

Chapter Title: Introduction

Chapter Author(s): Gabriel Mazor and Walid Atrash

Book Title: Bet She'an Vol. 3: Nysa-Scythopolis. The Southern And Severan Theaters.

Book Subtitle: Part 1: The Stratigraphy And Finds

Book Author(s): Gabriel Mazor, Walid Atrash, Marc Balouka, Lawrence Belkin, Ariel Berman, Avi Katzin, Tania Meltsen, Débora Sandhaus, Tali Sharvit and Tamar Winter

Published by: Israel Antiquities Authority / תוקיתעה תושר. (2015)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1fzhfq.6>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.



JSTOR

Israel Antiquities Authority / תוקיתעה תושר is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Bet She'an Vol. 3: Nysa-Scythopolis. The Southern And Severan Theaters*.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

GABRIEL MAZOR AND WALID ATRASH

The conquest of Coele Syria by Pompey (64/63 BCE) established a Roman province in a region that was densely settled by Greek cities controlling extensive territories. The Greek *poleis* of the Decapolis, previously conquered by the Hasmoneans, were seized by the Roman legions and shortly after rebuilt or refounded as Roman cities by Gabinius, the governor of the newly established province (57–55 BCE; Josephus, *War* I.vii.7; *Antiquities* XIV.iv.2). In honor of the governor, Nysa-Scythopolis was renamed for a while *Gabinia Nysa* (Barkay 2003:159). Due to the sense of security granted by the Roman Empire (*Pax Romana*), Nysa-Scythopolis was transferred from the well-protected mounds (Tel Bet She'an and Tel Iẓtabba) and refounded in the late first century BCE and early first century CE in the vast area of the 'Amal basin and its surrounding hills. Evidence for the earliest stage of the Roman city in the first century BCE derives mainly from coins and pottery, while architectural remains are thus far insufficient to reconstruct any significant part of the city plan. On the other hand, the excavation results supply far more data regarding the plan of the civic center in the early first century CE (Plan 1.1).

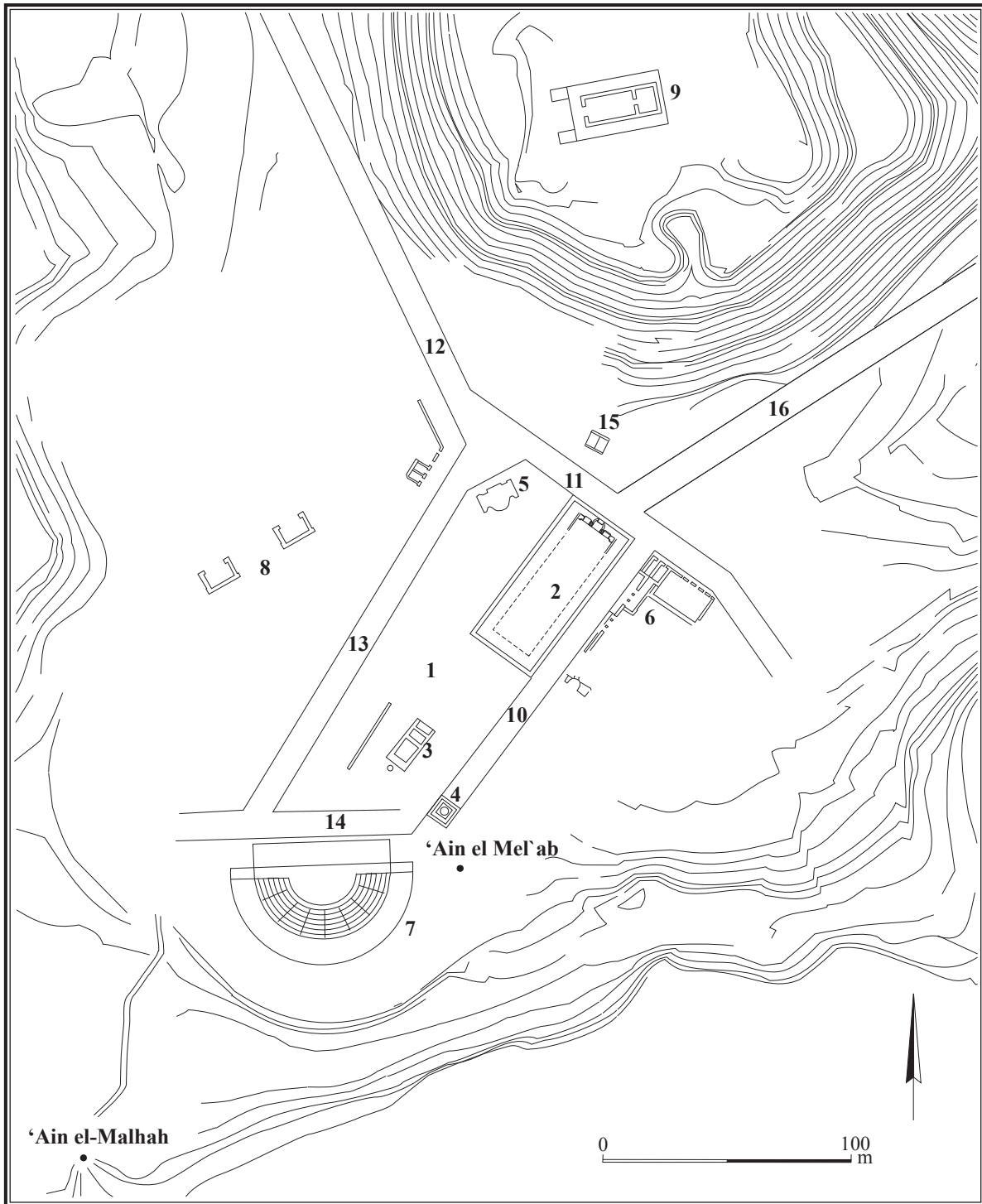
Within the civic center of Roman Nysa-Scythopolis (Roman II; 31–130 CE), the forum was the main focal point of the urban plan, which may have been influenced by city-planning trends customary in the Republican West, and far less common in the East. The forum contained a basilica in its northeastern part and two temples in the southeast. Paved streets surrounded the forum on all four sides, two of which, Pre-Northern Street and Pre-Valley Street, extended further out and led to two of the main city gates, the Caesarea and Damascus Gates (Plans 1.1, 1.2). South of the forum, the Southern Theater was erected.

