

Internal Settlement Patterns in Abila

Agricultural and pastoral potential, economic and commercial possibilities, geographical situation, cultural and artistic advantages, religious complexities, etc., all played a role in the size, quality and nature of Abila's population.

The Archaeological Evidence

In size, Abila is quite large, c. one kilometer and one half north-south by c. two thirds of a kilometer east-west (FIG. 1.), with Tell Abila on the north, Umm al-'Amad on the south with a saddle depression in between, and substantial suburbs and farmsteads extending out on various sides. Extensive surface ruins on both tells and in the saddle witness to the vigorous building activity especially in the Roman-Byzantine periods. Two large underground aqueducts run from 'Ain Qweilbeh south of Umm al-'Amad along the east ledge of the south tell north to the saddle depression, and in ancient times a third large underground aqueduct also brought water to the site from farther south. Many tomb and grave complexes were dug into the wadi ledges to the east and south of the site (FIG. 2).

The pottery distribution found at Abila covers a wide range of archaeological periods, as was initially shown by the 1980 survey and further illustrated in the 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1988 excavation seasons. The archaeological periods represented by pottery evidence at Abila range from the Neolithic to Ayyubid/Mamluk period (and including some Ottoman), with heavier concentrations for the Middle and Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Umayyad periods.

As to architectural evidence on the acropolis of Tell Abila (Area A), excavation has shown that the sixth century A.D. basilica (34.50m by 19.0m) there had used part of the foundations and other parts of an earlier structure (probably a Roman temple; cf. Hesban). The acropolis wall system is substantial (an extended portion is of header-stretcher construction) with long use and re-building evident.¹ A section of re-used basalt architectural

fragments just south of Area A and a flight of basalt stairs (2.30m wide; risers 0.50m high) at the southeast corner of the tell may point to an entrance to Tell Abila from a terrace in the saddle below.² Excavation on the north side of the tell shows that the 5.00m high city wall was used as early as the Late Roman period. Just below the acropolis wall on the south of Tell Abila the Decumanus street proceeded west from the ancient bridge; the *Cardo Maximus* went south from Tell Abila over a vault to Umm al-'Amad.

On a shelf just east of the theater cavea on the north slope of Umm al-'Amad, a small singleapse basilica (nave, 24.5m by 18.7m; apse radius, 4.85m; a narthex on the west is 4.5m wide) has been surveyed. The theater cavea, diameter 80m, height above the floor c. 30m, evidences multiple use. In 1986 and 1988 we excavated a portion of the street (which extends off the Decumanus; MacDonald shows side streets off main streets in his plan of Timgad³) in front of the cavea, and a portion of the cavea itself, finding in 1988 under the heavy overburden remains of a large Umayyad palace (re-used in the Abbasid and Ayyubid/Mamluk periods). Also at the east end of the palace we encountered a suspicious looking apse wall, suggesting remains of a possible Byzantine basilica.

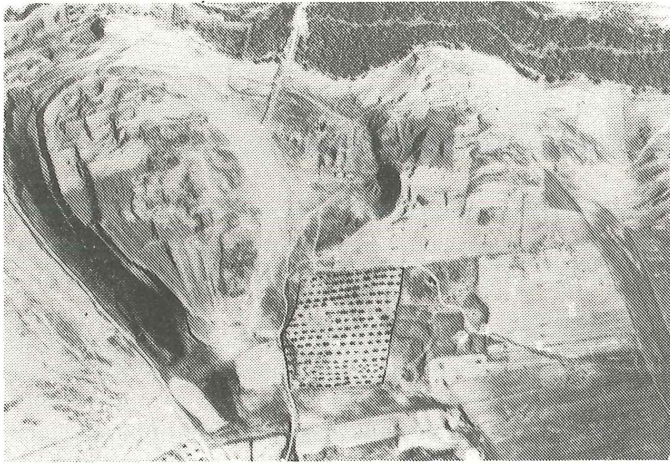
Survey and mapping have been done in the two underground Umm al-'Amad aqueducts (the Upper Roman/Byzantine aqueduct, 1.76m wide, 0.78m high; and the Lower Iron Age-Early Roman aqueduct, 2.38m wide, 0.88m high) and also in the third Roman/Byzantine water tunnel which brought water from 'Ain Khureibah further south to augment the 'Ain Qweilbeh supply. Because these Umm al-'Amad tunnels brought water north from 'Ain Qweilbeh at least 1,400 m away, under the eastern ledge of the tell up to and near these ruins, we suspect that the ruins just north of the theater constituted a bath and possibly a nymphaeum complex for which much of this aqueduct water was needed.

