Nysa-Scythopolis: The Hellenistic Polis

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For ninety-five years excavations have been going on at the site of Hellenistic Nysa-Scythopolis. From 1921 to 1923 the expedition of the Pennsylvania University Museum, Philadelphia worked at Tel Bet She'an. From 1991 to 1994 and 2005 to 2010 the expeditions of the Bet She'an Archaeological Project and the Israel Antiquities Authority were active at Tel Bet She'an and Tel Iẓtabba, sites located on both banks of Nahal Ḥarod (**fig. 1**). The excavations revealed the construction of a military stronghold and an administrative centre of the mid-3rd century BCE on Tel Bet She'an and the foundation of a *polis* on Tel Iẓtabba around 170 BCE until the destruction of Hellenistic Nysa-Scythopolis by the Hasmoneans in 108 / 107 BCE. Numerous scholars published their research on the material culture and ancient sources, highlighting the history and cultural identity of Nysa-Scythopolis, a Greek city of Coele Syria. This article summarizes the basic data of those researches and reviews the archaeological and historical evidence.

Archaeological research

During the years 1921–1933 the expedition of the Pennsylvania University Museum at Philadelphia (henceforth UME[1]) conducted extensive excavations at Tel Bet She'an (Tel el-Hussan, the fortress mound), a monumental landmark that rises over the southern bank of Nahal Ḥarod (Jalud). Reaching the earlier Bronze (Egyptian) and Iron Age (Biblical) strata, the excavation cleared the entire layers of the later periods, leaving scanty remains of the Hellenistic period at the eastern fringes of the mound. These were later excavated by the expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (henceforth IAHU, see below[2]). The late strata were termed by the UME excavators[3] as following: »City level III – Hellenistic, Jewish and Roman (301 BC – 329 AD); City level II – Byzantine, Roman, Christian (330–636 AD); City level I – Arabic, Crusader etc. (636 AD – ca. 19th century)«. In the excavation report a joint plan of Strata II and I was published though no plan of Stratum III.

The excavations of UME failed to identify a clear stratum of city level III and just sporadic, non-stratified finds, mostly out of later pits of city level II were recorded with no architectural

1 The expedition was directed by C. S. Fisher in the years 1921–1923, by A. Rowe in 1925–1928 and by G. M. FitzGerald in the years 1930–1931 and 1933.

2 Directed by A. Mazar in the years 1989–1996, Mazar 1994, 82–83; Mazar 2006, 240–248.

3 Rowe 1930, 7–8. 44–45.

Fig. 1: Aerial view of Tel Bet She'an (right) and Tel Iẓtabba (left).

remains. Few pottery sherds of unknown provenance (with no references to loci or areas) were published along with thirteen stamped Rhodian amphorae handles[4].

The head of a colossal marble statue was revealed in a fill within a Byzantine period cistern[5]. Apart from the broken chin and nose the head is in mint condition (**fig. 2**). Thiersch identified it as a 2nd century BCE fusion of Dionysos, Alexander and Antiochus IV[6]. Its accepted identification today is Alexander, perhaps assimilated with Dionysos[7]. Wenning dated it, based on its baroque treatment to the years 170–150 BCE, a date accepted by Erlich[8], based on style and historical considerations. According to Erlich the head reflects the characteristic components of Alexander as established by Lysippos, his court sculptor[9]. It combines heroic appearance, the authoritative and the divine and captures his symbolic significance and apotheosis[10]. The deeply drilled long and high sculptured mane of hair (*anastole*), described by Plutarch as a distinctive feature of Lysippan Alexander's physiognomy, is in Pollitt's assessment well

4 FitzGerald 1931, pls. 30–36 (from the mixed assemblage of strata III–I); Iliffe 1933, 126 nos. 15–16; Comfort – Waagé 1936. The stamped Rhodian amphorae handles were dated by FitzGerald 1931, 44–46 to the first half of the 2nd century BCE.

5 Rowe 1930, 45 pl. 55; Thiersch 1932, 57–76 assumed that it is a representation of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, an identification rejected by Fuks 1983, 78. Avi-Yonah 1962, 130 note 50 stated that as the male head is not bearded it cannot be Zeus and suggested that it might have represented Alexander.

6 Thiersch 1932, 57–76.

7 Vermeule – Anderson 1981, 8; Wenning 1983, 108–111; Fischer 1998, 38.

8 Erlich 2009, 10–11.

9 *Plut. Alex.* 4.1; *Plut. de Alex. fort.* 2.2.3

10 Pollitt 1986, 20–26; Nielsen 1988, 151–152; Killerich 1993; Erlich 2009, 10.

Fig. 2: Statue head of Alexander the Great.

reflected in the high Pergamene style of the Head of Alexander from Pergamon (ca. 200 BCE), now in Istanbul Archaeological Museum. According to Pollitt other typical Lysippan features can be observed in the turn of the neck, the slightly open mouth and aspiring glance. There also seems to be clear resemblance in technique and features to the ›Heroic Alexander‹ statue head from Pella, presumably dated to the time of Philip V or Perseus (ca. 200–175 BCE), now in the Pella Archaeological Museum. The latter might be a close reflection of a Lysippan prototype along with other Alexander figures from Ptolemaic Egypt[11]. Wenning suggested that by erecting a statue of Alexander in 2nd century BCE Nysa-Scythopolis, the Seleucid rulers and the citizens of the polis asserted and legitimized their rule, thus declaring their political identity and their intended association and participation in the Hellenistic koine. Smith proposes the head's attribution to »a (cult?) statue of a Hellenistic king, based on images of Dionysos and later Alexander types«[12]. Considering historical and stylistic criteria as well as the archaeological evidence Stewart refutes a Hellenistic date and tentatively assigns the head to a Roman statue of Alexander, emphasizing characteristic features of sculpture of the Severan period like the porcelain-like finish, the drilled ›bridges‹ in the hair and the depiction of the irises of the eyes flattened for painting and rolled up high under their upper lids[13].

