

Scythopolis—Nysa

The Capital of Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Palestine, the Islamic City of Bisan



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Translated by Elias Khayyo

The city of Bisan, situated in the Jordan Valley, is one of the ancient cities in human history. It was inhabited over 6,500 years ago and has been more or less continuously inhabited until today. Its importance is due to its exceptional geographic location on the fortified Al-Husn Hill (Tal Bisan), its proximity to the central junction of the sea road (Via Maris) and the Hawarna pathway (Via Triana Nova), the abundance of water in the area, and the fertility of its land.

According to Greek tradition, as recounted by the Roman historian Plinius in *Naturalis Historia*, the name Scythopolis-Nysa traces back to Greek mythology: Dionysus, the god of wine, buried Nysa, his nurse, in this location and assigned Scythian soldiers to guard the tomb. Hence, the name Scythopolis-Nysa.

Archaeological excavations revealed that the Hellenic city was fortified and walled, covering the entire area of Tal al-Mastaba, which amounts to 250,000 square meters. The city was planned according to the orthogonal planning scheme, introduced by Hippodamus of Miletus, which maintained an architectural and functional separation between public areas and residential and industrial buildings. The Hasmoneans invaded the city in 108–107 BC,

razed and burned it completely, and dispersed its population to other Hellenic cities not controlled by the Hasmoneans. After the occupation of Syria by Pompey in 64–63 BC put an end to Greek rule in the east, Scythopolis-Nysa was rebuilt between 57 and 55 BC, maintaining its Hellenic name. Over Tal Bisan, a religious and administrative center (acropolis) was established. However, its topography and rugged terrain prevented the city's rebuilding in accordance with classical hippodamian planning. Thus, in the city center, a central market (forum) was constructed that included a courthouse (basilica) and two temples, which became the main axis for the city's development. Around the forum, four columned streets were built, along which lay the basilica, the sacred buildings, the public buildings, and the theaters. For daily activities and business, Palladius Street was constructed.

Scythopolis-Nysa was now ruled by the Romans, who occupied the Levant for 400 years and established the ten-city union known as the Decapolis. Scythopolis-



Aerial shot of Scythopolis-Nysa.

Nysa was the largest among these and soon transformed into a flourishing commercial and cultural center, becoming the most important city of the union, which prompted Emperor Hadrian to visit in AD 130. During the second century, Scythopolis-Nysa had five gates, two of which have been discovered: the Damascus Gate in the northeast and the Caesarea Gate in the northwest. During the

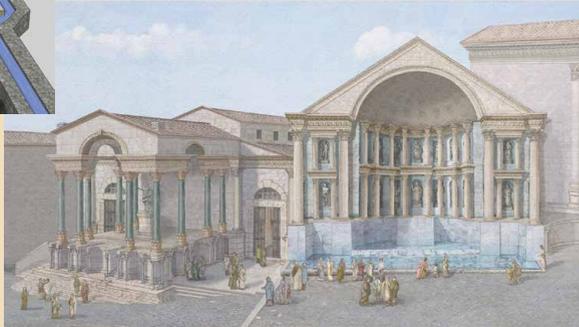
The facade of the northern theater.





An illustration of the linen mill.

An illustration of the altar of Caesar and the path of the nymphs.



Roman era, renovations were carried out in the city center, and new public buildings were constructed along the enormous public buildings street, among which three buildings are distinguished: an altar for the worship of Caesar, erected to the northeast of the basilica; the Trail of the Nymphs, a complex dedicated to the mythological nymphs that comprised a fountain and a luxurious marble basin, at the center of which is a semicircular arc covered by a half dome; and the temple of Caesar Marcus Aurelius (AD 160–181) that was established over an elevated platform, and featured a 15-meter high, straight northern facade adorned with architectural elements and a semicircular back facade with a place for the statue of the god or Caesar at its center.

One of the most important cultural buildings discovered at the city's center is the southern theater, built on a natural hill that inclines from south to north. Its construction dates back to the beginning of

the first century. At the end of the second century, it was expanded and rebuilt during the city development project of the Roman Peace era (*Pax Romana*). The theater comprises three main parts: the platform building, the orchestra, and the auditorium that consists of three floors: the first is built on natural rock, while the second and third floors are built on a set of aqueducts and domes. The theater has a capacity of about 9,000 spectators.

Scythopolis-Nysa maintained the distinct Hellenic-Roman character in its buildings, which resulted from a simultaneous combination of Eastern and Western cultural attributes. The architecture of Scythopolis-Nysa and its mundane and religious culture, together with the various languages its population spoke (Greek, Latin, and Aramaic), reflect the process by which a merger and coexistence of strong cultures occurred, as they emerged from the culture of the Hellenic and Roman world and from the ancient traditions of the

East in the Mediterranean Sea basin.

The city of Scythopolis-Nysa was in its golden age under Byzantine rule. When Christianity was introduced around AD 350, the new faith greatly influenced the city's design, as pagan temples were removed. During this period, two historical events took place: in AD 363, an earthquake hit the area and destroyed large parts of the city and many public buildings in its cultural center. The second occurred when Caesar Theodosius ordered that Palestine be divided into three provinces and Scythopolis-Nysa was declared the capital of the second Palestine province, *Palaestina Secunda*. Thereby, the city became one of the most important administrative and religious centers, and its population reached about 40,000 people in the sixth century.

