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Urbanism in the Late Antique Decapolis: Jarash and Scythopolis Compared

Introduction

In this paper, I compare the Late Antique (4th–8th c. AD) remains of Jarash (ancient Gerasa) with that of Scythopolis (modern Beisan).[1] Both cities were described as being a part of the Decapolis, which were cities united by a shared culture and special administrative status. Possibly established by Pompey in 63 BC, but definitely by the early empire, the Decapolis was connected to the Roman province of Syria (Parker 1975; Isaac 1981). Over time, Decapolis came be used as a geographic term. Located in the northern hills of the Transjordan, all but Scythopolis lay on the eastern side of the Jordan (Kennedy 2013). Though many of the Decapolis cities have been excavated over the years, none have been explored as extensively as Jarash and Scythopolis. This makes these cities invaluable for comparison.

Both cities underwent expansive building programs in the 1st and 2nd c. AD. In Jarash, temples, especially those of Zeus and Artemis, dominated the city. A *cardo* with two intersecting *decumani* defined the civic plan. In Scythopolis, the terrain did not enable a true Hippodamian plan, but the civic center was also delineated by monumental streets located between the city's acropolis (the Tall) and the Roman period theater. In both cities, population boomed in the first three centuries AD, and overall, the development of these two cities followed similar patterns in this period (Ward 2020: 100–13).

While the development of these cities were similar in Late Antiquity, the differences between them are also stark. For example, at least 20 churches have been discovered in Jarash, whereas only one has been discovered in the civic center of Scythopolis. This lone church stood not in the classical heart of the city, but on the Tall.

[1] This paper is a summary of Ward 2020: 113–34.

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Another major difference is that Scythopolis was the capital of a Roman province, which meant that the imperial authorities spent lavishly on its urban plan and constructions in the city. At Jarash, the most important non-residential building projects of this period were religious in nature—the aforementioned Christian churches and, under Muslim rule, a mosque in the center of town.

Jarash

Jarash continued to be a prosperous city in late antiquity, and unlike some other cities of the region, such as Scythopolis, its increasing Christian character can be easily charted through archaeological remains. At least 20 churches have been discovered in the city, most of them dated through building inscriptions (Crawfoot 1938; Clark 1986; Seigne 1992). Although they are found throughout the town, including on the eastern side of the river, the majority are clustered around the Temple of Artemis (March 2009: 119–30). Thus, the conversion of substantial numbers of people at Jarash to Christianity led to a change in the focal point of the city. The plan of the *cardo* and North and South *Decumanus* remained intact, but the uses of those roads changed significantly. After the city came under control of the Muslims, they too left their mark. The churches appear to have been largely undisturbed, but a substantial mosque was built right in the heart of the city at the corner of the South *Decumanus* and the *cardo*.

In addition to the growth of churches and the closing of temples, the changes to the city in late antiquity were substantial (March 2009). For example, the hippodrome, which was already being used for manufacturing by the late 3rd century, continued to be a site of industrial use, but the northern end was converted into an arena (Kehrberg 1989). Formerly public buildings, such as the *temenoi* of the Temples of Artemis and Zeus and the Northern Theater, were occupied by industrial production as well. The Temple C *temenos* was divided into living quarters (Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2018: 120–3). The building of churches also transformed previous public areas, with the Cathedral completely obscuring the remains of the Temple of Dionysus-Dusares, and the Propylaeum Church's construction blocked the northern bridge across the river (Kraemer 1938: 139–49, 176–234; Brizzi *et al.* 2010). Almost every quarter of the city saw increased population density, but this was true especially around the South Tetrapylon, which became the focus of the city during the Islamic period (Blank *et al.* 2010).

The increasing population density meant that much of the open space that characterized the earlier Roman city disappeared. For example, the open spaces of the temple precincts were occupied with either living spaces, churches, or manufacturing. The streets seem to have become narrower as more residential structures were built that encroached on public spaces, for example in the domestic complex north and west of the Church of St Theodore which reduced the street to an alley. Winding roads, rather than straight ones, cut through these residential complexes. The curved roads followed the topography instead of cutting through and across it, which diminished wind effects and permitted the higher population densities characteristic of this period (Stott 2018).

