

# Theatres in Ancient Palestine during the Roman-Byzantine Period (An Historical-Archaeological Survey)\*

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## *Introduction*

Our intention in this survey is to attempt to raise certain questions concerning the essential characteristics of the theatre in Ancient Palestine from the 1st century BCE through the 6th century CE.<sup>1</sup> Though no theatre in this region

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- 1 The theatre in Ancient Palestine as part of a total cultural picture has not yet received an in-depth study. Theatres have been mentioned, and even described from an architectural standpoint in a few studies dealing with Roman architecture in summaries about various cities such as Caesarea or Beth-Shean, but little attention has been devoted to the role of the theatre in the culture of Ancient Palestine with its Jewish, Nabatean and Greek populations. At the end of the 50's and at the beginning of the 60's, the French scholar E. Frezouls published a series of three articles on the theatres of Syria, Provincia Arabia, Phoenicia and Ancient Palestine. In addition to describing the architectural remains, he attempted to understand the place of the theatre in a region in which the classical tradition of the theatre had no roots. See: E. Frezouls, 'Les Théâtres Romains de Syrie,' *Les Annales Archaeologiques de Syrie*, vol. 2 (1952) 46–100; *idem*, 'Recherches sur les Théâtres de l'Orient Syrien,' *Syria* 36 (1959) 202–227; *idem*, 'Recherches sur les Théâtres de l'Orient Syrien,' *Syria* 38 (1961) 54–86. Two short summaries, in Hebrew, have been published in recent years on the theatres in Israel: G. Fuks, *Scythopolis — A Greek City in Eretz-Israel*, Yad Izhak Ben Zvi Publications (Jerusalem 1983) (see chap. 14: "The Theatre and other Forms of Mass Enter-

was built after the 3rd century CE, most of the theatres continued to serve their original purpose until the end of the Byzantine period.

Of the structures erected for the purpose of public entertainment known to us in the Graeco-Roman world, the theatre was the most varied in character. The significance and function of the hippodrome and amphitheatre are clear. Over the years, there was no real change in their use or in the nature of the events held in them. They also hardly varied from one region to another. However, when we come to the theatre, the picture is entirely different. In Ancient Palestine theatres were erected over a long period of time, as already indicated, in various areas: in Judaea, in the Nabatean kingdom and in the Hellenized cities. One cannot assume that the theatre fulfilled the same function in all these areas and everywhere transmitted the same messages to their audiences in the same language.

In Ancient Palestine, west of the Jordan, we now know of eleven theatres (Sepphoris, Hammat-Gader, Beth-Shean, Legio, Shumi, Dor, Caesarea, Samaria, Shechem, Jericho, Elusa). East of the Jordan we know of the existence of eighteen more.<sup>2</sup> These numbers are certainly not final and additional theatres will very likely be uncovered in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Let us now examine the essential character of the theatre in Roman and Byzantine Palestine. The first theatres there were built at the end of the 1st century BCE when most of this territory was under the rule of Herod, King of Judaea. South and east of it stretched the Nabatean kingdom. The Hellenized cities enjoyed limited autonomy, subject either to Herod or directly to the Syrian governor. Most of them were concentrated east of the Jordan.<sup>4</sup>

tainment," pp. 123–141). Y. Tsafir, *Eretz Israel from the Destruction of the Second Temple to the Muslim Conquest — Archaeology and Art*, Yad Izhak Ben Zvi Publications (Jerusalem 1984) 115–121.