On Umm al-'Amad to the west of the basilica we found

¹K. Smith, "Abila, 1982", in "The Abila Excavation: The Second Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1982), A Preliminary Report, Part II," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin*, 22 (1983), pp. 30, 31.

²Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

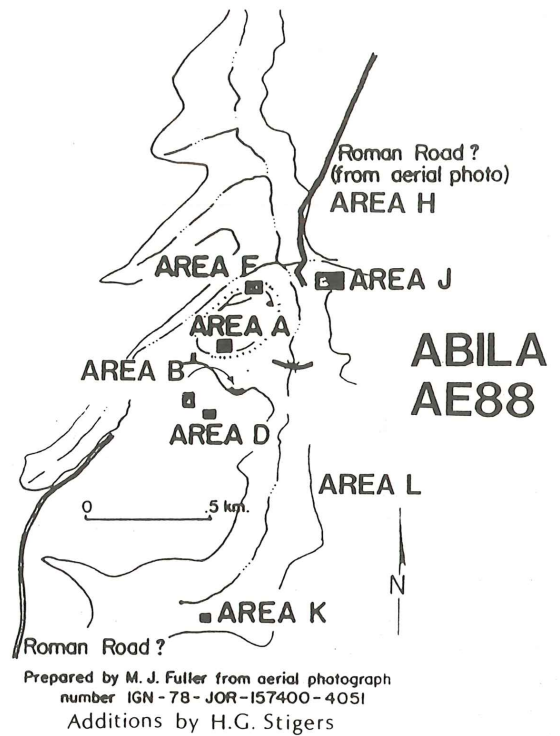
³W.L. MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire, Volume II, An Urban Appraisal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 27, figs. 23, 24.



1. Qweilbeh, aerial photograph of Abila; upper background, Wadi Qweilbeh; center foreground, Tell Abila; right foreground, Umm al-'Amad and the theater cavea.

remains either of a market, a street, a palaestra, or a small Byzantine garden villa with two columns to mark the entrance.⁴ The Umm al-'Amad Area D Christian basilica (Christian crosses are carved on some of the capitals), excavated in 1984, 1986 and 1988, is c. 41m long by 20m wide, with the nave 10m wide and each side aisle 5m wide. In front of the nave and narthex on the west we have excavated remains of the church's monumental porch.

Of a total number of the fifty-five tombs and graves excavated from 1982 to 1988, a number are to be dated to the Roman/Byzantine periods, usually with re-use in more than one period, in some cases into the Umayyad. In a few cases the tombs and/or graves were dug in the Hellenistic period (Area H 8) or the Late Hellenistic/Early Roman period (L 15, L 16 and L 3), and one with Nabataean features (H 3) seems to have been dug as a Nabataean/Roman tomb. In 1988, two Bronze-Iron Age tombs were salvaged (H 13, Middle/Late Bronze; H 10, Late Bronze/Iron Age). These Abila tombs thus far excavated often had a dromos and exhibited a variety of types: 1) single chamber tombs (as L 16); 2) main chamber tombs with or without a central sump with loculi (as H 1, H 2, L 15), or with arcosolia (J 3, J 4, L 2, L 10; this type is well attested in Palestine in the Late Roman/Early Byzantine periods),⁵ or with a rock cut bench (J 5);⁶ 3) or shaft tombs cut down into the ground (as J 9, J 10, J 14, 15, J 18, J 22-25;⁷ and H 8, H 9). Also excavated were one Roman sarcophagus (K 2) and one columbarium (L 4) constructed either for the placement of burial urns or used just for offerings for the dead. Sometimes the tombs were carved with elaborate