In 359, Scythopolis-Nysa was chosen as the seat of a special court for Emperor Constantine II during his war against paganism. This choice might have been due to its location between Antioch and Alexandria, from which most of the accused came. During the reign of Emperor Julian (361 to 363), it appears that the pagans enjoyed good graces, albeit temporarily. But during anti-Christian riots that erupted in the city in 362, the tomb of Patrophilus, the first bishop of the city, was desecrated.

Studies and results of archaeological digs indicate that the development of the Christian character of the city of Scythopolis-Nysa reached its peak in the fifth and sixth centuries, when the city became a cultural and religious center. Its center was redesigned, and new buildings and streets were constructed, such as the eastern and western public baths, new buildings on Palladius Street, and the semicircular Sigma building that consisted of twelve rooms and contained three arcs. Unlike in other Decapolis cities (Jerash, Gadara/Umm Qais, Bosra, and others) where no churches were built in the city center, the city on Tal Bisan became the seat of a bishop and a home

The archaeological site in Bisan is considered one of the best-preserved sites in the country and an exquisite example of civil and civilizational development in the Middle East, with a variety of buildings constructed across the ages. The city remained buried in dirt for many centuries before it was excavated and revived 50 years ago. Today, visitors can stroll among the ruins of buildings of distinctive quality and superior construction, including theaters, squares, baths, and columned streets. Its churches display splendid mosaic panels that attest to ancient glory.

for monks who resided in its monasteries and managed the city's religious and social affairs. In many cases their authority exceeded that of the province governors and heads of the municipal system.

Some of the most important information about the churches, church fathers, and history of monks in Scythopolis-Nysa has reached us through the works of Kyrrillus, who visited the city in 518 and 531. He mentions names and locations of the city's churches and monasteries, including St. Basilius Monastery, John the Baptist Church, St. Procopius Church (the first saint in the palace of the bishop), John's Hermitage (located on the road leading

Mosaics from the Church of St. Basilius Monastery.





Architectural elements after they fell as a result of the earthquake in 749.

to St. John Church), St. Thomas Church (located on the road leading to Caesarea), and Antanant Monastery (in Ein al-Tina). Historical documents and archaeological excavations indicate the existence of eight churches and monasteries in the city of Scythopolis-Nysa, most of which were constructed on the hill surrounding the city center. Their floors were covered with colorful mosaics and adorned with geometrical panels, the wheel of fortune, vegetables, birds, and predatory and domesticated animals.

The first half of the seventh century was characterized by important historical and cultural events in Syria and Palestine, the most significant of which included the recession and collapse of the Byzantine empire, the Persian occupation (in 614), and the Islamic conquest (634 to 636). In the beginning of the Umayyad period, we see a new administrative division of the Levant and Palestine, as the Byzantine administrative division was replaced, the second Palestine province was replaced by June al-Urdun, and Scythopolis-Nysa, the capital of the province, recovered its ancient Canaanite name of Bisan.

The cultural scene of the Islamic city of Bisan became distinctive, as some symbols particular to the Roman and Byzantine culture were still in use, together with the characteristics of the Islamic city. The city streets, squares, magnificent gates, Roman theater, fountains, and Byzantine baths stood empty and were no longer used for public activity. The new Muslim residents of the city lived side by side with the original Christian, Jewish, and Samaritan residents, and together with Greek and Aramaic, Arabic became an official language of the city. The economic system continued to use the Byzantine currency until it was replaced by the Umayyad currency during the rule of Caliph Abdul Malik ibn Marwan who ruled from 685 to 705 (AH 65 to 86).

During the seventh century, Caliph Mu'awiya initiated reforms and ordered that the capital of Jund al-Urdun be shifted to Tiberias, which caused Bisan to lose its administrative status. Yet it maintained its commercial and industrial position due to the importance of its location at an important crossroads. During this period, the city plans were redesigned

in a calculated manner, and the city was divided into four functional areas, each of which had distinctive features: residential neighborhoods, graveyards, markets and shops, and the industrial area. One of its most important markets was Caliph Hisham Ibn Abd al-Malik's market, constructed in 738 on Sylvanus Street, which contained 38 shops. At the gate of the market, an engraving of gilded glass mosaic testifies that Caliph Hisham ordered Ishaq Ibn Kubaysa to build the market.

The industrial area was built over the ruins of Roman and Byzantine public buildings. During archaeological excavations extensive industrial facilities from the Umayyad period were discovered, which

included potteries for making earthenware and a factory for dyeing leather and linen, built in one of the eastern Byzantine bath halls next to the owner's house.

Throughout the Umayyad period, Bisan maintained its traditional role in exerting political, economic, and commercial influence over the surrounding area, the Bisan district, and preserved its cultural and architectural heritage. In addition, it created new neighborhoods, mosques, factories, and markets until it was destroyed by a powerful earthquake (7 to 7.5 on the Richter scale) in the year AH 131 (January 18, 749).



Mosaic wheel of fortune from the convent of St. Mary.



Mosaic of the grape-picking season.

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