

Beth Shean – Scythopolis: churches and monasteries on the margins of the Holy Land

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Introduction

Scythopolis acted as the capital of Byzantine *Palestina Secunda*, reaching its zenith in the early sixth century CE.¹ Despite this importance, it features in only three pilgrimage reports dated before its change of hands to Arabic control in the seventh century. Only one of those attaches a devotional narrative to visiting the settlement (Theodosius, *De Situ Terrae Sanctae* 2); otherwise Scythopolis acts as a stopping post on the way between more theologically charged zones (*The Piacenza Pilgrim* 8; *Itinerarium Burdigalense*). Similarly, whilst an administrative centre, none of the sites mentioned by the local monk-turned-biographer Cyril of Scythopolis as important for Christian networks of monasticism, ecclesiastical realpolitik, or narrating sacred space can be identified within the main urban centre. How does late antique Christianity in Palestine function here, with respect to churches and monasteries in particular?

In this paper, I briefly discuss the known churches and monasteries, along with some of the previous scholarship dealing with them. Much of that work, however, relies on interpreting the material remains at Beth Shean by reference to a centralized Christianization hypothesis. In other words, it is assumed that as a city in Byzantine Palestine Beth Shean was also a site of top-down imperial investment intended to alter the religious landscape of Palestine through building projects and the sponsoring of pilgrimage.² After discussing the role Beth Shean-Scythopolis' marginality has to play in its religious life, I return to reassess the site, and present a picture of the functioning of Christian networks in Scythopolis-Beth Shean.

Churches and monasteries at Beth Shean-Scythopolis

When providing an overview of the relevant churches and monasteries, our investigation relies on four sources: the summary in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations*, the excavation notes of the original University of Pennsylvania expedition (1922-1931) themore recent Hebrew University excavation (1989-1996), and the only text written by a

¹ Gideon Avni, "'From Polis to Madina' Revisited – Urban Change in Byzantine and Early Islamic Palestine", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 21(3) (2011), 301-329; 304-5

² Works that sometimes lean in this direction include Robert L. Wilken, *The Land called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (Yale, 1994), E.D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the later Roman Empire* (Oxford, 1984), Gabriel Mazor, "Nysa-Scythopolis: Ethnicity and Religion" in ed. R.G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann, *One God-One Cult-One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives* (de Gruyter, 2010), 273-300; Doron Bar, "The Christianization of Rural Palestine during Late Antiquity", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2003), 401-421

Scythopolitan for our period, Cyril of Scythopolis' (c.525-559) *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*.³ The combination of these sources renders a similar picture to somewhere like Gerasa, rather than a site like Jerusalem.⁴ Indeed:

The list of church buildings in the work of Cyril is quite short in comparison to other contemporary cities, and most were part of monasteries on the outskirts of the city. It seems that the civic center of Nysa-Scythopolis retained its secular character and Hellenistic appearance, reflecting a wealthy, flourishing city rich in cultural, social, political, and mainly business and administrative activities, as would befit a provincial capital.⁵

The Byzantine Round Church features in the majority of discussions due to its size and prominent location, built on the site of the temple of Zeus Akraias which had been destroyed in an earthquake in 363 CE. This structure, located on Tel-Beth Shean and presumably visible from the main *cardo* of the lower city, comprises one of the most perplexing features of the site. Gerald Fitzgerald, the last of three excavators on the University of Pennsylvania expedition, devoted a significant portion of his 1931 publication to the Round Church, and included a detailed scale plan.⁶ Now dated to the late fifth or early sixth century by comparison of the column capitals to other examples at Khirbat al-Karak and Horvat Karkur Illit, this large circular building has a diameter of approximately 38.8m to the outer wall, and an inner circle with a diameter of 27.44m. The scholarly consensus on roofing probably correctly understands only the ambulatory between these two walls to have been roofed; a series of pipes existed at the south side of the building to drain rain water away from the central opening in the structure, and the thin walls (approx. 60cm inner walls, approx. 1m outer) make it difficult to conceive any roofing that would stretch over the whole space.⁷ Its decoration included geometrical mosaics, as well as gilded tesserae, and something that may have been a monastic complex stood beside it.⁸