The unique location of the city on a major regional crossroads that linked the flourishing coastal cities with the extensive trade network of Damascus and

the wealthy *poleis* of Arabia (Roll 2002), lent the city immense strategic importance and economic prosperity, which reached its zenith in the second century CE.

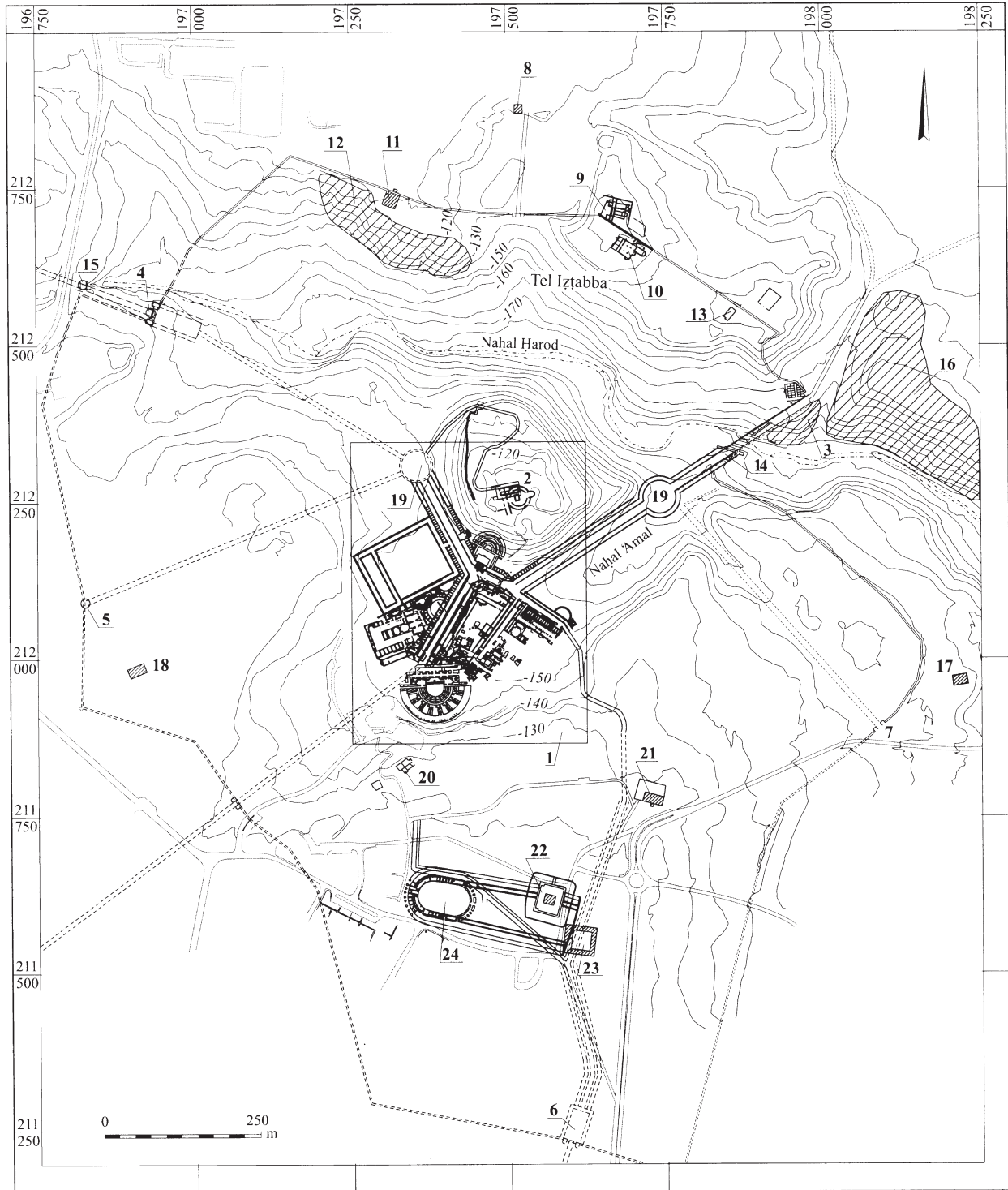
The urban planning of the city's civic center during the second century CE, best termed 'From Function to Monument' (Plan 1.3; Segal 1997), was architecturally characterized, as in most *poleis* in the provinces of the Roman Empire, by its remarkable new imperial architectural design and baroque decor, as reflected in its colonnaded streets and monumental public buildings. The 'monumentalization' of the city landscape was a consequence of Hadrian's tour to the region (128–132 CE), in which he presumably visited Nysa-Scythopolis, and was further advanced by his successors, Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, and even more so by Septimius Severus toward the end of the century. In all the cities of the eastern provinces, intensive urbanization was everywhere marked by the Flavian architectural renaissance, characterized by its monumental and exquisitely decorated public buildings. Colonnaded streets adorned by nymphaea and propylaea, temples and shrines dedicated to the imperial cult, such as caesarea, kalybe structures and altars, public halls including odea, theaters, hippodromes, amphitheaters and other entertainment facilities, as well as thermae, city gates, bridges and roads, were erected, establishing the Roman imperial *koine* (Plan 1.3; Fig. 1.1).

In the early second century CE, the quarries of superb-quality limestone in the Gilboa Mountains were extensively exploited to supply the flourishing city of Nysa-Scythopolis. At the end of the century, architectural elements carved of marble and granite imported from Asia Minor and Egypt further enriched the city's grandeur. The civic center of Nysa-Scythopolis was graced with a monumental, richly adorned, baroque-oriented appearance (Lyttelton 1974) that characterized the city throughout the entire Roman and Byzantine periods.