Site of Abila of the Decapolis

2. Qweilbeh, contour and excavation site map of Abila, 1988.

external facades (L 13) or with internal entrance medallion painting (L 5), and in the large tombs sometimes with elaborate wall and ceiling paintings (L 5, the Temple Tomb near 'Ain Quweilbah, etc.).⁸ Often the loculi were sealed with stone, mortar and plaster (as L 5, H 6) and painted (H 6, L 13, L 5), sometimes with inscriptions (H 6).

Ethnoarchaeological studies conducted during the 1982, 1984 and 1986 seasons in the Abila region agree with the study made of the floated soil samples, containing botanical specimens, that ancient and modern Abila specialized in the husbandry of sheep and goats and the raising of crops such as olives, grapes, figs, wheat, barley, garden vegetables, etc. The rainfall in the Abila area now averages 350 to 450mm annually,⁹ and assuming similar rainfall in ancient and modern times, this is well within the range of dry farming and even truck farming at ancient Abila.

Of the 61 coins found at Abila from 1982 through 1988 all but two (silver coins, one Ottoman, A.D. 1754, and the other Ayyubid, A.D. 1239/40) have been bronze. The time periods represented range from Hellenistic to Ottoman.

⁴W.H. Marey et al., 'The 1984 Season at Abila of the Decapolis,' *Annual of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan* 29 (1985), p. 225.

⁵J.J. Davis, "Abila Tomb Excavations: 1984", in 'The Abila Excavation: The Third Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1984), A Preliminary Report, Part I,' *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 24 (1985), pp. 79, 80.

⁶Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 53.

⁷Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-90.

⁸Cf. W.H. Mare, 'Tomb Finds at Abila of the Decapolis, News and Notes,' *Biblical Archaeologist* 45/1 (1982), pp. 57, 58.

⁹Cf. J.A. Shoup, "Ethnoarchaeological Report," in 'The Abila Excavation: The Fourth Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1986), A Preliminary Report, Part III,' *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 30 (1988), pp. 38, 39.

The mint marks, where visible, include Tyre, Antioch (Syria), Constantinople and Rome.

INTERPRETATION OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE:

Settlement Pattern in Roman/Byzantine and Umayyad Abila

Internal Population Levels at Abila

Comparing the population density of Abila (1500m N-S, 750m E-W) with modern Khureibah south of Abila (21 persons per hectare, 700 to 1,000 persons), and modern Harta to the north (population 5000;¹⁰ physical size in 1972, 1000m by c. 500m),¹¹ we can project that ancient Abila had a population of c. 8 000 to 10,000 persons — a medium size city. This projection agrees with the estimates of Broshi and Frankfort on Abila population size for the Roman period, 6320 and 6241 respectively, and for the Byzantine/Umayyad periods, 12,760 and 12,600 respectively.¹²

The above population estimates for Abila can be correlated in general with the archaeological data found at the theater cavea, assuming that below the heavy debris overlay and other building remains in this area there is finally to be found more material evidence of the theater. At Abila in 1988, Reuben G. Bullard, in arguing for the theater hypothesis, indicated that this theater cavea must have been man-made; it is too steep to be a natural slope. Incidentally, Schumacher in his brief survey in 1888 comments about the theater: "The configuration of the slope was made use of to form the amphitheater, the seats — of which but few remained — were placed on a masoned foundation, for the reception of which the soft rock had been prepared."¹³ In the 1980 survey the diameter of the theater cavea was determined to be 80m, and the height has been shown to be c. 30m. The theater of Marcellus in Rome (120m wide, 32m high) seated 11,000¹⁴ and the north theater at Jarash 56.50m across and c. 16m high seated 1,600.¹⁵ Thus the Abila theater, about two thirds size of the theater of Marcellus and more than twice as large as the Jarash north theater, must have held about 6000 to 7000 persons; compare the comparable size theater at Aphrodisias, Turkey, seating c. 8,000.¹⁶ It is well to remember, however, that it is difficult to estimate the population size of an ancient site from theater capacity without also