- 2 The 18 theatres known to us today on the eastern side of the Jordan and in southern Syria are: Sahr, Philippopolis, Kanatha, Dionysias (Soueida), Bostra, Gadara (2), Pella, Abilla, Gerasa (3), Dion, Philadelphia (2), Petra (3).
- 3 Based upon literary evidence, one can expect additional theatres to be found, for example, in Jerusalem or the *odeon* at Caesarea which is said to have been built upon the city's synagogue which was destroyed in the course of the revolt; similarly, in the Hellenized cities such as Susita (Hippos), Akko, Ashkelon and Gaza. See: C. Glucker, *The City of Gaza in the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, B.A.R. International Series 325, (Oxford 1987) 19. I have recently been told that the remains of a small theatre have been unearthed in Antipatris. We hope for at least a preliminary publication soon.
- 4 M. Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land from the Persian to the Arab Conquest*, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1966) 164–180; A.H.M. Jones, *The Cities*

I. *Herodian Theatres*

The earliest theatres in Judaea were built at Herod's initiative, and funded by him. Josephus tells of three theatres built by Herod: at Caesarea, Jerusalem and Jericho.<sup>5</sup> The theatre at Caesarea was erected as part of a very impressive city complex. Caesarea, for Herod, was the epitome of all his building activity in Judaea. It was the showcase which was to display Judaea as a Hellenistic kingdom in character and spirit, adorned by statues, temples and entertainment structures for spiritual and physical culture.<sup>6</sup> Josephus, telling the story about the statuary of Augustus and Rome which Herod ordered erected upon the façade of the Temple of Augustus above the port of Caesarea, compares the statue of Augustus to Phidias' statue of Zeus at Olympia.<sup>7</sup> This comparison may be amusing or ridiculous, but still it truly reflects Herod's conception of the world and his aspirations. The theatre, the amphitheatre, and the hippodrome erected at Caesarea were an inseparable part of the setting which gave Caesarea the appearance Herod desired.

The Syrian-Phoenician Gentile population of the city certainly enjoyed these installations, but our literary and historiographic information on this subject comes chiefly from the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th to 6th centuries CE, and not from the Herodian Period.<sup>8</sup>

*of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford 1971<sup>2</sup>) (see chapter 10, 'Syria', 276–294).

- 5 The theatre in Jerusalem: J. *AJ* 15. 268; at Caesarea, *BJ* 10.415; and at Jericho, *AJ* 17.161.
- 6 About Caesarea, see: A. Schalit, *König Herodes — Der Mann und sein Werk* (Berlin 1969) 332–340; A. Frova (ed.), *Scavi de Caesarea Maritima* (Roma 1966) 57–195; L.I. Levine, *Roman Caesarea — An Archaeological-Topographical Study* (Jerusalem 1975) (see chapter 5, 'Theatres,' 23–26); J. Ringel, *Césarée de Palestine* (Paris 1975) ('théâtre': pp. 45–51; 'odéon': p. 51; 'amphithéâtre': pp. 51–53; 'hippodrome': pp. 53–55); G.C. Izenour, *Theatre Design* (McGraw-Hill, New York 1977) 17–19.
- 7 J. *BJ* 1. 21. 7.
- 8 The ceremonies at the founding of the city of Caesarea were accompanied by games and sports-competitions in the best Hellenistic tradition. Josephus stresses the large prizes which were awarded the competitors in order to attract them to the new city and thus put Caesarea on an equal footing with the other cities in the eastern Mediterranean Basin; see: *AJ* 16. 5. 1; *BJ* 1. 21. 8. — During the late Roman and Byzantine Periods Caesarea was famous for its pantomimes, see: J. Rogue (ed.), *Expositio Totius Mundi et Gentium* (Paris 1966) (Parag. 32, p. 166); H.J. Lawlor, J.E.L. Outlon (eds.), *Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History and Martyrs of Palestine* (London 1927) 3. 2(Syriac); 6. 3(Syriac). — According to Malalas,

The theatre that Herod built in Jerusalem has not yet been found. Here, in contrast to Caesarea, it is hard to pinpoint the population which might have used it.<sup>9</sup> And it may be precisely this factor which explains the “disappearance” of this theatre. One hears nothing of it after Herod’s death, and it is reasonable to assume that it was simply abandoned or at a later stage even dismantled because of a lack of interest.