An inscription carved on a stone block was revealed in the debris of a Byzantine period reservoir. The inscription represents a priests' list of the Olympian Zeus and reads »[Priests of the] Olympian [Zeus] [and of the] Savior [Gods]. In the year … of the king [Demetrius?] Euboulos, son of Epicrates …sos ...ou. Heraclides, son of Sarapion«[14]. The inscription was dated to about the mid-2nd century BCE.

Rowe stated that in the 3rd century BCE a large temple (37.05 x 22.08 m) was erected atop the summit[15]. The probably peripteral temple was built of white marble, with column drums and Corinthian capitals revealed. According to Rowe it resembled the Temple of Aphrodite at Naukratis in Egypt. He also mentioned a frieze member decorated by a garlanded head of Bacchus, which testified that at a later stage (Roman) the temple might have been dedicated

11 Bieber 1964, pl. 28; Vermeule – Anderson 1981, 8; Nielsen 1988, 156–157.

12 Smith 1988, 180 no. 16; Smith 1991, 224 fig. 263.

13 Stewart 1993, 338 note 46.

14 The inscription was first read by Abel and Vincent (Rowe 1930, 45) and again by Mouterde 1933 who dated it to Demetrius II's first period of reign (145–143 BCE). Fuks dates it to 143 / 142 BCE as the king's name was erased from the inscription when his rival Tryphon came to Nysa-Scythopolis (Fuks 1983, 82 no. 42).

15 Rowe 1930, 44 fig. 9.

to that deity. A reexamination of the architectural members clearly dates the temple to the Roman period[16].

Finely, a hoard of twenty silver tetradrachms was found in a broken pot below the Byzantine level at the southern edge of the summit[17]. The coins were minted at the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE) and most of the dateable coins of the hoard are from the years 259–249 BCE.

When the excavations of the mound were resumed (1989–1996) by the IAHU expedition scanty remains of the Hellenistic period were unearthed along the western fringes of the mound (Area P, Stratum 5; Plan 1.1), revealing the stone foundations of brick walls with remnants of plaster[18]. The remains were identified as a domestic structure containing several rooms and courtyards with ovens, in which three phases were distinguished (P5a–c), evident in some alterations of the walls and raised floors. Stratum P5 was reached immediately under the massive foundations of a Byzantine structure. The pottery assemblages, both of imported and local wares, fit well into the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE[19]. Eighteen stamped amphora handles were retrieved and dated to the third quarter of the 3rd century BCE[20], and they seem to reflect an earlier date than those revealed in the UME excavations. Eleven coins were retrieved in Area P21. The earliest coins (nos. 1–2) are from the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE), while the rest (nos. 3–12) are Seleucid attributed to the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE) and that of Antiochus IX Cyzicenus (third reign, 96–95 BCE). Four Hasmonean coins of Alexander Jannaeus (nos. 17–20) and two Tyrian shekels from the 1st century BCE (nos. 13–14) were also found on the mound, though not in Area P, Stratum P5. Terracotta figurines, few and fragmentary, were found in Area P and they seem to represent domestic cult objects or decorations. Their state of preservation and provinciality of material prevents a more accurate dating within the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE[22].

In the wake of the IAHU's work on Hellenistic Nysa-Scythopolis the Israel Antiquities Authority (henceforth IAA) carried out excavations at Tel Iẓtabba (1991–1994) where Hellenistic remains were observed. The deep gorge of Nahal Ḥarod (Jalud) that runs from west to east along the northern limits of Roman-Byzantine Nysa-Scythopolis sets a majestic imprint on the landscape of the polis. The stream-bed, deeply cut in Nahal Ḥarod's rock layers created a deep and narrow gorge with high, sharply sloping banks. Along the southern bank rises Tel Bet-She'an, while the northern bank consists of three low flat hills, separated by small tributaries. In the west spreads Tel Naharon, a flat hill that during the Byzantine period housed an extra muros neighborhood[23]. In the east is Tel Hamam, a relatively small and rounded hill that served during the Byzantine period as the city main necropolis[24]. In between Tel Naharon and Tel Hamam a long, relatively wide and rather flat table-shaped hill extends, Tel Iẓtabba (Tel el-Mastaba) that slopes gently into the flat land in the north. Its southern steep slope, the

16 The scattered architectural members mistakenly identified as marble were of limestone quarried in the Gilboa Mountain quarries that presumably started functioning at the late 1st century CE. The Corinthian capitals of the temple were analyzed by Fischer 1990, 61 no. 229 and dated to the Flavian period. On the mound no earlier architectural members were revealed. The temple should therefore be dated to the late 1st century CE and there is no evidence for any earlier temple at the site.

17 FitzGerald 1931, 51–55.

18 Mazar 1994, 82–83; Mazar 2006, 240–248. The surviving remains might indicate what the nature of the Hellenistic stratum was before it was obliterated by the UME clearing.