knowing the intensity of cultural interest in the population and the city's ability and willingness to expend sizable funds on such facilities.

'Ain Qweilbeh, with a flow of 7.7 liters per second volume, would be putting out 665,280 liters per day, enough to provide for 2218 persons,¹⁷ (on an estimate of 300 liters per person per 24 hours),¹⁸ but with the capacity of either one of the Umm al-'Amad aqueducts (each with a capacity to provide water for 10,000 to 20,000 persons), and the additional services that the Khureibah aqueduct, bringing water from 'Ain Khureibah on the south, would provide, and the possibility of water being brought from the westsouthwest by an additional aqueduct (West Transsect 15), the possibility of providing water for a population of 8000 to 10,000 is certainly reasonable.

The Social Classes and their Standing at Abila

Following the patterns of the social classes generally represented in the Roman Empire, [1] the wealthy Senatorial-Equestrian class¹⁹; 2) the household community unit, the *oikonomia*,²⁰ headed by the *pater familias*²¹; 3) the free plebs; 4) freedmen; and 5) slaves]; or in the Greek world [1] the rulers; 2) soldiers; and 3) manual laborers, Plato, *The Republic*²²; or set forth in Roman Jerusalem [1] the rich rulers, merchants, landowners, tax-farmers, bankers, religious officials; 2) middle class entrepreneurs (traders, craftsmen, clergy, freedmen, innkeepers, etc.); and 3) the poor (slaves, day-laborers and beggars),²³ Abila must have had at least three social classes: 1) the wealthy; 2) middle class entrepreneurs; and 3) the poor.

Evidence from the Abila tombs gives some support to this three tiered model of society. Evidence of the wealthy class is seen in elaborately painted tombs, containing loculi²⁴ (L 5, L 17, the Temple Tomb on the south slope of Umm al-'Amad, etc.), some with basalt sarcophagi (H 1, L 5, K 2), monumental tower tombs (L 12), and wide ranging and expensive grave goods (as in J 1, two gold rings, etc.). The middle class is represented by smaller and less elaborately decorated tombs (H 1, H 2), also equipped with loculi (H 1, H 2), sometimes with arcosolia (J 13, L 12) and containing a moderate variety of grave goods (H 1, H 2). Evidence of the poor and day-laboring class is seen primarily in Area J of the necropolis in shaft and cist graves

¹⁰N.B. Fuller, "Analysis of the Ethnoarchaeological Studies," in "The Abila Excavation: The Third Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1984), Part II," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 25 (1985), p. 76.

¹¹N.B. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹²M.J. Fuller, Unpublished dissertation, 1987, p. 246.

¹³G. Schumacher, *Abila of the Decapolis* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1889), p. 30.

¹⁴MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

¹⁵V.A. Clark *et al.*, 'The Jerash North Theatre,' *Jerash Archaeological Project, 1981-1983*, F. Zayadine (ed), (Amman: Department of Antiquities, 1986), pp. 213, 226, 229.

¹⁶Erim, *Aphrodisias. City of Venus Aphroditic*, (New York: Facts on File Publication, 1986), pp. 79, 80.

¹⁷M.J. Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p. 69.

²⁰C. Hill, *The Sociology of the New Testament*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Nottingham University, 1972, p. 215.

²¹Tidball, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-81.

²²Cf. G.W. Botsford and C.A. Robinson, Jr. *Hellenic History*, 5th ed, revised by Donald Kagan (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 363.

