice in the early 6th century CE. As Mazor notes, while the city was largely Christianized by that time, it nevertheless clung to its Hellenic roots.
came in part to inspect the damages from the revolt in both provinces of Palestine and determine payment for rebuilding. Many of the sites he visited have been identified in the recent excavations.

What did Beth Shean look like when Sabas visited? Scythopolis (its Greek name) was the largest city of the Decapolis, ten city-states in eastern Palestine. It celebrated Dionysos as its founder, and throughout the Byzantine period (330–638 CE) it enjoyed immense economic resources, political influence, a monumental urban landscape, and a growing population of mixed ethnicity and religious beliefs that nevertheless coexisted harmoniously. The city had been damaged in a devastating earthquake followed by fires in 363 CE, the effects of which may still be seen in the civic center: at the forum, the porticoes, basilica, and temples were damaged; at the theater, part of the stage and upper rows of seats collapsed; and damage can also be observed at the odeum, the nymphaeum (shrine dedicated to water nymphs), the northeastern bridge, and elsewhere. The wide-scale restoration that followed is attested in two inscriptions. The first, found near the theater but perhaps originally from the forum, reads: “In the days of Flavius Ablabius, the most magnificent Metropolitan [governor], the city was renewed.” The second, carved on the nymphaeum, states: “In the days of Flavius Artemidorus, the most magnificent and spectabilis, comes [companion] and governor, all the fabric of the nymphaeum was rebuilt from foundation.”

As a result of the restorations, the civic center was gradually reshaped. Both public baths were significantly enlarged and turned into monumental thermae. The forum, now stripped of its political and religious functions, was remodeled into a social and economic quadruporticus or quadrangle. Old monuments in the civic center were re-erected or new monuments constructed out of spolia, earlier building material. Finally, in the early 5th century CE, a wall was built encircling the city. By the 6th century the process of renewal and redefinition reached its climax. The city, by then a powerful and wealthy administrative and
economic center, flourished, as did the whole region which saw an increase in urban centers and prosperous villages due in part to stable political conditions.

In 506/7, Theosevius, the governor of the province, added to one of the colonnaded streets (Palladius Street) a remarkable sigma—a semicircular exedra or area with seating—constructed along its western portico. The theater façade was given a new portico, and a vast paved plaza equipped with a nymphaeum encircled its northern and northeastern sides. The forum was once again renovated, along with some of the colonnaded streets of the civic center. Throughout the extended renovation the city remained faithful to its Roman imperial architectural heritage, and its urban plan was hardly alternated. Thus the city never lost its monumental magnificence.

The region (Palaestina and Arabia) in Late Antiquity—a remarkably peaceful era—reflected significant urban prosperity and a great increase in population, a process that reached its peak in the 5th and 6th centuries CE. It was linked with the regional change of status from a remote eastern province of the Roman Empire to the highly venerated Holy Land of the Byzantine period. The significant increase in urban centers as well as numerous prospering villages of the countryside created a densely settled region. This evolution during the 4th to 5th centuries CE occurred due to the stable political and economic conditions granted by Diocletian’s (284–305) wide scale reforms, Constantine’s (307–337) religious and political renovations, and Theodosius II’s (402–450) administrative division.

A new element in the Roman city beginning in the late 4th century was a monastic presence, which greatly influenced the city’s public and religious life. The monks maintained strong ties with the Judean Desert monastic movement and other monastic centers east of the Jordan River—Gadara, Pella, Madaba, and Mount Nebo. Churches of the monasteries within the city included a centralized memorial church on the tell, a medium-size basilica, and two other small chapels. Except for the Round Church, all were located at the edge of the city. Curiously, there is no evidence of a Christian basilica or a cathedral in the center, as one might expect. Beth Shean was the seat of a bishop and the capital of a province, with a population of ca. 40,000 citizens, most of whom were no doubt Christians by the mid-6th century CE. The absence of churches within the city center stands in sharp contrast to other cities in the region, such as Gerasa, Pella, Gadara, and Hippos, in which numerous churches and cathedrals were revealed.
The pagan temples of Beth Shean had been cleared during the early Byzantine period. Yet the elimination of temples was by no means complete in the region, as the temples of Zeus and Artemis at Gerasa and the temples of Bacchus, Jupiter, and Venus at Baalbek bear witness. Beth Shean of the 5th and 6th centuries CE remained deeply rooted in Hellenic culture. As inscriptions attest, its citizens continued to honor Dionysos as the founder of their city. Other inscriptions used archaic or literary Greek phrases, such as quotations from the Odyssey.