19 Johnson 2006, 523–537.

20 Ariel 2004, 23–30; Ariel 2006, 594–606.

21 Amitai-Preiss 2006, 607–615.

22 Erlich 2006, 616–625.

23 Vitto 1991, 33–45.

24 Avi-Yonah 1935, 11–30.

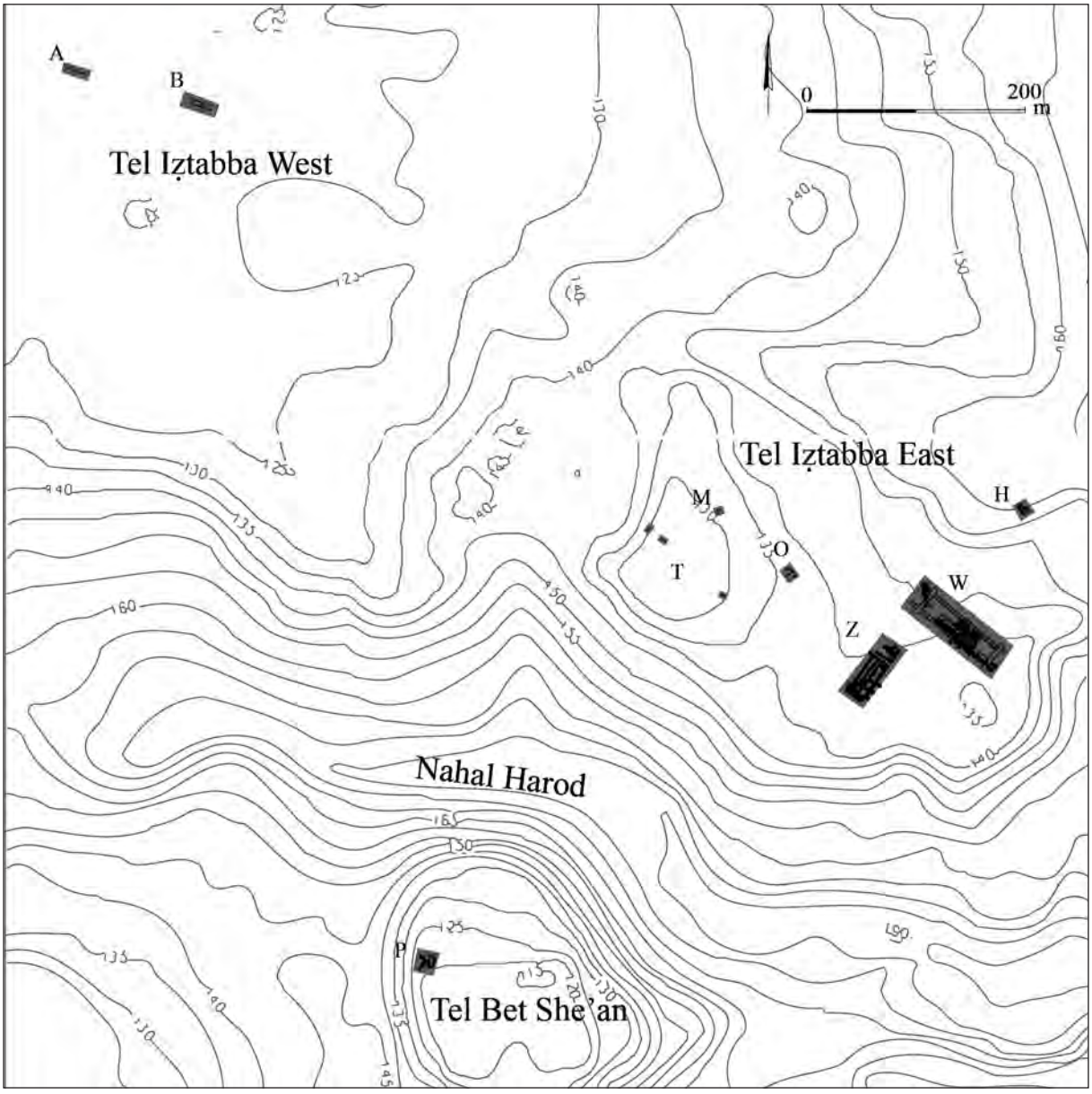

Fig. 3: Excavated areas of Tel Iẓtabba and Tel Bet Sheʾan (Area P).

Nahal Ḥarod northern bank served during the Bronze Age as a necropolis and is honeycombed by hundreds of burial caves, part of which were excavated by UME[25]. Previous surveys and several trial excavations conducted at Tel Iẓtabba revealed Hellenistic remains[26] (**fig. 3**).

Two major Areas (W and Z) were opened in the eastern part of the flat hill and various smaller areas (Areas H, O, M and T) in the west and north. Further trial excavations were conducted during the years 2005–2010 by W. Atrash, E. Yannai and Z. Horvitz in the western premises of Tel Iẓtabba[27].

Area W represents a residential quarter constructed in the characteristic orthogonal layout (**fig. 4**). Residential insulae (16 × 75 m), composed of numerous houses, are separated by axial alleys 2–2.5 m wide, paved with earth-beaten floors consisting of crashed lime mixed with

25 Rowe 1930, 2. 52 pls. 4–5; Oren 1973.

26 Tzori 1962, 152–154; Tzori 1977; Landau – Tzaferis 1979.

27 Yannai 2014; Atrash 2016.

Fig. 4: Residential quarter in Area W.

pebbles and pottery sherds; under the floors are drainage channels. Walls, built of sun-dried mud bricks on basalt stone foundations were plastered with yellow, red and black painted frescoes on white stucco in masonry style panels (**fig. 5**). The floors of the rooms were of compressed crashed limestone and in some cases plastered. Two storied-buildings of medium size and similar type contained relatively small rooms surrounding a courtyard from two sides and opened to alleys on both longitudinal sides of the insula (**fig. 6**). Stone-paved courtyards held ovens and cisterns; rooms had plastered floors, while the roofs and upper level floors were made of wood, reed and plaster. Rooms in several buildings had burnt wooden looms with numerous loom weights scattered around them (**fig. 7**). A large amount of pottery, both imported and of local production, including many Rhodian wine amphorae was retrieved. Several ceramic assemblages, mostly of complete vessels, were separated into vessels found on the ground floor in various rooms and courtyards and vessels that originated from the second-floor rooms and collapsed as the buildings were set on fire (**fig. 8**).

Fig. 5: Red and white stucco in masonry style preserved on a brick wall.

Beneath the buildings an earlier phase was revealed, composed of hearths and pottery, yet with no architecture. The Hellenistic phases were constructed on top of an Early Bronze III stratum that seems to extend over a large portion of the mound.

Fig. 6: Artistic reconstruction of residential insula.