Another feature of the Late Antique city was the growth of industry (Kehrberg-Ostrasz 2018). Once the hippodrome was no longer used as an entertainment facility, industrial activities returned to the area. Pottery kilns and simple dwellings were found in the *cavea* chambers of the hippodrome where mass production of pottery, tiles, pipes, lamps, figurines, and Jarash bowls was located, and tanneries and lime kilns (for preparing animal skins) were also operating. These installations were

abandoned at beginning of the 7th century (Kehrberg 1989). The North Theater was used as a dump from the mid-6th until the 8th century when pottery production began on the site. Occupation ended in the late 9th or early 10th century (Ball *et al.* 1986; Clark *et al.* 1986; Schaefer and Falkner 1986). By the late 6th century, the *macellum* had been converted to industrial uses. The north and west side of the market was turned into a dye manufacturing center. Sections of the market were now used for storage and stables, possibly because animal products were used in the dye-making process. Portions of the floor were removed to create an in-ground lime kiln (Martin-Bueno 1989; Uscatescu and Martin-Bueno 1997). In the early Islamic period, two pottery kilns were found across the *cardo* from the Temple of Artemis along with a blacksmith shop, which continued into the 8th century. Recent research stresses the continuity of the industrial activities during the Late Antique period in the city (Lichtenbeger and Raja 2019).

There is no evidence of a stark break between the period of Roman and early Islamic rule, instead, the growth of population that is evident in the 6th century seems to have continued unabated until the 8th century, when it seems that population reached its height in the city. Evidence of 8th century Jarash is present in almost every excavated location around the city; however, little information of this later occupation was recorded by the earliest and most extensive excavations of the city (Gullini 1984: 27–8). New excavations in the northwest sector of the city are revealing rich occupation layers from the Umayyad period, including multi-story houses that were destroyed by the earthquake of 749, though occupation continued long after this (Lichtenbeger and Raja 2018a; 2018b).

Archaeology of the early Islamic period in Jarash demonstrates that settlement patterns were changing. For example, Umayyad houses share a courtyard, such as those just north of the South *Decumanus*. Their plan is irregular because they used previous Roman period walls as foundations. These residences cut into the hill to the north, where a retaining wall was constructed. The houses opened onto the South *Decumanus* between two shops, indicating that commercial life on this street continued unabated (Gawlikowski 1986).

The intersection of the South *Decumanus* and the *cardo* became the focal point of the Islamic community with the construction of a large mosque in the 8th century. This mosque was framed by the South *Decumanus* to the north and the *macellum* to the south, and the *cardo* to the east. The entire area around the mosque was occupied by domestic structures. An alley ran along the west wall of the mosque, with multiple dwellings surrounding an open courtyard. This area was continuously used even after the earthquake of 749 as there is evidence of repair of earthquake damage. Umayyad and Abbasid shops were found east of the *cardo* across from the mosque. There was also a large building just behind them—perhaps originally Umayyad, but maybe even earlier—which was remodeled after the earthquake (Blanke *et al.* 2010; Rattenborg and Blanke 2017).

Scythopolis

Scythopolis achieved its largest population size in late antiquity, likely during the early to mid-6th century. In fact, its population may have doubled to around 30,000–40,000 people, possibly making it the third largest city in the southern Levant. Domestic structures expanded over sections of the city that were previously uninhabited, especially on Tall Iztaba. A church and houses replaced the town acropolis and temple on the main Tall. Additionally, the city wall was constructed sometime in this period, increasing intensification inside the city and suburbs were built beyond the city

walls. Buildings from the late 5th and early 6th century emphasized the importance of the city, as it was the capital of Palestine Secunda, a province created in the late 4th century.

The city was heavily impacted by the earthquake of 363, as excavation reports describe extensive damage throughout the civic center from the mid-4th century. Most of the structures were reconstructed around AD 400, with the exception of the pagan structures. Examples include the *nymphaeum*, the *propylon* leading from the Northern Street to the Tell, the portico near the eastern bathhouse, and the theater (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 108–16).