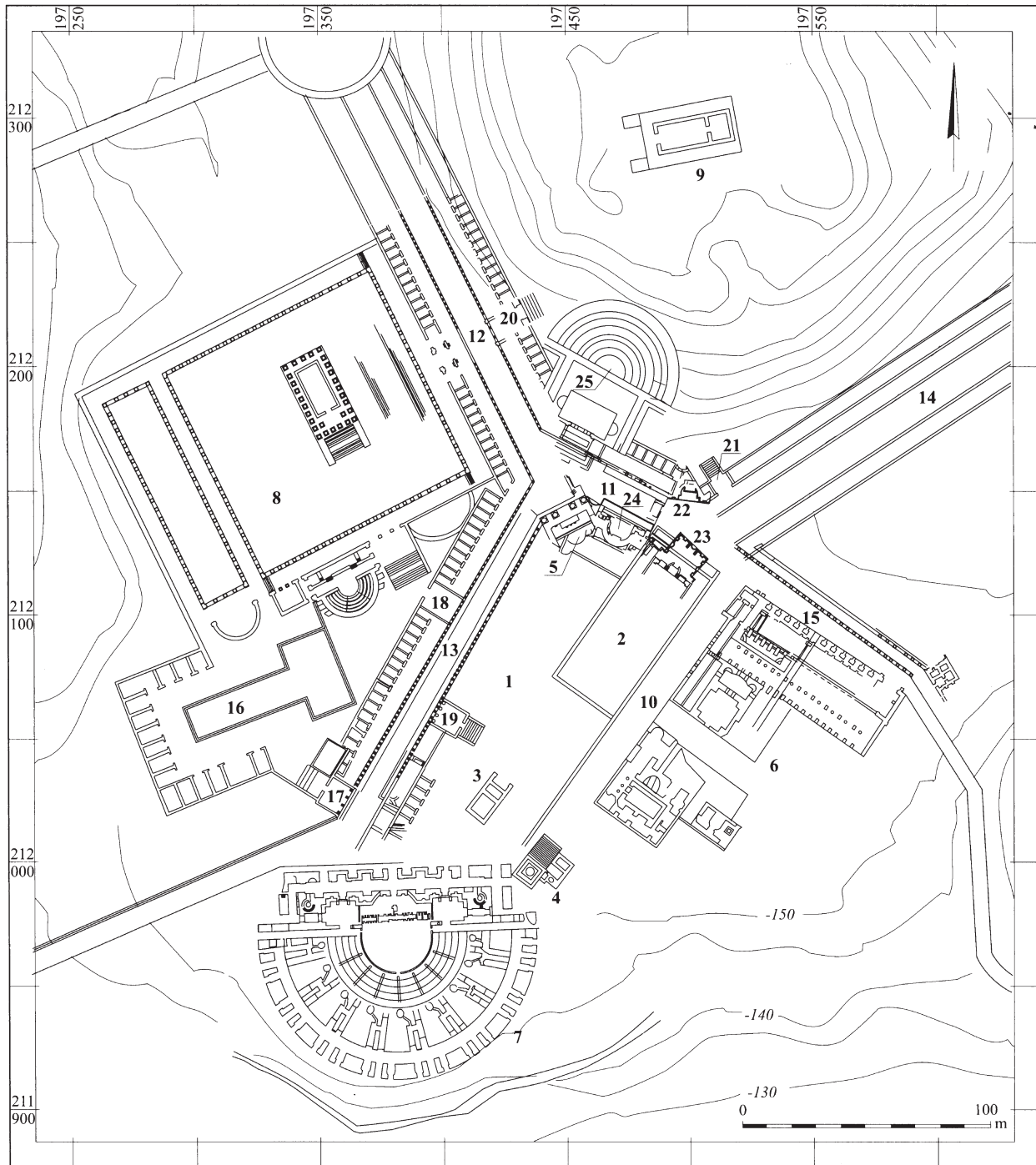
- |                     |                                |
|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Forum            | 9. Temple of Zeus Akraios      |
| 2. Basilica         | 10. Street of the Forum Temple |
| 3. Forum Temple I   | 11. Pre-Monument Street        |
| 4. Forum Temple II  | 12. Pre-Northern Street        |
| 5. Temple(?)        | 13. Pre-Palladius Street       |
| 6. Bathhouse        | 14. Theater Street             |
| 7. Southern Theater | 15. Shops                      |
| 8. Public Halls     | 16. Pre-Valley Street          |