Area Z revealed several public buildings that were partly exposed. A large-sized complex composed of numerous rooms surrounding a spacious courtyard represented the first and main structure, while other units, separated by a 3 m wide plastered street, had various sizes. Architectural elements including white limestone bases, column drums and Ionic capitals retrieved in secondary use in the walls of an Early Roman structure that was built over the ruined Hellenistic complex might have originated from a temple or a public structure. Walls construction of sun-dried mud bricks were plastered with white masonry style stucco. North of Area Z and downhill, Area O revealed another public structure, presumably a warehouse with a sophisticated drainage system and a plastered courtyard. Probes conducted in the western parts of Tel Iẓtabba in Area H, T and later in the rescue excavations undertaken further west indicated that the Hellenistic polis spread over the entire area of the hill covering some 225.000 sq. m. At the north-eastern section probes revealed what seem to be parts of the city wall with an integrated tower (**fig. 9**). Altogether, three phases were clearly indicated in the excavations of the Hellenistic polis at Tel Iẓtabba. The meagre earliest phase from the second half of the 3rd century BCE comprises hearths and pottery with no architecture. The two subsequent main phases represent the well-planed, extensive polis constructed around 175 BCE, including the minor changes it underwent during its time of existence. In 108 / 107 BCE this city was conquered by the Hasmoneans, destroyed by fire and never re-built.

In the habitation debris at Tel Iẓtabba several categories of outstanding finds came to light, and although just a small part of the polis was excavated (7 %), their quantity and quality contrast the meagre finds published by the UME that excavated the entire Hellenistic strata at Tel Bet She'an. Some 360 stamped amphora handles were recovered, besides some earlier ones

Fig. 7: Burnt wooden loom with scattered vessels around.

the bulk dates to the 2nd century BCE, the latest stamps from 108/107 BCE (**figs. 10–11**). Their research determined the dates of Nysa-Scythopolis' foundation and destruction and provided evidence for the city's long-distance trade patterns and consumption habits[28].

Meticulously conducted excavations of complete houses within the residential quarter of Area W enabled the specific attribution of a considerably large amount of restored pottery assemblages to the various floors and rooms of the analyzed houses. The systematic research of the pottery assemblages resulted in a precise assessment of the types of vessels (table wares, lamps, cookware, storage jars and amphorae) and their distribution as revealed in various

28 Finkielsztejn 2017.

Fig. 8: Empty amphorae stored in room's corner.

Fig. 9: City-wall and tower in Area H.

functional rooms of the first and second floors of houses and courtyards[29]. Furthermore, the research also documented patterns of settlement abandonment that occurred prior and during the violent conquest and destruction of the polis in 108 / 107 BCE and its possible impact on analyzing the archaeological evidence.

About 380 coins were retrieved, apart from coins dated to the 2nd half of the 3rd century BCE the bulk was dated to the 2nd century BCE and few (five) to the Hasmonean conquest. In addition there were over 300 clay loom weights of the truncated pyramidal type, some 20 lead sling shots, arrows and various minor tools, terracotta figurines, glass beads and an inscribed astragal.

Some one-hundred sealings were unearthed in one of the buildings in the residential quarter of Area W, representing a private archive (**fig. 12**). The preserved clay sealings derive from burnt legal and official documents. They bear scenes of Greek nature, mostly depicting mythological gods and goddesses and Seleucid portraits in the so-called ›Republican Style‹[30]. Dated to the later part of the 2nd century BCE they seem to reflect the culture and ethnicity of the polis officials. Outstanding are five unique sealings that depict the local cult myth of Nysa breastfeeding Dionysos (**fig. 13**). Petrographic analysis of the sealings revealed a rather wide distribution of legal documents that were sent to Nysa-Scythopolis from various Hellenic centres in the nearby Decapolis, as well as from more distant centres like Antioch, Cyprus and the Aegean Islands[31]. The main categories of finds shed important light on the commercial ties with the Greek Islands and bear witness to the Hellenic affiliation, culture, religion and ethnic identity of the citizens at Hellenistic Nysa-Scythopolis, a deeply-rooted marker still present decades later.

In the 2nd century CE, the citizens of Roman Nysa-Scythopolis erected a statue in honor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161–180) in front of a temple (*kalibe*), presumably dedicated to the imperial cult[32]. The temple was built within the civic centre in front of an irregular piazza

Fig. 10: Amphora.

Fig. 11: Stamped amphora handle.

29 Sandhaus 2014.

30 Mazor – Atrash 2017, 168–250.

31 Shapiro 2017, 251–261.

32 Foerster – Tsafrir 1986–1987.

Fig. 12: Sealing depicting Tyche.

Fig. 13: Sealing depicting Nysa breastfeeding Dionysos.

located at the junction of two colonnaded streets. In the inscription on the round pedestal that once carried the bronze statue the Greco-Roman polis was declared a Holy City and Asylum, one of Coele Syria's Greek cities. The abbreviated title HL[LHNIC] POL[IS] also appears on coins of Nysa-Scythopolis from the year 175/6. According to Barkay[33] the usage of the anachronistic titles »indicates the city's desire to emphasize its Greek origins and its deeply-rooted Hellenistic heritage« as well as its honorable historical Hellenic ethnicity. Barkay assumed that the titles that evoked the Hellenic past, Greek culture and ancient origins, were revived during the reign of Hadrian, the philhellene emperor, probably at the time of his visit to the region (130 CE) and in accordance with his policy of Hellenization.