³ Ephraim Stern, Hillel Geva, Alan Paris, and Joseph Aviram (eds.) *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* 5 (Jerusalem, 2008). For these dates, as well as a solid English introduction to the polemical and theological context of monasticism in sixth century Palestine, see D. Hombergen, *The Second Origenist Controversy: a New perspective on Cyril of Scythopolis' Monastic Biographies as Historical Sources for Sixth-Century Origenism* (Rome, 2001), 21-49. The Greek text available at present is that edited by Eduard Schwartz (1939), and an English translation with an additional three sections from Georgian and Arabic recensions was made by R.M. Price (intro. John Binns), *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis* (Michigan, 1991).

⁴ See J.W. Crowfoot, "The Church of S. Theodore at Jerash", *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 61(1), 17-36; 21: "at Jerash there are traces of eight or nine churches at least and of only two pagan temples, but the former do cut a poor figure" with significant reuse of material, spolia, and often carelessly laid construction.

⁵ Stern et al, *Archaeological Investigations vol.5*, 1634

⁶ G.M. Fitzgerald, *Beth-Shan Excavations 1921-1933. The Arab and Byzantine Levels* (Philadelphia, 1931), 18-30 (plan with scale on p.19)

⁷ D. Nocera, "The Round Church at Beth Shean", *Expedition Magazine* 55(1), 2013, 16-20; 17

⁸ Mazor, Gabriel, "Nysa-Scythopolis: Ethnicity and Religion" in ed. R.G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann, *One God-One Cult-One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives* (de Gruyter, 2010), 273-300; 286



(Original fieldnotes showing the site of the Round Church, currently held in University of Pennsylvania archives)

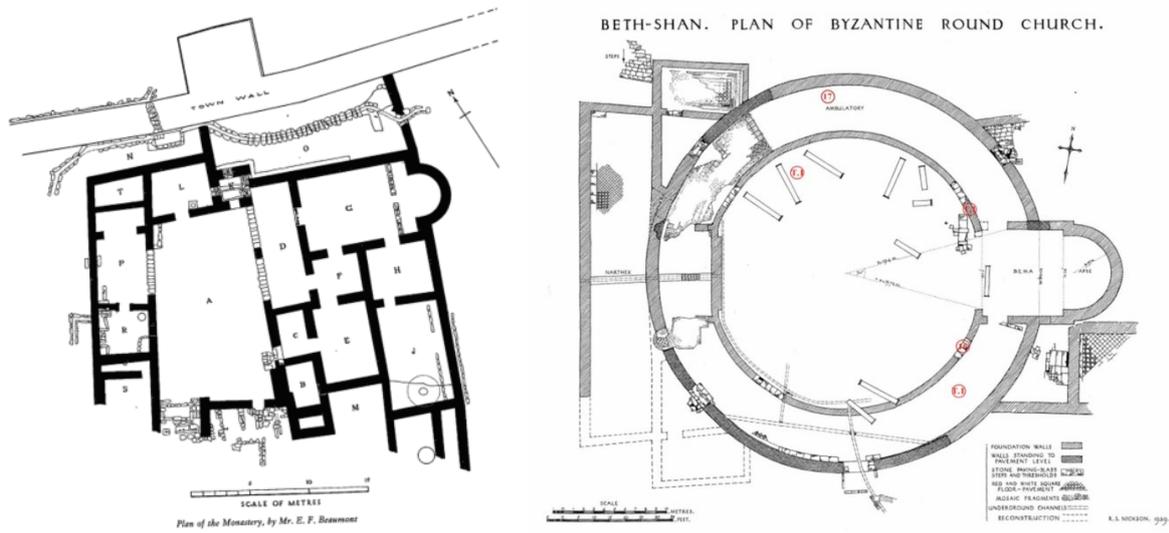
There are other hypaethral (roofless) structures of comparative date, such as the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem (Arculf, *De Locis Sanctis* 23)⁹ or Heraclius' reconstruction of the judicial basilica in Gortyna on Crete as hypaethral (between the years 618 and 621).¹⁰ Perhaps the best comparisons amongst rotunda sites for size are the octagonal rotunda at Qal'at Se'man northwest of Aleppo in Syria (36.5m diameter), the site of the memorialization (though not the burial) of Simon the Stylite, and the Anastasis Rotunda in Jerusalem (20m inner diameter and 33.70m full diameter, with outer walls 1.2m thick).¹¹