The third of the theatres built at Herod’s initiative, that at Jericho, was not far from the king’s winter palace complex; it apparently served the court circles. Its special design, integrated with the hippodrome, is perhaps an indication that the seating arrangement also served the chariot-race spectators; therefore it may not have functioned as an actual theatre after all.<sup>10</sup>

Vespasian converted a synagogue of Caesarea into an odeon, see: B.G. Niebuhr (ed.), *Malalas-Chronographia* (Bonn 1931) 261 (10, 338). — The arenas in Caesarea were also very active during the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods, see: Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 3. 2. — The Caesarean circus races were as important as those of Antioch, Laodicea, Tyre and Berytus, see: Rogue, *Expositio*, Parag. 32, pp. 164–166. — The Hippodrome of Caesarea is also mentioned in the late 5th cent. CE, see: L. Dindorf (ed.), *Malalas, Chronographia* (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae) 15.93, p. 382. B.G. Niebuhr (ed.), *Chronicon Paschale* (Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae), Parag. 327. The amphitheatre of Caesarea is also mentioned in Byzantine sources, see: Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 3. 2(Syriac); 6. 2 (Greek), *idem.*, *Ecclesiastical History* 8. 7. 1. — Recitations to a musical accompaniment were very popular in Caesarea during the Byzantine Period, see: R. Foerster, E. Richsteig (eds.), *Choricus of Gaza* (Choricus Gazaicus) (Teubner, Leipzig 1929) 32. 95, pp. 365–366. — Gymnastic exercises, boxing and wrestling were regular events at Caesarea and were held either at the theatre, the amphitheatre or the hippodrome, see: Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine* 6. 3; 7. 4; 8. 2.

9 Prof. N. Avigad and his staff did not manage to locate the remains of the Herodian theatre, built, according to Josephus, in the upper city (see note 5). The accidental find of two theatre tickets is not enough to verify that it was in existence later. See: N. Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (New York 1983) 193, fig. 239. As early as in 1886 C. Schick attempted to locate Herod’s theatre in Abu-Tor, see: C. Schick, ‘Herod’s Amphitheatre, Jerusalem,’ *PEQ* 19–20 (1886), 161–166; see also: A. Kloner, ‘Abu-Tor,’ *Hadashot Arkhiologiot* (*Archaeological Newsletter*) No. 50, April 1974; M. Avi-Yonah, *The Model of Second Temple Jerusalem* (Holy Land Publications, Jerusalem 1967) 5, 8–9 (Hebrew).

10 E. Netzer, ‘The Hippodrome built by Herod at Jericho,’ *Qadmoniot* 51–52 (1980) 104–107 (Hebrew).

The dating of the theatre at Sepphoris is still uncertain. Some claim it was built by King Herod, but it may have been built by his son, Herod Antipas.<sup>11</sup> It is the latter who first made Sepphoris the capital of his kingdom. It is possible that Herod Antipas followed in his great father's footsteps and wished to give his capital a Hellenistic cast. There is no knowing how this theatre was used, but it is reasonable to assume that it served the members of the court.

The theatres built by Herod fit nicely into the totality of the building activities attributed to him. They are part of a group of structures built with a political intent: to express a clearly defined cultural and political policy which the king did his best to realize. The goal was to change Judaea into a kingdom in spirit with the times, an equal among equals in the new world that had become an absolute and final reality, after Rome had extended her rule over the eastern Mediterranean Basin. This outlook of Herod's is most evident when one examines the list of his building activities, particularly beyond the borders of his kingdom. He erected gymnasia, theatres, temples, and market-places, and refurbished fortifications and plazas. A generous contribution of his even extricated the Olympic games, the most honored institution in the Greek world and the symbol of the Hellenic spirit, from financial difficulties.<sup>12</sup> And yet there is no ground to assume that Herod was a true Philhellene. The theatres which he built were not intended to expose a new audience, viz. the residents of Judaea, to the beauties of Greek tragedy, nor even to satisfy his own artistic taste. Of those within his kingdom, only the one at Caesarea continued to serve its purpose hundreds of years afterwards. There the character of the city and the constitution of the population justified its continued existence.<sup>13</sup>