Historical research

During the summer of 332 BCE Gaza was captured by Alexander the Great following a two-month siege, an event that marked the beginning of the Hellenistic period in Coele Syria[34]. There is no clear archaeological evidence that the colonization or poleis foundation was initiated in the region by Alexander the Great, although various scholars dated military or urban settlements as early as the late 4th century BCE. Fuks assumed that Macedonian military strongholds were first founded along the coastline in accordance with Alexander's strategy of keeping control over the Phoenician coast[35]. Among these early poleis foundations Rostovtzeff counts Gaza and Tyre that might have served along with Acre and Sidon as administrative centres[36]. Rostovtzeff further assumed that the earliest colonization of Greek administrative centres and military strongholds along the coast resulted in the arrival of Greek officials in constantly rising numbers in places which were gradually turned into *katoikoi* with no urban legal status. In time those administrative and military centres, both in Asia Minor and Syria, were turned into poleis[37]. *Eusebius*

33 Barkay 2003, 163–164.

34 The geographical term, presumably of Seleucid origin, defines a region with varying boundaries in different periods (Avi-Yonah 1966, 26. 32; *RE* XI, 1921, 1050–1052). *Strab. geogr.* 16, 2, 21 uses the term when describing the strategy of Antiochus III, *Ios. ant. Iud.* 14, 4. 5; 13, 13. 2–3 refers it to southern Syria and the Decapolis, while *Ptol. geogr.* 5, 15, 22–23 of the 2nd century CE uses the term together with Decapolis when he refers to the region's cities. In the Roman period, it appears on city coins of Philadelphia, Gadara, Scythopolis, Abila, Pella and Dium (Barkay 2003, 159–160) and inscriptions at Philadelphia (*IGLS* XXI [2] 23–24) and Nysa-Scythopolis (Foerster – Tsafrir 1986–1987, 57; Gatier 1990, 206). Scholars differ in their interpretation of the term as a geographical one (Schürer 1973, 158; Fuks 1983, 171–172), an administrative one (Schürer 1973, 159; Bowersock 1983, 88), a cultic one (Jones 1928, 157) or a term glorifying the Hellenic origins (Bikermann 1947, 266–268; Stein 1990, 274–276).

35 Fuks 1983, 14 no. 8.

36 Rostovtzeff 1941, 132.

37 Launey 1949, 92–93; Rostovzeff 1941 III, 401 no. 137.

states that Alexander established a military stronghold at Samaria although later he attributes it to Perdiccas who suppressed the Samaritan revolt[38]. Further east, Gerasa might have been founded at the time as a military stronghold, its foundation attributed either to Alexander or Perdiccas[39]. Gerasa was joined by some other strongholds that were presumably established by Perdiccas at Pella, Dium and Abila, all of which were thought to have been established in order to form the eastern frontier of the Hellenistic kingdom against nomads[40].

Fuks assumed that once Ptolemais (Acre) was established by Ptolemy II Philadelphus the foundations of Nysa-Scythopolis, Philoteria and Philadelphia must have followed soon after[41]. Engaged in both the first (276–272 / 273 BCE) and second (259–255 BCE) Syrian wars, the importance of Coele Syria loomed high in Ptolemy II's strategy. Once the Ptolemaic naval base and administrative centre in Coele Syria was founded the secure connection of the coast with the Hellenistic centres of Transjordan, strengthened by Philadelphia, became crucial. Philoteria guarded the passages over the Jordan River, while Nysa-Scythopolis was located at the region's most important road junction (*caput viarum*) that connected the coast with the Hellenistic poleis of Transjordan and Damascus[42], a vital road junction (Bet She'an) that in the past housed an important military stronghold of the Egyptian Empire. There is no clear evidence that at the time of their foundation the rights of a polis were granted to any of the three Hellenistic centres, and it is reasonable to assume that they were originally established as military strongholds at well-chosen strategic locations and later developed into semi-autonomous poleis.

The foundation legend of the city, the rather obscure names (Ζκυθωπόλις, Νύσα)[43] and the founder's identity (Dionysos) are interrelated according to Di Segni[44]. Analyzing an inscription that refers to Dionysos as the city founder (Θεω Διονύσω κτίστη τω κυρίω) Di Segni examines the historical sources. In his 1st century CE list of cities that formed the Decapolis *Pliny* remarks: »Scythopolis, previously called Nysa, as Liber Pater buried his nurse there, having settled Scythians [at the site]«. His legendary remark was later repeated by the 3rd century CE writer *Solinus*[45]. By contrast, the 6th century CE historian *John Malalas*

38 *Eus. chron.* 114, 118; Tcherikover 1973, 83 states that during the years of Perdiccas' regency (323–321 BCE) he upgraded Samaria to a polis, while Jones 1971, 237 concludes that both Alexander and Perdiccas established military strongholds rather than real cities. The fortified city gate at Samaria with its round towers might have been erected at the time (Crowfoot et al. 1942, 24–27).

39 The city was either named after its elders speared by Alexander or after his veterans that settled there (*Steph. Byz.* 3, 543; Seyrig 1965, 25–28; Spijkerman 1978, 102–103 no. 15). An inscription found at Gerasa hints to its founding by Perdiccas (Welles 1938, 423 no. 137).

40 Fuks 1983, 15–16. Both Pella and Dium were named after cities in Macedonia, the former Alexander's birth place (*Steph. Byz.* 3, 544). However, the relation of the names to the Macedonian cities was opposed by Jones 1971, 448 and Tcherikover 1973, 79.

41 Fuks 1983, 22–23. Ptolemais' monogram first appears on coins of Ptolemy II in 260–261 BCE (Poole 1883, 33 no. 108) and the city is mentioned by its new name in *Zenon*' papyri dated to 259 BCE (*PCZ* 59004, 59008; *PSI* 406, 616; *PSI* 366). Philoteria was named after the king's sister (Tcherikover 1973, 82). It was identified by Sukenik 1922, 101–109 with Khirbet el-Kerach where Hellenistic remains were found (Baramki 1944, 86–90; Maisler et al. 1952, 166–167; Bar-Adon 1953, 132; Bar-Adon 1955, 273). Amman was renamed by its dynastic name (*Hier. comm. in Ez.* 335 and *Steph. Byz.* s.v. Philadelphia) right after 259 BCE as *Zenon* papyri *PSI* 406 still carries the old name.