⁹ The large church at the site associated with the Ascension of Jesus (Luke 24.50-53; [Mark 16.19-20]) is *sine tecto et sine camera*. *De Locis Sanctis* recounts the journey of a Gaulish monk, Arculf, as recorded by his bishop Adamnan and presented to Aldfrith lord of Northumbria in 698. See Meehan, D. (ed.), *Adomnan's 'De Locis Sanctis'* (Dublin, 1958), and the earlier Latin edition edited by Pomialovsky (1898). For the terminology, see Vitruvius, *De Architectura* III, 2, 8.

¹⁰ C. Morrisson and J.-P. Sodini, "The Sixth-Century Economy" in ed. Angeliki E. Laiou, *The Economic History of Byzantium: from the Seventh through the Fifteenth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks, 2002)

¹¹ For the Anastasis Rotunda, see summary and literature in W. Eugene Kleinbauer, "Antioch, Jerusalem, and Rome: the Patronage of Emperor Constantius II and Architectural Invention", *Gesta* 45(2), 2006, 125-145; esp. 128-131. For Qal'at Se'man, see Markus Bogisch, "Qalat Seman and Resafa/Sergiupolis: Two Early Byzantine Pilgrimage Centres in Northern Syria" in ed. I. Volt and J. Päll, *Byzantino-Nordica 2004* (Tartu, 2005).

The Beth Shean structure, however, has a particularly unusual combination of extremely thin inner rotunda walls, a size close to the largest imperially-sanctioned sites, and a location with little to no significance in trans-local Christian tradition. In fact, despite the striking scale of the Round Church, it does not feature in any textual sources.¹² When initially excavating, Clarence Fisher dated it late, due at least in part to expecting a crusader church matching the later fortifications.¹³



(Left: *Monastery of Lady Mary*. From Fitzgerald, Gerald M. 1939. A Sixth Century Monastery at Beth-Shan, plate II. Right: *Plan of the Round Church* from the same volume).

Cyril of Scythopolis mentions a number of other churches, mostly attached to monasteries. These cluster on and around Tel Iḏtabba, a hill standing opposite Tel-Beth Shean, across the Harod valley, and were excavated by Mazor and Bar-Nathan from Hebrew University.¹⁴ Tsafir and Foerster give a list, which in a number of cases can be directly corroborated with Cyril's monastic biographies. One church, identified by a mosaic inscription in the narthex as the church of Andreas, stood north of the city wall. The other, rebuilt in the fifth century within the city walls, held the reliquary of a martyr whose name the fragmentary narthex inscription now lacks. This church had mosaic floors decorated with geometric designs, as well as fruit, vegetables, plants, birds, peacocks, and hunting scenes around the edges. Another church, dating to 522 CE, stood east of the cemetery and northeast of the city

¹² Fitzgerald, *Excavations*, 18: he also notes the similarities with the Anastasis Rotunda, as well as with octagonal churches, and with the large church at Bosra.

¹³ See Clarence Fisher, field notes for September 8, 1921; in archives of University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

¹⁴ See Mazor and Bar-Nathan, קדמוניות 107-8(1994), 117-137

limits, belonging to the monastery of Abba Justinus.¹⁵ A Chapel of Thomas the Apostle accompanied the road to Caesarea to the north (Cyril, 162.25).