The theatre was an alien implant in the Judaea of the end of the 1st century BCE. Its content and language were foreign to the vast majority of the population, not only to the Jewish segment. There is no evidence that there were theatres between the 1st century BCE and the end of the 1st century CE in the cities of the Decapolis and in the Hellenized cities along the coast, such

11 L. Waterman, *Preliminary Report of the University of Michigan Excavations at Sepphoris, Palestine in 1931* (Ann Arbor 1937) 6–12, figs. 3–5; J.F. Strange, 'Sepphoris (Sippori) 1983,' *IEJ* 34 (1984), 'Notes and News,' pp. 51–52. This exploratory investigation did not solve the problem of the theatre's founding but verified that it was still in use in the 4th–5th centuries CE.

12 J. *BJ* 1. 21. 12.

13 See note 8.

as Ashkelon and Gaza. This indicates not only that these cities were unable to bear the expense of erecting them but also, mainly, that there was no interest and, simply, no need for them during this period.

## II. Nabatean Theatres

During the period under discussion, i.e. the end of the last century BCE and the 1st century CE, theatres were also built in the Nabatean kingdom. We now know of five: three at Petra (two in Petra proper and another at Wadi Sabra, 12 kilometers from the city); one at Elusa; and another at Sahr, in Trachonitis.<sup>14</sup> The very fact of finding theatres within the confines of the Nabatean kingdom is in itself surprising. However, a closer look at their locations clarifies their purpose.

The large theatre at Petra, the only one of the Nabatean theatres to have been thoroughly studied and fully published, was built, or, more precisely, for the most part hewn, out of the very heart of the central necropolis at Petra. It was built at the time of Aretas IV (9 BCE–40 CE).<sup>15</sup> The theatre at Elusa, not yet investigated completely, is also dated to that period. This theatre is in the southeastern, lower part of the city, not far from the necropolis.<sup>16</sup> The locations of these two theatres are certainly not accidental, and it would seem that those investigators are correct who wish to see these theatres as installations whose purpose it was to accommodate the throngs that participated in Nabatean rituals of necrolatry.<sup>17</sup>

- 14 On the theatres in Petra, see: Th. Wiegand, *Petra* (Berlin 1921) 29–33; Ph. Hammond, *The Excavations of the Main Theatre at Petra, 1961–1962*, Final Report (London, 1965) (here see also the history of the research, pp. 6–7, and the comprehensive bibliography, pp. 89–90); on the theatre at Wadi Sabra which has not yet been excavated, see: M. Linder (ed.), *Petra und das Königreich der Nabatäer* (Munich 1970) 27–28, fig. 12; *idem*, 'An Architectural Survey of the Theatre Mount at Sabra, South of Petra, 1980,' *ADAJ* 26 (1982) 231–242.
- 15 Ph. Hammond, *op.cit.*, pp. 55–56, 16. A. Negev, 'Excavations at Elusa in 1980,' *Qadmoniot* 55–56 (1982) 122–128 (Hebrew).
- 16 A. Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev* (Franciscan Printing Press, Jerusalem 1981) (Nabatean theatre inscription from Elusa, pp. 73–76, phot. 74). This inscription is clear evidence that the theatre at Elusa was still in use at the end of the 5th cent. CE.
- 17 A. Negev, 'Nabateans and the Negev' from Y. Gradus, A. Schmuely (eds.), *The Negev Desert* (Ministry of Defense, Tel Aviv 1979) 242–243 (Hebrew); A. Negev,

In the Nabatean site of worship at Sahr, in Trachonitis, there is a small theatre near the temple.<sup>18</sup> It would seem that here, too, the theatre fulfilled a purely ritual function with no connection whatever to its original purpose. In addition to the theatre itself, the courtyard in front of the temple was designed like a theatrical architectural space with a stepped seating-section enclosing the courtyard on three sides of a "U". This apt architectural solution is also found in other Nabatean sanctuaries such as Sur, Seeia, and Tannur.<sup>19</sup> An epigraphic find proves that the Nabateans themselves called the theatre-like courtyard "teiatra".<sup>20</sup>

Both the actual theatres and the theatre-like courtyards served for assemblages of the multitudes for worshipping the dead at the cemeteries, or for religious worship at the Nabatean temples and sacred precincts.