Evidence of population growth is quite evident outside of the monumental civic center in almost every section of the city. Tall Iztaba was inhabited for the first time since the Hellenistic period, and several churches were built on it (FitzGerald 1939; Mazor and Bar-Nathan 1994). The Tall was completely rebuilt with large numbers of domestic structures and a circular church (FitzGerald 1931: 50–3; Mazar 2006: 40–2). Domestic structures and a bathhouse were built between the theater and the hippodrome. This marks the first time this area of the city was inhabited. Silvanus Street was lengthened in the early 6th century, connecting this new residential zone with the monumental civic center. One gets the impression that there was a rapid construction of domestic structures throughout the entire city, with the exception of the civic center, throughout the 4th through 6th centuries. It is possible that the construction of the western bathhouse, completed by the end of the 5th century, was necessitated by the rapid growth of the population (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 99–106).

Extensive roadwork must be connected to the expansion of the population of the city. The civic center was repaved, beginning with Palladius Street, named after the governor Palladius who built the facing portico, which stretched from the theater to the Northern Street. It was lined with the aforementioned portico, with a mosaic sidewalk, and commercial shops just beyond this. In 515/6, Silvanus Street and an associated basilica (Silvanus Hall) were constructed along the northeast side of the civic center over the previous Roman period road and blocking the entrances to the Roman shops located along the road (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 121–5).

The layout of roads is an important difference between the Late Antique and earlier Roman periods. Whereas the Roman roads were generally straight and angles were disguised with tetrapylons, arches, or other monuments, the Late Antique builders were willing to employ curved roads that followed terrain, rather than cut through the town's topography, as at Jarash. Silvanus Street is a good example of this, which curved from the civic center to the new southern residential area.

In the 5th century, a large trapezoidal agora was constructed over the ruins of the basilica and the previous Roman temple. Porticoes with decorated mosaics were built along the inside walls of the agora. It was remodeled at the beginning of the 6th century, perhaps in response to the constructions just across Palladius Street. In the reign of Anastasius, the governor Theosebius and the *protos* Silvinus embarked on a transformation of the northern part of the civic center. They replaced the mosaic and some of the shops in the center of Palladius Street with a new semi-circular plaza, which they named "the Sigma." This semi-circular plaza contained 12 new shops or offices, each richly decorated with colorful mosaics with a portico covering the entrances and sidewalk in front of the shops. In order to construct this plaza, the builders removed portions of the nearby wādī bed and the structures standing on it, which included the odeon, already abandoned at the time

of the Sigma's construction (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 121–2).

Literary sources, such as Epiphanius, describe Scythopolis as a Christian, though Arian, city in the 4th century, but there is little archaeological evidence to suggest that the city had converted to Christianity by then (Epiphanius *Panarion* 30.4–12). One suggestion that paganism was dying by the late 4th century is the lack of evidence that any of the temples were rebuilt or restored after the earthquake of 363 (though there is not much evidence that they were damaged by the earthquake either; Heyden 2010: 312–3). A parallel to this situation exists at Petra, where the structures associated with pagan worship were also not restored after the 363 earthquake (Ward 2016). Looking at the two entrances to the Tall suggests, however, that the city had turned away from paganism. While the *propylon* off the Northern Street was restored, the one which connected the civic center to the Temple of Zeus was rebuilt as an industrial complex with pools and water pipes (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 106–16).

Currently, no Christian structure has been discovered inside the Roman civic center of the city. It is possible that the large putative temple to the north of the theater contained an undiscovered church, but so far Christian structures from within the civic center have eluded archaeologists. The large round church located on the Tall, however, would have dominated the scenic views of the city (FitzGerald 1931: 18–33). As this structure replaced a pagan temple to Zeus Akraios (possibly destroyed in the 363 earthquake), perhaps this church alone was deemed sufficient to demonstrate the Christianization of the civic center? Or maybe the civic center was kept clear of Christian structures because of the mixed population of the city that included Jews and Samaritans? Or perhaps there were no open spaces around the civic center like those that existed around the Temple of Artemis at Jarash.

However, evidence of Christianity is abundant throughout Tall Iztaba, including three churches and the Monastery of the Lady Mary. One church was also located within the city wall, located 400 m east of the Monastery. Two churches are known to the north of the wall; one was built to the northeast of the city in 522 in the Monastery of Abba Justinus (FitzGerald 1939; Mazor and Bar-Nathan 1994).

An earthquake seems to have heavily damaged the city in the late 6th century or the early 7th century. It caused severe damage to the city that was never repaired. For example, Silvanus Hall was leveled and the portico of the Byzantine agora and Sigma were irreparably damaged. It is also possible that the columns of Palladius Street fell at this time. The last known repair of the street occurred sometime after AD 565, helping to date the earthquake to no later than the mid-6th century (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 125).