42 Isaac – Roll 1982.

43 The name ›Scythopolis‹ appears in the 4th century CE *Book of Judith* 3, 10, in *Polyb.* 5, 70, 4–5 and the *Books of Maccabees I* 5, 52; 12, 40; *II* 12, 30, while the name ›Nysa‹ appears in learned or poetic contexts (Di Segni 1997, 145 nos. 20–21). Di Segni further points out that the name Nysa was not used by the Ptolemies (*RE* XVII, 2, 1937, 1627–54).

44 Di Segni 1997, 139–161.

45 *Plin. nat.* 5, 74; *Solin.* 36, 156. In his poem Dionysiaca the Byzantine poet *Nonnos* mentions Nysa as one of the nymphs in Dionysos' retinue with no reference to the legend (Di Segni 1997, note 15).

connected the name Nysa to Iphigenia, rescued from the Scythian king Thoas, and stated that a temple was built to her patron goddess Artemis in Tricomia[46]. Notwithstanding *Pliny*'s statement that the name Nysa was older than Scythopolis, Rigsby[47] argued that Nysa was a dynastic name of the eldest daughter of Antiochus IV who presumably re-founded and renamed the city, following her birth in ca. 174 BCE, and concluded that the name Nysa has no relation to the local myth of Dionysos and was later added to the name Scythopolis. The excavation results at Tel Iẓtabba revealing that the re-founded polis dated to 175 / 170 BCE verify Rigsby's dating but not his assumption that no cult of Dionysos was practiced in the city at the time. Di Segni[48] assumed that the foundation myth either attests to an early tradition or cult of Dionysos already practiced during the Hellenistic period or might be regarded as an etiological tale that explains the toponym. The unique sealings found during the excavations at Tel Iẓtabba, depicting Nysa breastfeeding Dionysos (**fig. 13**), provide clear evidence for the validity of the myth and the existence of a cult practice of the local triad: Dionysos, Zeus and Nysa already in the 2nd century BCE and probably even earlier. The Ptolemaic dynasty regarded Dionysos as their founder (αρχηγέτης), and Di Segni therefore considers the likelihood that such a cult existed already in the mid-3rd century BCE and might have assisted a later Nysa cult to take root. It seems rather unlikely that the Seleucids with their dynastic god Zeus would encourage a cult of Dionysos *ktistes* in the re-founded polis unless it was already practiced long before. Yet an inscription from Tel Bet She'an attests to the cult of Zeus Olympios in the 2nd century BCE. However, it should be remembered that Zeus also played a central role in the myth of Dionysos and that he might have shared the foundation cult at Nysa-Scythopolis with his son and wet-nurse long before the 2nd century[49].

Civic coins of Roman Nysa-Scythopolis portraying the foundation myth of Dionysos served, according to Lichtenberger, as »identity fostering«[50]. He connects the phenomenon with the Second Sophistic that publicized orators during the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE in the Decapolis and emphasized Greek origins (*eugeneia*) as promoted by Hadrian, the Pan-Hellenic emperor, hailed as the *ktistes* par excellence in numerous inscriptions[51]. Lichtenberger alludes to the powerful dominance of the Dionysos *ktistes* myth that first over-shaded the Seleucid princess Nysa and later Gabinius, the re-founder of the Roman Nysa-Scythopolis. The name Gabinia was added for a while to the Roman city name.

Fuks devoted a long and thorough discussion to the assumed foundation date and nature of Hellenistic Nysa-Scythopolis[52]. His research was based on historical and epigraphic sources, supplemented by the meagre archaeological data known at the time from the UME excavations, and while it predated the recent excavations both at Tel Bet She'an and Tel Iẓtabba, its validity has not been basically questioned.

The foundation issue of Nysa-Scythopolis and its supposed date were earlier dealt with in length by various scholars. Beloch assumed that Nysa-Scythopolis and other poleis in the region as Pella, Gadara, Hippos, Dium and Gerasa were Macedonian foundations of the late 4th century BCE[53]. Jones considered Nysa-Scythopolis a Ptolemaic foundation, although he

46 Di Segni 1997, 144 note 16. Tricomia was also referred to as the possible origin of Scythopolis by Appelbaum (Appelbaum 1980, 63–69; Fuks 1983, 69 note 22). The 6th century CE historian *John Malalas* (*Ion. Mal*. 139–140) preserved a tradition regarding the foundation of the city as a result of synoecism of three villages, originally named Trikomia. As for the alleged Artemis temple, no temple of that deity or any other evidence for her cult was found at the site.

47 Rigsby 1980, 238–242.

48 Di Segni 1997, 144–145.

49 *SEG* VIII, no. 33.

50 Barkay 2003, 111–154; Lichtenberger 2004, 23–34.

51 Di Segni 1997, 148.

52 Fuks 1983, 44–74.

53 Beloch 1903, 233.

was not specific about its foundation date[54]. Tcherikover agreed with Jones and stated that the city's main deity (Dionysos) was firmly related to the Ptolemaic dynasty[55]. Abel was the first to propose that a Scythian stronghold was established by Antigonos Seleucus or Ptolemy II, an assumption later rejected by Tcherikover[56]. Avi-Yonah combined foundation date and city name[57] and postulated that Scythians serving in the Ptolemaic army founded the city in the autumn of 254 BCE, the time of the visit of the Bosphoran delegation on behalf of Paerisades II[58].

Describing the activity of Joseph the Tobiad, the tax collector, *Josephus* states that the Scythopolitans refused to pay the tax, which earlier they willingly did, and therefore the tax collector executed the prominent citizens (protos) and sent their property to the king[59]. Fuks dated Joseph's activity to the years 240–205 / 204 BCE and placed the incident occurred in the early years of his service[60]. As new foundations were exempted from tax payment during their first years Fuks assumed that a foundation date around 260 BCE would be quite accurate. His dating was corroborated by the hoard of twenty silver tetradrachms from Tel Bet She'an[61]. He further supposed that in light of Ptolemy II's aggressive strategy against the Seleucids[62], culminating in the two Syrian wars, the king decided to strengthen his hold of Coele Syria. With the earlier Ptolemaic foundations along the coast and in Transjordan the addition of a military stronghold at the main strategic crossroad at Bet She'an fitted the king's strategy well[63]. A military unit, presumably consisting of Macedonian Thracians and Greeks from Asia Minor, was stationed in a fortress on Tel Bet She'an which subsequently served as the administrative centre of the district in which Ptolemaic officials resided[64].