Elements of Hellenic culture continued to appear in public monuments long after the arrival of Christianity. The sigma erected by Theosevius had in one of its rooms a mosaic floor depicting Tyche (Fortuna) in its central medallion, in what may be one of her last appearances in Byzantine art. A spacious villa of a Jewish or Judeo-Christian merchant had remarkable mosaic floors depicting, for example, a scene from the "Odyssey" and a Nilotic landscape. At the monastery of Lady Mary, discussed in a previous article in this issue, one mosaic floor depicted a zodiac with Helios and Selena at its center. Another had a vine scroll populated with figures engaged in the grape harvest, with Orpheus in a central medallion.

Although Beth Shean’s pagan polytheism was gradually replaced by Christian monotheism, it was primarily a monastic center, and for the most part it coexisted peacefully with significant Jewish and Samaritan communities, sharing monotheistic beliefs but differing dogmas. And the city retained its secular imperial essence and Hellenic cultural tradition. The rise of Christianity did not cause the “Christianization” of Scythopolis but rather its secularization. Pagans converting to Christianity throughout the 4th to 6th centuries CE might have changed their cult but not their culture. That was the political, religious, and cultural landscape in 518 when Sabas arrived in the city.

Arriving at the northwestern city gate, the Caesarea Gate, Sabas was met by the Christian community led by the holy metropolitan Theodosius at the shrine of Saint Thomas. They made their entry with psalms, and the liturgy was celebrated in the ancient chapel of the holy martyr Basil. During the ensuing Samaritan revolt the chapel was destroyed and a new larger monastery incorporating a church was erected next to it and within the city wall.

On his way to a monastery named Enthemaneith, Sabas entered the civic center by way of the Northern Street. Passing the “so-called Apse of Saint John” he met in the “western

The emperor depicted in this statue found at Nysa-Scythopolis wears a cuirass or breastplate that protects his body.
colonnade of the street” a woman with a hemorrhage whom he miraculously cured. The apse or gate (arcus), a monumental propylaeum on the colonnaded Northern Street, was revealed during excavation at the foot of the tell. Its arched entrance opened onto a wide staircase to the Round Church on the tell, which may be identified as the church of Saint John, based on the account of Anthony of Piacenza.

Southwest of the Round Church, the Penn Museum expedition uncovered the remains of a monastery and, along the eastern terrace, a group of spacious houses dated to the Byzantine period. In spite of Cyril’s reference to the bishop’s palace as being within the Monastery of the Holy Martyr Procopius, Clarence Fisher made the interesting suggestion that the entire mound was an ecclesiastical domain with the bishop’s palace in its center.

Encircling the mound Sabas continued by way of the Valley Street to the Monastery of Enthemaneith. Based on a survey and an inscription found by Fitzgerald, its location may have been on a terrace overlooking the Harod Stream. The inscription mentions the dedication of the Monastery of the Abbot Justin Apocrisarius by an offering of the Scholasticus Anoisius in the year 522 CE.

Sabas’s second visit to Beth Shean came in 532 CE, when Cyril was seven years old. As he entered the city on his way from Caesarea, Sabas was met by the congregation and the Metropolitan Theodosius. The great old man was then escorted to the episcopal palace in the monastery of the Holy Martyr Procopius, where he met Cyril’s father and the Metropolitan, urging them to dedicate young Cyril to monasticism. A decade later, properly instructed, Cyril left Beth Shean for a life of monasticism, and he never returned to his beloved hometown.

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For Further Reading