What remains now is to attempt to examine what use was made of the theatres in the Hellenized cities of Judaea, southern Syria and Provincia Arabia. As far as is known today, the first theatres in those cities were erected at the end of the 1st and the beginning of the 2nd centuries CE. Almost one hundred years separate the theatres Herod built and the first ones erected in the Hellenized cities.

### III. *Early Roman Theatres* (end of 1st cent. CE — first half of the 2nd cent. CE)

To the best of our knowledge, the first theatre erected during this period was the southern theatre at Gerasa which was dedicated, as evidenced by the

'The Nabateans and the Provincia Arabia,' in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II(8) (Berlin 1977) 601.

- 18 H.C. Butler, *Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria*, Div. 2 — *Ancient Architecture in Syria*, Sec. A. — *Southern Syria*, Part 7 — *The Ledja* (Sahr) (Leyden 1919) 441–446.
- 19 On the sacred precinct at Sur, see H.C. Butler, (see n.18) 428–441. On Seeia, see: H.C. Butler, *P.U.A.E.S.*, Div. 2, Sec. 1, A. Part 6 (Seeia), pp. 374–399; J.M. Dentzer, 'Six compagnes de fouilles à Si: Développement et culture indigène en Syrie méridionale,' *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 2 (1985) 65–83; on Tannur see: N. Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins* (New York 1965) 621–630, plans A-H.
- 20 E. Littman, *P.U.A.E.S.*, *Semitic Inscriptions*, Div. 4, Sec. A. (Nabatean Inscriptions from Southern Hauran) (Leyden 1914) 77; A. Negev, 'Nabatean Inscriptions from Avdat,' *IEJ* 11 (1961) 127–138.

inscription, between 90–92 CE.<sup>21</sup> Its location is of special interest. The theatre is in the southern part of the city, utilizing the northwest slope of the hill on which lies the sacred precinct of Zeus. Indeed, the theatre is part of this huge worship-site. The location of this theatre may reflect the Nabatean traditions which, at the end of the 1st century CE, were still quite strong here. Gerasa's Nabatean past and the remains of the Nabatean presence there all suggest that this is the case. On the other hand, we must point out that in the Hellenistic, and even in the ancient Roman building tradition too, we find theatres incorporated into sacred precincts.<sup>22</sup> Thus, alternatively, we might view the integration of the sanctuary of Zeus and the southern theatre at Gerasa as a reflection of the Hellenistic or ancient Roman tradition.

The theatre at Bostra is to be dated in the first decade of the 2nd century CE.<sup>23</sup> The theatre and the nearby hippodrome were erected following the change of Bostra from a flourishing Nabatean trading station to the capital of Provincia Arabia. The initiative for building the theatre and the hippodrome in the city seems to have come from the provincial government. These