This leaves two remaining sites; one enigmatic, and one with more to identify it. To begin with the latter, the monastery of Lady Mary was built within the city on Tel Iḏtabba, close to the wall as a burial foundation adjoining the Northern Cemetery, and replete with elaborate mosaics. Inscriptions on behalf of the aforementioned Mary and her son Maximus date it firmly.¹⁶ As for the more difficult site, Cyril talks about the Church of the martyr Procopius situated in the bishop's palace (180.5). This location remains unidentified, although Mazor and Bar-Nathan suggest the basilica of the martyr, on the north-east edge of the city, as Procopius' church.¹⁷ Alternatively, Cyril of Scythopolis refers to a priest from the chapel of the holy martyr St. Basil (26.10; see also Theodosius, *De Situ Terrae Sanctae* 2), a description possibly corresponding to this site. Neither view garners conclusive proof, although Mazor and Bar-Nathan have their case marginally strengthened by two observations: (1) basilicas could be built outside of the main urban centre, and even in cemeteries as in third- and fourth-century Rome;¹⁸ (2) at Ephesus, the first identified bishop's church dates to the early fifth century CE,¹⁹ by which time much of the Christian network of Scythopolis seems to have consolidated around the monastic nodes on and around Tel Iḏtabba.

Problems of interpretation; Beth Shean-Scythopolis and marginality

From this brief overview, it should be clear that Christian religion at Scythopolis-Beth Shean is not a simple matter; in general, as Armando Momigliano points out, knowing how people in the past "behaved according to a religious tradition" constitutes a challenge.²⁰ Not only does often scarce material evidence never provide unambiguous data, as Jaś Elsner argues persuasively, but Kim Bowes correctly diagnoses that the dominantly Christian academies within which churches and monasteries have tended to be treated have often shaped the material in unhelpfully positivistic ways. When an imperializing structure sees the religious material it researches as fundamental to its self-identification, that same structure

¹⁵ Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis-Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 51(1997), 85-146; 104

¹⁶ See inscriptions 58-60 in Ovadia (Bonn, 1970); also see Gerald M. Fitzgerald, *A Sixth Century Monastery at Beth-Shan* (Philadelphia, 1939), 16

¹⁷ Mazor and Bar-Nathan, "Scythopolis", 136-137

¹⁸ Ramsay MacMullen, "Christian Ancestor worship in Rome" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129(3), 2010, 597-613, esp. 600-601 drawing attention to the importance of basilicas specifically built directly above or nearby to sites of burial.

¹⁹ Martin Steskal, "Wandering Cemeteries: Roman and Late Roman burials in the capital of the province of Asia" in Olivier Henry (éd.), *Le Mort dans la ville Pratiques, contextes et impacts des inhumations intra-muros en Anatolie, du début de l'Age du Bronze à l'époque romaine* (Istanbul, 2011), 253

²⁰ A. Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Connecticut, 1987), 159-177

prioritizes different aspects, and deploys its resources accordingly.²¹ Even genuine attempts to frame material culture with respect to the language of “identity” and “definition” often end up hindering more than helping because of the priorities of the systems for research.²² This is not to mention the ongoing debate within Religious Studies as to how “Christian” functions as a label in this period, especially with reference to “Jew”.²³

In contrast with more positivistic views of late antique “Christianization” such as those found in our commentators on Beth Shean,²⁴ participation in an organized programme after which the city is recognizable “Christian” seems inapplicable. Rather localism and marginality play the key roles. In this I follow the lead of Andrew Jacobs, in explicitly choosing to focus on a different categorization for analysis (although he selects post-colonial theory).²⁵

In her 2005 monograph on pilgrimage, Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony points out a number of forces at play in memorializing the holy land.²⁶ For example, she draws our attention to those who specifically oppose pilgrimage (as an activity deemphasizing the continued presence of Christ with the church), rivalry amongst sacred sites at Edessa, Gaul, Qartamin, and Cappadocia, and the emergence of the idea of “Jerusalem” as a transitive property capable of resting on any city.²⁷ Her most important insight for our purposes is the distinction between “local” and “central” pilgrimage, a distinction which Kim Bowes also emphasizes.²⁸ She opens her chapter by quoting Philoxenus (440-523), bishop of Mabbug (modern-day Manbij): “he who visits the holy monastery of Qartamin seven times with faith is like one who goes to Jerusalem”,²⁹ and goes on to notice that holy men had a tendency to draw visitors in a way similar to pilgrimage sites.³⁰ With respect to this distinction, local references configure sacred space at Scythopolis.