²³J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), Ch. IV to VII.

²⁴J.J. Davis, "Abila Tomb Excavations," in "The Abila Excavation: The Second Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1982), A Preliminary Report, Part I," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 21 (1983), p. 55 and *op. cit.* p. 91, states that elaborately painted tombs point to a wealthy and important class at Abila.

there (J 9, J 10, J 14, J 15, etc.) (cf. also the Hellenistic grave H 8, excavated in 1988), with few grave goods. About this phenomenon Davis comments, "...simple graves and cist burials reflect the hasty disposition of the body of individuals of a poorer class".²⁵ That the wealthy are primarily buried in Area L and that the poorer classes primarily in Area J (with the middle class buried some in Area H and some Area J) suggest that class segregation was practiced at Abila. As Davis says, "The very large and elaborately painted tombs are usually quite isolated, whereas the common chamber and loculi tombs and graves of average citizens are concentrated in a distinctly different area. The socio-economic factors that divided the people of urban Abila apparently divided them in cemetery traditions as well".²⁶

The Economic and Cultural Patterns of the People in Abila
A prominent factor in determining class status at Abila must have been one's economic position as well as his social and cultural background. How prosperous was Roman-Byzantine Abila?

Economic Prosperity

On Tell Abila, the 5m high city wall exposed on the north, the substantial acropolis wall on the south, the Roman temple-Byzantine basilica structures and later Umayyad buildings on the acropolis and the *Cardo Maximus* road running north-south along the west of the acropolis all point to an opulent city.

In the saddle depression the theater cavea (containing a theater, then possibly a basilica, and finally an Umayyad palace), the east-west *Decumanus* street system, running west across the ancient stone bridge, with a branch off to the south to go between the theater cavea and the bath/nymphaeum complex, the monumental buildings and large civic center which must have been located on a platform in the middle of the saddle, also bespeak economic wealth and prosperity.

The Area D basilica on Umm al-'Amad and the earlier building there (stratigraphic evidence shows that floor and surface layers of this earlier structure were cut to lay down the stylobate foundation of the seventh century AD basilica), the Byzantine villa (or market, palaestra, etc.) to the west, and the surface remains of many other building on the south tell give evidence that this part of the city was economically and commercially prosperous.

The agricultural diversification at ancient Abila, as evidenced through the study of the botanical specimens and the osteological evidence showing that many sheep and goats were raised,²⁷ point to prosperous farming and to potential for prosperous landowners "households" in the Abila area. The Abila ethnoarchaeological reports²⁸ corroborate this. This evidence runs contrary to Rostovtzeff's claim that the Transjordan region was too poor agriculturally to sustain a sizeable city population.²⁹

Artisan products also bear testimony to a vigorous economy at Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Abila. The quantity of imports, such as Hellenistic black ware (found in increasing amounts), Eastern Terra Sigillata sherds and some Cypriot ware (as Cypriot white ware) evidence economic prosperity and commercial connections. The presence of molded figurines of classical Greek and Roman mythology (the Dionysos, Terpsichore, and horse and rider figurines found in Tomb H 2), and part of a figurine of a Roman figure wearing Roman clothing and holding a scroll (?) (A 88, H 16001, #849) point to high culture and affluence.

Expertise in tomb painting, tomb carving (done by tomb masons), and the extensive use of glass — many fragments of glass objects and whole glass vessels (lamps, unguentaria, flasks, etc.) and window glass — point to sophistication, as do sophisticated temple buildings, some with a double roof, portrayed on some Abila coins³⁰ and the many pieces of sculptured architecture found in excavation, including a part of a marble altar screen (Area A) and a beautifully carved marble foot of a large statue (found in Area B in 1988).