- 21 On the southern theatre at Gerasa see: C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa — City of Decapolis* (New Haven 1938); (see C.S. Fisher's article on the theatre, pp. 19–20). During the excavations conducted at the site in the 1960's and 70's, new inscriptions were discovered which made it possible to date the theatre to 90–92 C.E., see: D. Kirkbridge, 'A Brief Outline of the Restoration of the South Theatre at Jerash,' *ADAJ* 4–5 (1960) 123–127; *A.A.S.O.R.*, Newsletter, 4, Oct. 1974; J. Fouilloux, *LA* 27 (1977) 246–254; *idem*, *LA* 29 (1979) 276–278. For an up-dated summary with a wealth of illustrative material and an isometric reconstruction of the *scaenae frons*, see: I.F. Browning, *Jerash and the Decapolis* (Chatto & Windus, London 1982) 125–131, figs. 62–66.
- 22 Theatres were incorporated in most of the sacred precincts in the Graeco-Hellenistic world, like the theatre of Dionysus which occupies the southeastern slope of the Acropolis, the theatre in the sacred precinct of Apollo at Delphi, or the theatre at Pergamum. — a. On the theatre of Dionysus at Athens see: J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (London 1971) 537–552, figs. 676–690. — b. On the theatre at Delphi see: P. Coste-Messeliere, Ch. Picard, *Delphi* (Paris 1943) 317, 332; figs. 25, 198–199. — c. On the theatre at Pergamum see: R. Bohn, *Pergamon 4* (Die Theater-Terrasse) (Berlin 1902) Tafeln 1, 4, 45. — d. On the theatres incorporated in the sacred precincts in Roman architecture, see E. Frezouls, 'Aspects de l'histoire architecturale du théâtre romain' in: *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* (Berlin 1982) (Zwölfter Band) 343–441 (especially 356–361).
- 23 H. Finsen, *Le Lève du Théâtre Romain a Bosra* (Einar Munsdgaard, 1972); E. Frezouls, 'Les Théâtres Romains de Syrie,' *A.A.S.* 12 (1952), 69–79; J.P. Rey-Coquais, *A.A.S.* 15 (1985) 66.



institutions were supposed, first and foremost, to serve the Third Cyrenaica Legion for whom Bostra had been designated as the base-camp.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, there is no knowing who initiated the building of the southern theatre at Gerasa. An inscription discovered by the excavators of Gerasa, as early as the 30's, points out that one *cuneus* in the theatre was contributed by a *Decurio* who had been mustered out of the army and had settled there. This is not sufficient evidence for concluding, as did the French investigator, Frezouls, that at Gerasa, as at Bostra, the initiative for erecting the theatre came from the Roman soldiers who had settled in the city, but it is not impossible.<sup>25</sup>

The end of the 1st century CE and the beginning of the 2nd mark the beginning of a period of prosperity for the cities located east of Jordan. The establishment of the Provincia Arabia, the paving of the *Via Traiana Nova* and its various feeders and, finally, the peace with the Parthians at the end of Trajan's military campaigns, all contributed to the creation of flourishing prosperity in the cities of Arabia, southern Syria and, perhaps to a somewhat lesser degree, Judaea.<sup>26</sup>

In the days of the Antonine Emperors (especially during the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius) the theatre and odeon at Philadelphia, the northern theatre at Gerasa, and apparently also the theatre at Kanatha were erected.

In this discussion, as already indicated, two central factors distinguish the theatres which were built in the days of Herod from those erected in the Hellenized cities, beginning with the time of the Antonine Emperors and thereafter: the initiative for their erection, and the audience using them.

We have indicated that in the case of the southern theatre at Gerasa and that at Bostra, it is possible that the initiative for their erection was not local municipal. It is reasonable to assume that the theatre at Legio, too, the base-camp of the Sixth Legion, was erected at imperial, not local, initiative

24 A.H.M. Jones *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford 1937) 293; G.W. Bowersock, 'A Report on Arabia Provincia,' *JRS* 61 (1971) 219–242, pls. 14–15; *idem*, *Roman Arabia* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1983) 76–89; A. Segal, 'Roman Cities in the Province of Arabia,' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40 (2) (1981) 108–121.

25 C.H. Kraeling, *Gerasa*, p. 399, inscr. 52; E. Frezouls, 'Recherches sur Les Théâtres de L'Orient Syrien,' *Syria* 38 (1961) 58, notes 2–3; A.H.M. Jones, *JRS* 18 (1928) 152 f.; according to Jones the retired *decurio* did not pay the entire cost of the *cuneus*, but merely contributed toward it.