²¹ Jaś Elsner, “Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art”, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 93(2003), 114-128; Kim Bowes, “Early Christian Archaeology: a State of the Field”, *Religion Compass* (2004), 575-619; esp. 575-580

²² Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity’”, *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1-47

²³ Key works in the modern discussion include Adam H. Becker and Annette Y. Reed (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Mohr Siebeck, 2003), as well as Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania, 2004).

²⁴ This constitutes too significant a scholarly trajectory to deal with here. For example, Mazor, “Nysa-Scythopolis” treats Eusebius and Epiphanius, authors involved in establishing a specific status quo, as if their stories are reliable historical sources. Doron Bar, as another example, treats the Holy Land as a continuous whole, only differentiated in terms of urban and rural (Bar, Doron, “The Christianization of Rural Palestine during Late Antiquity”, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2003), 401-421; 404).

²⁵ Andrew Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: the Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, 2004)

²⁶ Brouria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: the Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity* (California, 2005)

²⁷ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 206

²⁸ Bowes, “Early Christian Archaeology”, 603

²⁹ Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 185

³⁰ David Franfurter, “Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt”, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003), 339-85; 350. Also Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 191

This type of locality seems the most plausible way of making sense of the setting. The monasteries and churches identified reflect predominantly local patronage relations (as in the case of the Lady Mary monastery inscriptions). If Mazor and Bar-Nathan correctly assert that the bishop's palace, and the Church of Procopius, stood at the northern edge of the city, this marries well with Cyril's accounts of travels to the city. Whenever someone significant visits Scythopolis, they visit as part of a monastic or ecclesiastical embassy (162.20; 180.2), with the one exception of Silvanus the Samaritan who returns to Scythopolis from Constantinople and finds himself burned to death for his trouble (172.15-173). Equally, the majority of churches at Beth Shean attach to monastic institutions that show no signs of punching above their weight, not featuring in trans-local politics like monasteries further south. When Sabas becomes tired of politics, Cyril represents him withdrawing to a site near Scythopolis for a time (118.20). This emphatically local setting, rooted in the particular landscape and in local networks of travel and exchange, makes sense given the economic and spiritual roles which monasteries played. Monks both sacralised space as holy men and integrated themselves into, for example, flourishing caravan and wine-export industries.³¹

As a consequence of this localized emphasis, Scythopolis also demonstrates a high degree of marginality with respect to trans-local ecclesiastical and devotional networks. We have already mentioned that Scythopolis remains absent from the majority of pilgrimage accounts, but there are three exceptions. Theodosius writes

...de Sebastea usque in Scythopolim milia xxx. Ibi dominus Basilius martyrizatus est. De Scythopoli usque ad mare Tiberiadis...

"from Sebaste to be in Scythopolis, thirty miles; here lord Basil was martyred. And from Scythopolis to the sea of Tiberias..." (*De Situ Terrae Sanctae* 2)

The *Itinerarium Burdigalense* (ca.333 CE) grants the site nothing more than a passing mention, and the Piacenza Pilgrim who, struggling for an association with St. John, writes

"...and then we descended through Galilee along the banks of the Jordan, passing through many cities which are mentioned in Scripture, and reached the chief city of Galilee, which is named Scythopolis, and stands upon a mountain, in which St. John performed many miracles." (sixth-century, *Anonymous Pilgrim VIII*).