*Plan 1.1. Nysa-Scythopolis: civic center of the first century CE.*



- |                                   |                                 |                                       |                               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Civic Center                   | 7. Southeast (Gerasa) City Gate | 13. Hellenistic City                  | 19. Circular Piazza           |
| 2. Tel Bet She'an                 | 8. Samaritan Synagogue          | 14. Eastern Bridge (Jisr el-Maktu'a)  | 20. Bathhouse                 |
| 3. Northeast (Damascus) City Gate | 9. Church of Andreas            | 15. Western Bridge                    | 21. Mosque                    |
| 4. Northwest (Caesarea) City Gate | 10. Church of the Martyr        | 16. Eastern Cemetery (Tell el-Hammam) | 22. Crusader Fortress         |
| 5. Southwest (Neapolis) City Gate | 11. Monastery of Lady Mary      | 17. Cemetery                          | 23. Turkish Serai             |
| 6. South (Jerusalem) City Gate    | 12. Northern Cemetery           | 18. House of Kyrios Leontis           | 24. Amphitheater (Hippodrome) |

*Plan 1.2. Nysa-Scythopolis: city plan of the second century CE.*



- |                    |                                 |                                   |                               |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Forum           | 8. Caesareum                    | 14. Valley Street                 | 20. Temple of Zeus Propylaeum |
| 2. Basilica        | 9. Temple of Zeus Akraios       | 15. Street of the Eastern Thermae | 21. Valley Sreet Propylaeum   |
| 3. Forum Temple I  | 10. Street of the Forum Temples | 16. Western Thermae               | 22. Monument of Antonius      |
| 4. Forum Temple II | 11. Street of Monuments         | 17. Thermae Propylaeum            | 23. Altar                     |
| 5. Temple(?)       | 12. Northern Sreet              | 18. Caesareum Propylaeum          | 24. Nymphaeum                 |
| 6. Eastern Thermae | 13. Palladius Street            | 19. Forum Propylaeum              | 25. Northern Theater          |
| 7. Severan Theater |                                 |                                   |                               |

*Plan 1.3. Nysa-Scythopolis: civic center of the second century CE.*



Fig. 1.1. Nysa-Scythopolis: aerial view of the Roman-Byzantine civic center, looking southwest.

Four designated complexes (the hippodrome, the odeum, and the Severan and Northern Theaters) comprised the entertainment facilities of Nysa-Scythopolis during the late second to early third centuries CE (Roman III). South of the civic center, a 270 m long, 67 m wide hippodrome was constructed (see Plan 1.2). Its cavea was partly built over a fill within its perpendicular walls and partly over vaulted substructures with entering vomitoria. The beaten-earth floor of the arena was surrounded by a high wall decorated with a colored fresco depicting hunting scenes. Two tribunalia marked the center line of both longitudinal cavea sections, and a vaulted room below the northern tribunal may have accommodated a shrine.