The Arts and Culture

The theater cavea, the bath/nymphaeum complex and the nearby monumental buildings and middle level plaza (?) for an expanded civic center in the large central depression certainly point to concentrated cultural, as well as business, activity in the center of the site. Compare other ancient theater, bath/nymphaeum complexes, and nearby civic centers at Palmyra, at Antioch on the Orontes, at Timgad and at Lepcis Magna in north Africa.³¹ The importance placed on Roman temples (one on Tell Abila, and possibly another on Umm al-'Amad in Area D) and on Byzantine church basilicas speak to the cultural, as well as religious,³² climate of Abila.

Further evidence of religious emphases and cult practices

²⁵Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Cf. R.H. Kyle, 'Human Skeletal Remains from Abila: 1988 Season,' *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 31 (1988), p. 35.

²⁸N.B. Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-82; J.A. Shoup, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-40.

²⁹M. Rostovtzeff, *Caravan Cities* (New York: AMS Press, 1975, reprint of the 1932 edition), p. 62; later in his *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), pp. 270, 271, he revised his concept and allowed for agricultural prosperity and landowners.

³⁰A. Spijkerman, *The Coins of the Decapolis and Provincia Arabia*. (Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1978), pls. 7-9.

³¹MacDonald, *op. cit.*, p. 20, fig. 16, Palmyra; p. 23, fig. 18, Antioch on the Orontes; p. 27, fig. 23, Timgad; and p. 40, fig. 36, Lepcis Magna.

³²Inscriptional material bears testimony to a bishopric at Abila in the sixth century A.D. See B. Van Elderen, 'The Water Tunnel Inscription of Abila,' to be published in the Winter-Summer, 1989, double issue of the *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin*; the inscription reads, "[At the time of...] the most holy and most blessed bishop ..., the upper channel was cleared in the month (s) September (and) October, in the second indiction (and) the year 631 [Pompeian era, i.e., A.D. 568]."

at ancient Abila can be seen in the silver amulet (probably a fertility cult image, used for apotropaic purposes) found in Area A in 1982 on Tell Abila, and in the broken well-weathered limestone altar, with a *patera* on top to hold libation offerings and with carved scenes of a bull (?) on the sides (a Mithraic cult object?),³³ found north of Tell Abila in 1982.

Tomb evidence pointing to Abila's ancient religious practices include: 1) loculi-central sump Roman tombs (H 1), representing domicile living after death; 2) loculi sealed with stone and/or plaster, enabling families in comfort to visit tombs for worship; 3) limestone busts/headstones, pointing to family reunions and feasts³⁴; 4) Dionysos and

Terpsichore figures (H 2) used in the cult³⁵; 5) food offerings and incense (L 15) for cult worship; 6) lamps and lamp niches pointing to the Roman practice of honoring the dead with lighted lamps on the Kalends, Ides and Nones of each month and yearly in the Parentalia, February 13 to 21³⁶; and 7) bronze bells buried with the dead, pointing to an apotropaic practice of warding off evil.³⁷

Thus we have proposed that Abila in the Roman and Byzantine periods was a moderate size city and urban area of 8000 to 10,000 persons, with a prosperous agricultural and commercial economy, and the type of class and cultural structure which befits a city belonging to that area and time.

³³Cf. Michael P. Speidel, *Mithras-Orion: Greek Hero and the Roman Army God*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980), pp. 39-40.

³⁴Davis, *op. cit.* (n. 5), p. 72.

³⁵Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 90; J.M.C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, (Ithaca, New York, 1971), pp. 38-39, 236.

³⁶N.B. Fuller, "Abila Tomb Excavations: 1986," in "The Abila Excavation: The Fourth Campaign at Abila of the Decapolis (1986), A Preliminary Report, Part II," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin*, 29 (1987), p. 59; Toynbee, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 64.

³⁷N.B. Fuller, *op. cit.* (n. 36), p. 59; N.P. Toll, *Excavations at Dura Europos, Part II, The Necropolis. Preliminary Report on the Ninth Season of Work, 1935-1936*, M. Rostovtzeff et al. (eds) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 122.