In general, however, Scythopolis acts as a place pilgrims and travellers journey out from and monks leave, rather than a place people from elsewhere go to (Cyril, 26.4; 71.20; 119.16; 196.9; 231.16). The round church stands as a key example; even though highly prominent in terms of visual presence it goes entirely unmentioned, spurned by embassies in favour of

³¹ Bowes, "Early Christian Archaeology", 601-2. For overviews of late antique economics including some comment on monastic involvement see J. Banaji, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour, and Aristocratic Dominance* (Oxford, 2001) and parts of C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800* (Oxford, 2005).

the “ancient church” (Cyril, 163). Equally, we find nothing of the pilgrimage investment or grand euergetism found at more favoured and frequented sites like the Holy Sepulchre or Qal’at Se’man.³²

Furthermore, not only is Scythopolis-Beth Shean geographically marginal, between Jewish Galilee and Samaritan Neapolis, but what evidence remains of religious interactions suggests that it remained contested religious space. Byzantine writers record Samaritan violence (Malalas, *Excerpta* 44; *Anonymous Pilgrim VIII*),³³ and anti-Samaritan violence and political strategy on the part of bishops are praised by Cyril of Scythopolis. He justifies the murder of Silvanus the Samaritan by prophetic threat, and records the bishops harnessing the spiritual power of the monk Sabas to distract Constantinople from Silvanus’ murder (Cyril, *Vita Saba* 163.5; 172.10). Equally, Scythopolis provided a space for the imagining of Purim; in two places of the longest *piyyut* dealing with the Jewish festival (33.28; 33.49), Haman stands not in Susa but in Scythopolis.³⁴ What the *Chronicon Paschale* (and Mazor, reading the *Chronicon* uncritically) reports as “pagan” violence should probably be cashed out as Christian on Christian violence (*Chron. Pasch.* 362),³⁵ and the fiasco that is bishopric authority in Palestine in the fifth century does not leave Scythopolis uncontested either (see Cyril, 139.20-141.20; 148.10-152.15; 191-200; esp. 197.20-25 in which the “Origenist” Theodore was made bishop of Scythopolis).³⁶ This patchwork of conflict probably goes some way to explaining the lack of a central urban bishop’s palace.

The Byzantine round church provides the best example of a site opened up to new questions once we modify our expectations that “Christianization” happened at this site in the same way as elsewhere. Most of the scholars who mention it talk about it as a church *simpliciter*.³⁷ Nevertheless, the Church lacks many of the key markers that identify a church used for the year-round liturgy, including a reliquary. The *Encyclopedia* rightly notes that, like other ambulatory churches in the region, the site was not likely to have been used by the general community.³⁸ There are no textual references to it in the works of Cyril of Scythopolis, a contemporary born in the city and familiar with local cults, and it is too large a

³² Bowes, “Early Christian Archaeology”, 603

³³ For the locating of the march and massacre of the Christian children in 529 CE, based on Malalas’ referring to a church dedicated to Basil, L. Di Segni, “Scythopolis (Bet Shean) during the Samaritan Rebellion of 529CE” in D. Jacoby and Y. Tsafrir (eds.), *Jews, Samaritans and Christians in Byzantine Palestine* (Jerusalem 1988), 217-27 [Hebrew]. Hagith Sivan agrees, see *Palestine in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2008), 168-169

³⁴ Sivan, *Palestine*, 157

³⁵ See Mazor, “Nysa-Scythopolis”, 286; Sivan, *Palestine*, 166 suggests this emendation.

³⁶ See Hombergen, *The Second Origenist Controversy*, 130-328 for a detailed historiographical critique which nevertheless presents an excellent account of the troubles and the involvement of prominent bishops in wrangling with the emperor at Constantinople. Also, see Evagrius ii.5; in the troubles surrounding Juvenal’s return to Palestine following the Council of Chalcedon (451) some sources report the metropolitan of Scythopolis, Severian, being assassinated by the followers of emperor Theodosius (Schnitzler, T., 1953, 738; see also *A Panegyric on Macarius* attributed to Dioscorus of Alexandria vii.5-7 and vii.9-10. See also Ps-Zacharias Rhetor, book 3.

³⁷ For instance Avni, “From City to Madina’ Revisited”, 303; Tsafrir and Foerster, “Urbanism”, 109; see Nocera, “Round Church”, 16-17

³⁸ Stern et al (eds.), *Encyclopedia*, 1634

structure for the possible monastery next to it to have used it as a chapel. Hence, any strong Christianization thesis is doing too much work here in identifying this building as belonging to some sort of “Christianizing program”; this site does not fit the mould of the building programme in late fifth century Palestine without some significant bending of the rules of classification. Bernard Mulholland (2014) presents a number of detailed comparisons of early Byzantine churches; perhaps as a result of the ambiguous character of the Round Church he makes no mention of it.