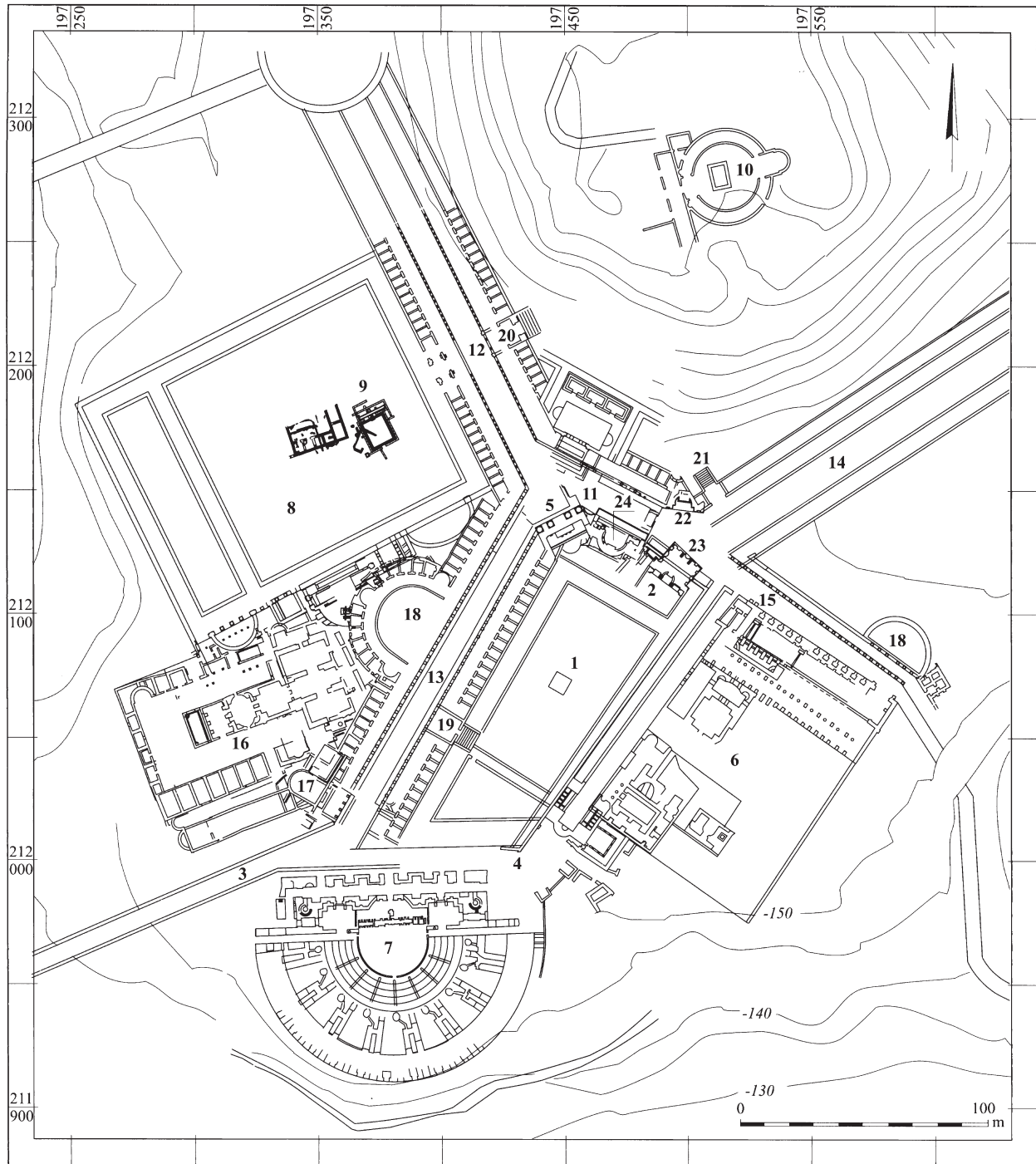
Within the second-century civic center, a caesareum was erected upon a wide, leveled plateau, and a small odeum was built along its southern porticus (*Bet She'an I*). This small, theater-like, roofed auditorium had an ima cavea of 14 rows of seats furnished with profiled, white-limestone seats that accommodated an audience of c. 600 people. Its limestone-paved orchestra was entered via its aditus maximi and it had a narrow pulpitum and a high scaenae frons with three entrances from the porticus of the caesareum. It may have functioned as a bouleuterion, and the hall to the west of it, presumably a library, may have served as the municipal archive.

Two theaters adorned the civic center in the late second century CE (Roman III). The Severan Theater, built over the earlier Southern Theater to the south of the forum, was founded partly upon the slope of the southern hill and partly over a vaulted substructure. Its orientation due north does not fit the setting of the forum; both complexes, separated by a street and a considerable difference in elevation, retained their separate architectural and functional diversities. The Northern Theater, partially revealed by the IAHU expedition (Arubas 2006:48–58; Atrash 2006:68–71; Arubas, Foerster and Tsafirir 2008:1641), was built into the southwestern slope of Tel Bet She'an and therefore faces southwest, an uncommon direction for a theater. It was relatively small and its cavea, not accommodated with vomitoria, was entered via the *aditus maximi*. Its southern facade was adorned by a porticus *postscaenium* (Atrash 2006: Fig. 240) that finds its best parallel in the northern theater at Gerasa (Clark et al. 1986:205–230, Fig. 1). The Northern and Severan Theaters of Nysa-Scythopolis were connected by a 170 m long colonnaded street (*Palladius Street*) with piazzas at both ends, creating a well-balanced urban plan (see Plan 1.3) that continued well into the Byzantine period (Plan 1.4), although the Northern Theater was dismantled during the late Byzantine period (Stratum 8, Byzantine III).