With the passing of control of Scythopolis from the later Roman to Islamic authorities, the town lost much of its importance. Whereas it had been the capital of a wealthy province under the later Roman Empire, the Islamic conquerors completely transformed the provincial government of the Near East, moving the capital of the region to Tiberias (Walmsley 1987). Scythopolis, now known as Baysan, was just another city in the *Jund al-Urdunn*, as this new province was called. This transformation meant that there was no longer imperial money to improve the city, though the major monumental features of the city remained in use and standing for over a century until destroyed in the earthquake of 749.

Though the changes that took place in the city in the early Islamic period are hard to date, there are numerous obvious trends. First, many of the monumental structures were occupied by industrial pur-

suits. This included the domed chamber of the *frigidarium* (cold room) of the eastern bathhouse, the theater which was used for ceramic production, the western bathhouse which contained a large number of open air ovens (*tabuns*), the Byzantine agora which had numerous pottery kilns, and the entrance to the amphitheater which also had large pottery kilns. Along almost all the streets, shops had encroached onto the sidewalks, dramatically narrowing the size of the thoroughfares. Makeshift buildings were constructed in what were previously public spaces, such as in the plaza in front of the Central Monument. Walls were built along Valley Street, narrowing it significantly (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 135–41).

In the early Islamic period, the Tall's plan was completely altered. The circular church, the Byzantine period road, and residential complexes were all replaced with a planned community, which had two roads that intersected in a right angle at the southwestern sector of the Tall. These roads ignored the topography of the Tall and ran in straight lines. Little dating evidence was recovered or published, but the most recent evidence suggests that this early Islamic period remodeling occurred prior to the earthquake of 749. An early Arabic inscription dated to AD 806 confirms that the church destruction occurred sometime prior to that date (FitzGerald 1931: 53–7).

There was also some remodeling of the civic center during the early Islamic period. In the middle of the 8th century, a long line of shops was constructed on top of the remains of Silvanus Hall. These builders removed and then rebuilt the Byzantine arcade by reusing the marble bases, shafts, and capitals. Just behind the shops, another portico was erected, with an arched passageway connecting the new *suq* with the rear portico. A large mosaic was discovered which contained the *shahada,* the Muslim declaration of faith, and another mosaic declared that the complex was built during the reign of caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik [724–743] by the governor Ishaq bin Qasbisa (Khamis 2001).

So far, no mosque has been discovered in the civic center, unlike at Jarash, for the Umayyad period. It is possible that an earthquake damaged the Sigma, as it was deserted around AD 700 when building elements were removed and used nearby. The area of the Sigma became a cemetery in which approximately 400 Muslim burials were discovered. Nearby Palladius Street was covered by alluvial soil. The columns from the street were placed in the former roadbed at ninety degree angles to the road to support run off agriculture in the street (Tsafrir and Foerster 1997: 135–41).

Conclusion

In late antiquity, the populations of Jarash and Scythopolis expanded from the Roman period. Both cities suffered damage from the 363 earthquake, but this damage was most heavily felt in Scythopolis. The late 4th century, there was a time of increased building in that city to repair damage from the earthquake. Scythopolis also became capital of an imperial province around that time, which is clearly indicated by the number of buildings constructed by Roman governors there. Jarash increasingly became a city of churches, several of which occupied the space around the Temple of Artemis. There are no surviving churches from the civic center of Scythopolis, but on the Tall a Christian church replaced the Temple of Zeus. The importance of Scythopolis for the imperial administration is perhaps shown by the continued construction of non-religious structures there, such as the Sigma, but there is little similar evidence from Jarash. There is little evidence that the Muslim conquest substantially impacted either city, at least initially. At Jarash, a congregational mosque was built in the heart of the civic center and was surrounded by new shops. A new commercial district

was also constructed in Scythopolis during the early Islamic period, but other sections of the civic center were being abandoned. These cities provide further evidence for understanding the transition of the classical polis to the Islamic *Madina* and appear to support the conclusions of Avni that the transformation of cities in late antiquity was unique to each city (Kennedy 1985; Avni 2011; 2014).

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