Applebaum accepted the authenticity of *Josephus*' account of the activity of Joseph the Tobiad and the supposition that Ptolemy II Philadelphus first founded a military stronghold[65]. Yet, he argued that at the time of the incident reported by Josephus Nysa-Scythopolis must have been a polis as the term used for the deputies (*protos*) is decidedly a municipal term[66]. *Polybios* states that Antiochus III, while invading the region during the fourth Syrian war (218 BCE), captured Philoteria, Scythopolis and later Pella and placed a military unit in each

54 Jones 1971, 242.

55 Tcherikover 1973, 82.

56 Abel 1952, 57; Tcherikover 1973, 358 no. 96.

57 Avi-Yonah 1962, 123–134.

58 The Scythians were nomad tribes living in Classical times in what is now South Russia. Rejecting any connection to their activity in the region at the late 7th century BCE (*Eus. chron.* 88; *Synk.* I, 405) Avi-Yonah 1962, 123–134 assumed that they served as archers and horsemen in the Ptolemaic army. Launey 1949, 421–423 considers the evidence of their appearances as relatively meagre. Avi-Yonah pointed out that Bet She'an was a perfect choice for archers' horses with its ample grazing grounds. See Fuks 1983, 45–47 for arguments against Avi-Yonah's theory. For further discussion concerning the issue of the name of the city see Fuks 1983, 160–165.

59 *Ios. ant. Iud.* XII, 183.

60 Fuks 1983, 47–49. It was generally accepted that Joseph's appointment should be dated to Ptolemy III Euergetes' reign (246–221 BCE). Tcherikover 1973, 102–106 preferred a date between 230–220 BCE, while Stern 1973, 41–47 set a date somewhere around 240 BCE. Fuks 1983, 70 note 26 assumed that Joseph's activity lasted 32 years and not 22 as was mistakenly stated, a correction based on a manuscript preserved in the New College library in Oxford (Niese 1892 III, xv).

61 FitzGerald 1931, 51–55.

62 Tarn – Griffith 1952, 16–17; Bengtson 1969, 405–406. 408.

63 Applebaum 1975, 60.

64 Launey 1949, 92–93; Jones 1971, 449 note 20.

65 Applebaum 1989, 1–8.

66 See for Gerasa: Welles 1938, nos. 45–46. 188; for Tiberias: *Ios. ant. Iud.* 20, 194.

polis. The historian also mentions the cities' territory (*chora*), legally referred to a polis[67]. Contradicting *Polybios*' reference Avi-Yonah, dating the ›municipalization‹ of Scythopolis to the 2nd century BCE advanced the view that Philoteria and Scythopolis were at the time administrative district centres. Their inhabitants were organized as *politeumata*, while their land was part of the royal domain and therefore they were not poleis and could not possess any chora[68].

In an attempt to establish the foundation date of Nysa-Scythopolis as a self-administered polis Fuks tried to date its chora[69]. In his opinion the Hephtziba inscription (dated to 200–199 BCE, while some lines were presumably added in 195 BCE) demonstrates that at the time Scythopolis had no chora[70]. The inscription indirectly refers to Scythopolis, indicating village land in the vicinity of Scythopolis that fall into three differing categories of legal ownership: land held by the king, land held by Ptolemy son of Thraseas in hereditary tenancy and land transferred by the king to Ptolemy. As all of this land is not part of its chora Fuks concluded that the city did not possess any at the time. Although the evidence from the Hephtziba inscription is ambiguous Fuks uses it as a *terminus post quem*, while the priest list unearthed on Tel Bet She'an serves as a *terminus ante quem*.

The fragmentary inscription with a priest list dates from the reign of Demetrius II (145–140 BCE) and was compared by Mouterde to a similar complete inscription from Samaria[71]. The reference to a city clerk (*grammateus*) in line 5 and probably to an *archon* in line 11 presumably indicates that Samaria was a polis at the time. In analogy Scythopolis could have been one. On a lead weight from Tel Bet She'an dated to the years 118 / 117 BCE the *Agoranomus* Satyros was mentioned[72]. In the light of the policy of Antiochus IV it seems reasonable that under that king Scythopolis became a polis. Hence, Fuks concluded that about thirty years after Antiochus III' victory at Paneas (200 BCE) all the land referred to in the Hephtziba inscription was granted to the city's chora.

In view of the excavation results at Tel Iẓtabba and Nysa's foundation date as a polis around 175 BCE Fuks' assumption seems reasonable. The numismatic evidence from both Tel Bet She'an and Tel Iẓtabba is quite consistent. Nysa-Scythopolis did not mint its own coins, neither as a military stronghold and administrative centre founded by Ptolemy II on Tel Bet She'an, nor with its foundation as a polis by Antiochus IV on Tel Iẓtabba. Most of the coins that were found at both sites were minted at Acco-Ptolemais and it seems that Nysa-Scythopolis even as a polis was never granted full administrative autonomy.

Nysa-Scythopolis is the only city among those termed Greek cities by Josephus[73], while Gadara, Hippos and Gaza depicted the term ›Greek Polis‹ on their coins and inscriptions. The title could have been re-claimed during Hadrian's reign in order to demonstrate the city's Hellenic ethnic origin. The term *iera* (holy) was granted in the Hellenistic period to cities

67 *Polyb.* 5, 70.