What we do know is that the church is hypaethral, mismatched in terms of size and thickness of walls, and having two burials unmentioned by many commenters, including the most detailed description by Mazor.³⁹ It grasped at prestige in terms of size and decoration, but its internal walls were too weak to support any sort of dome or vault. Unlike the Chapel of the Ascension it had no Jesus-traditions associated with it. It is therefore possible that the church aimed at some sort of multiple imitation, mimicking imperial hilltop burial mausoleums on the most prominent political site in the area, as well as important church sites at Caesarea, Bosra, and Jerusalem. Such constructions are commonly used by architects involved with imperial Roman patronage in the tetrarchic period and following, both in secular and ecclesiastical buildings.⁴⁰ As Yasin points out, commemorative rites were hugely important, in a number of varied ways, in the late Antique Mediterranean, including as a method for forming Christian identity.⁴¹ The Beth Shean site waives both the significance of octagonal building (a hallmark of imperial style and elite prestige as well as carrying significant baptismal significance) and the possibility of cross-centred imagery (unlike Qal’at Se’man, the closest similar site in terms of the size and date of construction of the central octagonal construction).⁴²

In short, this structure, like Beth Shean in general, raises more questions than it answers. Without a new physical examination of the remains, no definite answers will be forthcoming, especially since there are serious discrepancies between the field plans and plans as published in terms of what is included as a church, where access routes exist or not, and whether to show the graves under the church as part of the structure or not. It is possible that some features of the site have been overlooked. Nevertheless, those are very useful questions and ripe for revisiting. So far, rather than being an important monument for the larger Christian community at Beth Shean, its form and setting suggests that more likely forms part of the self-establishment of the occupants of the “mosaic house” complex

³⁹ Mazor, “Nysa-Scythopolis”, 285; for the burials see Fitzgerald, *Excavation*, 18-30

⁴⁰ See Mark J. Johnson, *The Roman Imperial Mausoleum in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2009); also Regina Franke, “The headquarters building in the tetrarchic fort at Nag’al-Hagar (Upper Egypt)” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 2013(26), p.456-463; p.456: the plan clearly shows, as the article comments, an octagonal *principia* in this provincial tetrarchic fort.

⁴¹ Yasin, Ann Marie, *Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community* (Cambridge, 2009), ch.2

⁴² Paul A. Underwood, in a dated but usable paper, explores the significance of eight for baptisteries and churches in “The Fountain of Life in Manuscripts of the Gospels”, *Dunbarton Oaks Papers* 5 (1990), 43-138. For Qal’at Se’man, Robert Milburn, *Early Christian Art and Architecture* (California, 1988), 124-129

on the tell. Unfortunately, the “monastery” attached to the church has not yielded any inscriptions. The involvement of patrons, at least in theory, can be strongly supported by Bowes’ observation of the need for donated land in urban church construction. Such a central position in the province capital could probably only be built on with significant input from local wealthy landowners, given the lack of evidence for imperial interest.⁴³



(Mosaic in the Monastery of Lady Mary, UPM Image #238272); the evidence in the Round Church allows nothing so elaborate to be posited)

Conclusion

Material remains cannot speak alone. But the images gleaned from the excavations at Beth Shean-Scythopolis marry well with Cyril’s writings. Scythopolis was a politically expedient location, but religiously marginal and contested. Its most visible site probably served as an element of elite self-positioning. In short, it provides an excellent case study of “Christianization” as a varied set of tactics, used to reconfigure extremely varied sets of aspirations and ends. The material remains of churches and monasteries on Tel-Beth Shean and Tel Iztabba can be best understood when slotted into a localized view of the way Christian networks attempted to actualize themselves.

⁴³ Bowes, “Early Christian Archaeology”, 589-590

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