Most of the entertainment facilities of Roman Nysa-Scythopolis were still functional throughout the entire Byzantine period (Byzantine I–III), although the nature of the performances conducted in them obviously underwent considerable changes over time, as paganism gave way to Christianity. Late in the Roman period, the *summa cavea* and porticus of the Severan Theater collapsed as a result of the earthquake of 363 CE and when reconstructed, the *scaenae frons*

was reduced in height. The *scaenae frons* was again reduced in height in the early sixth century CE. Despite its repeated reduction in size during the Byzantine period, the theater's northern facade was enriched by a monumental porticus and a vast piazza, with a *nymphaeum* in front of it. The *media cavea* seems to have been removed during Stratum 8 (Byzantine III), and by the end of the Byzantine period, only the *ima cavea* was still functional. The Northern Theater apparently suffered constructional problems following the earthquake of 363 CE, and was finally dismantled in the sixth century CE (Byzantine III), apart from its southern facade, which remained to adorn its piazza. The odeum was active until the mid-fifth century CE, when it was dismantled along with the entire *caesareum* compound.

In the framework of the Bet She'an Archaeological Project, the IAA excavations were conducted within the Southern and Severan Theaters and the surrounding area. Fortunately, the northeastern part of the Severan Theater had not been excavated by Applebaum in 1960–1962, enabling the IAA expedition to excavate here the Islamic phases (Strata 7–2) and the consecutive stages of the Severan Theater during Roman III–IV and Byzantine I–III (Strata 12–8). During excavation of the foundations of the eastern *aditus maximus* and the *hyposcaenium*, the presence of the earlier Southern Theater was revealed. Its construction phases are dated within the first century CE (Roman II, Stratum 13), and it was later completely covered by the Severan Theater. Subsequent probes conducted in other locations in the Severan Theater further confirmed the existence of the Southern Theater and its dating. Additional excavation and probes were undertaken, as required, to clarify stratigraphic or architectural problems during the complex architectural analysis.



- |                    |                         |                              |
|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Forum           | 9. Byzantine Building   | 17. Thermae Propylaeum       |
| 2. Basilica        | 10. Round Church        | 18. Sigmae                   |
| 3. Theater Street  | 11. Street of Monuments | 19. Forum Propylaeum         |
| 4. Theater Piazza  | 12. Northern Street     | 20. Round Church Propylaeum  |
| 5. Temple(?)       | 13. Palladius Street    | 21. Valley Street Propylaeum |
| 6. Eastern Thermae | 14. Valley Street       | 22. Monument of Antonius     |
| 7. Severan Theater | 15. Silvanus Street     | 23. Altar                    |
| 8. Caesareum       | 16. Western Thermae     | 24. Nymphaeum                |

*Plan 1.4. Nysa-Scythopolis: civic center of the Byzantine period.*



## REFERENCES

- Arubas B. 2006. The Impact of Town Planning at Scythopolis on the Topography of Tel Beth-Shean: A New Understanding of Its Fortifications and Status. In A. Mazar. *Excavations at Tel Beth-Shean 1989–1966 I: From the Late Bronze Age to the Medieval Period*. Jerusalem. Pp. 48–58.
- Arubas B., Foerster G. and Tsafirir Y. 2008. Hellenistic to Early Islamic Periods. *NEAEHL* 5:1636–1641.
- Atrash W. 2006. *Entertainment Structures in the Civic Center of Nysa-Scythopolis (Beth-She'an) during the Roman and Byzantine Periods*. Ph.D. diss. University of Haifa. Haifa (Hebrew).
- Clark V.A., Bowsher J.M.C., Stewart J.D., Meyer C.M. and Falkner B.K. 1986. The Jerash North Theatre, Architecture and Archaeology 1982–83. In F. Zayadine ed. *Jerash Archaeological Project 1981–83*. Amman. Pp. 205–302.
- Lyttelton M. 1974. *Baroque Architecture in Classical Antiquity*. London.
- Roll I. 2002. Crossing the Rift Valley. The Connecting Arteries between the Road Network of Judaea/Palaestina and Arabia. In P. Freeman, L. Bennett, Z.T. Fiema and B. Hoffmann eds. *Limes XVIII* (Bar Int. S. 1084 I). Oxford. Pp. 215–230.
- Segal A. 1997. *From Function to Monument: Urban Landscapes of Roman Palestine, Syria and Provincia Arabia*. Oxford.