68 Applebaum 1989, 3 does not support Avi-Yonah's assumption that links the foundation of Pella and Scythopolis, apart from stating that from an economic and military point of view both were closely connected. He states that Pella and Philoteria were founded at the 3rd century BCE (Maisler et al. 1952, 165–173. 218–219) and that one of *Zenon*'s papyri indicates that at 258 BCE Pella had an *archon* (Edgar 1931, 12 note 5). This official term does not inevitably imply an urban status. According to *Georgios Synkellos* (*Synk.* 558–559) Philoteria was a Macedonian colony, later renamed Berenice after a Ptolemaic princess (*Steph. Byz.* s.v. Berenice); Avi-Yonah 1962, 53 also states that the suffix *polis* in a city name does not necessarily point to its urban self-administrated statues; Jones 1971, 449 note 20; see Lifshitz 1977, 267–268.

69 Fuks 1983, 66–73.

70 Landau 1966, 54–70; Robert 1970, 469–473 no. 627; Fischer 1979, 131–138; Bertrand 1982, 167–174.

71 Mouterde 1933, 180–182.

72 Lifshitz 1976, 181 no. 33.

73 *Ios. ant. Iud.* 17, 11, 4.

dedicated to a specific deity to whom a sanctuary was erected. It appears on Nysa-Scythopolis' coins from the time of Marcus Aurelius and on coins of other cities in the region as well. It seems that the reused term relates to its earlier Hellenic connotation[74]. The term *asulou* (right of sanctuary), always related to the former, appears at the same time on inscriptions and coins of Scythopolis and even earlier in several other cities in the region. It holds Hellenic sanctuary restrictions and recalls the earlier Hellenic connotations that were most likely kept traditionally in Nysa-Scythopolis.

Nysa-Scythopolis is occasionally mentioned in historical sources of the Hellenistic period. *Polybios*[75] describes the campaign of Antiochus III against Ptolemy IV (218 BCE), in which the city was captured by an agreement with no fighting involved. The Ptolemaic military unit was replaced by a Seleucid one, although not for long, as after the battle of Raphia (217 BCE) the Ptolemies regained their control over the region, followed by an extensive royal tour of the region by Ptolemy and his sister Arsinoe. Although it would be reasonable to assume that the tour included a visit at Nysa-Scythopolis there is no evidence for such. The Hephtziba inscription indicates that shortly after, during the fifth Syrian war, the city was re-captured by Antiochus III (year 111 of the Seleucid era, 202 / 201 BCE). At the time the Seleucid governor of Coele Syria and Phoenicia, Ptolemy son of Thraseas, gained control over some villages near the city[76]. During the winter of 201 / 200 BCE Ptolemy Schopas launched a counter attack and regained control over Nysa-Scythopolis[77]. In the summer of 200 BCE Antiochus achieved his decisive victory over the Ptolemies who finely withdrew from Coele Syria.

In 163 BCE Judas Maccabaeus launched a campaign to save the Jews of the Gilead and on his route via Nysa-Scythopolis used the regional crossroad. While passing by the city he acceded to the local Jews request to spare the city on behalf of their good relation with the pagan community[78].

Twenty years later Tryphon, the usurper to the Seleucid throne during the reign of Demetrius II (146–142 BCE), marched his grand army from Antioch to Nysa-Scythopolis (143 / 142 BCE) where he met Jonathan the Jewish High Priest with his 40,000 men[79]. Avi-Yonah assumed that serving as the arena for both sides' meeting grounds reflected the city's neutral standing in the conflict[80]. On his way back from Jerusalem Tryphon passed through the region once again[81].

The Seleucid era at Nysa-Scythopolis ended in 108 / 107 BCE as attested by the excavation results at Tel Iẓtabba and historical sources. Epikrates, the general of Antiochus IX Cyzicenus, »openly betrayed« the city and its nearby vicinity for a sum of money to the prince and High Priest John Hyrcanus, the conqueror of Samaria and Peraea[82]. *Josephus* states that the city was destroyed and burned as the archaeological evidence clearly indicated. Its citizens went into exile, although *Josephus* does not specify where to. The ruined city was not resettled by the

74 Bikerman 1938, 154–156; Barkay 2003, 162–163; Stein 1990, 299.

75 *Polyb.* 4, 70, 5–6.

76 Landau 1966, 59.

77 *Ios. ant. Iud.* 12, 135.

78 *2 Macc.* 12, 29–31. Although Nysa-Scythopolis was outside of the Jewish realm of Judea the presence of a presumably substantial Jewish community in the city is clearly attested since 163 BCE (Fuks 1983, 147–156). As for the vicinity, the presence of quite a few synagogues in the Bet She'an Valley attests to a densely Jewish populated chora.

79 *1 Macc.* 12, 40–41; *Ios. ant. Iud.* 12, 6, 1–2.

80 Avi-Yonah 1962, 55.

81 *1 Macc.* 12, 41–52.

82 *Ios. ant. Iud.* 12, 10, 3. According to *Josephus* (*Ios. bell. Iud.* 1, 66) the city was captured in war and did not surrender (Lifshitz 1977, 269–270). For the date see Schürer 1973, 210 note 22. The exile of the pagan citizens of the city and presumably those of its chora was dated in Megillath Ta'anith to the 15th and 16th of Sivan.

Hasmoneans, notwithstanding that *Josephus* mentions the visit by Cleopatra, the daughter of Ptolemy VII of Egypt, to Nysa-Scythopolis some years later in 102 BCE, when she made a pact of mutual assistance with Alexander Jannaeus against her son Ptolemy Lathiros. No Hasmonean stratum was revealed at Tel Bet She'an and Tel Iẓtabba, both of which were left in ruins. The conquest of Pompey (64 / 63 BCE) and the re-foundation of Nysa Scythopolis by Gabinius (57 / 55 BCE) abandoned both mounds and occupied the vast area of the Amal Basin and its surrounding hills to the north of Tel Bet She'an.

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