26 See note 24.

like that at Bostra.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the theatre at Philippopolis, which was to be the mausoleum-city of the Emperor Philip the Arab (244–249), was undoubtedly built at the initiative of Philip himself.<sup>28</sup> This theatre, incidentally, is the last of those built in the Roman East. All the other theatres we now know of in Ancient Palestine, southern Syria and Provincia Arabia, were erected by local, city initiative.

#### IV. *The Theatres of the Antonine and Severan Periods*

The northern theatre at Gerasa was erected in the days of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, about seventy years after the southern theatre.<sup>29</sup> It differs from its predecessor in size and in the way it was built, but the outstanding difference between the two theatres is their location. The southern theatre was built, as we have said, on the northwest slope of the hill of Zeus' sanctuary, in the south of the city, with no connection to the city itself; whereas the northern theatre is integrated architecturally and in its spatial planning with the network of the streets of the town.

The impressive theatre at Philadelphia, the southernmost city of the Decapolis, is also well integrated into the city landscape.<sup>30</sup> Its seating arrangement utilizes the slope of the hill which borders on the center of the city on the south, and faces the forum, the city's main thoroughfare, lined with colonnades and public buildings. All these together create an impressive, well-planned city center. Near the theatre, east of it, is the *odeon*, a small theatre, built somewhat later than the main theatre itself. This combination of a large theatre and a nearby *odeon* forming a single unit is very rare in the eastern

- 27 The city of Legio was established as a camp-site, a base for the Sixth Legion, in the first quarter of the 2nd century CE. See: M. Avi-Yonah, *The Holy Land from the Persian to the Arab Conquest* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1966) 141–142.
- 28 P. Coupel, E. Frezouls, *Le Théâtre de Philippopolis en Arabie* (Paris 1956); H.C. Butler, *P.U.A.E.S.*, Part 2: *Architecture and Other Arts* (New York 1903) 376–396; R.E. Brunnow, A.v. Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia* 3 (Strasbourg 1909) 154–179.
- 29 G. Schumacher, 'Dscherasch,' *ZDPV* 25 (1902) 145–150; C.S. Fisher, *Gerasa*, 22–23.
- 30 F. El Fakharani, 'Das Theater von Amman in Jordanien,' *A.A.* 3 (1975) 377–403; J. Hanson, *Roman Theater-Temples* (Princeton 1959) 59–77, figs. 16, 27, 36; E. Frezouls, "Recherches sur les Théâtres de l'Orient Syrien," *Syria* 26 (1959) 225.

basin of the Mediterranean, and has only very few parallels in Provincia Arabia and in the western provinces of the Roman Empire.<sup>31</sup>

According to the epigraphic evidence the theatre at Kanatha, too, may have been erected in the time of the Antonine Emperors.<sup>32</sup> This theatre, called an "odeon" by the modern scholars because of its small dimensions, was found outside the city, in a gulch, most of it hewn out of the lower slope of the hill. Its relative distance from the city and its location in a gulch in verdant surroundings, may perhaps mean it was meant for celebrations and festivals, like the theatres at Hammat-Gader or Birketein (Gerasa). We shall deal with this kind of theatre below.

We have, then, attributed the erection of the following theatres to the reigns of the Antonine Emperors: the northern one at Gerasa, the theatre and the *odeon* at Philadelphia, and the theatre at Kanatha. All the other theatres in Ancient Palestine, southern Syria and Provincia Arabia, and they are the majority, were built from the latter part of the 2nd to the 3rd century CE, mainly during the reigns of the Severan Emperors. To this group belong the theatres at Beth-Shean (Scythopolis), Samaria, Dor, Shechem (Neapolis), Hammat-Gader, and it would seem, the theatre at Shumi, as well; and on the eastern side of Jordan, the theatres at Pella, Abilla, and the theatre at Birketein near Gerasa. We shall briefly review the theatres which have been excavated or studied, albeit partially.

The theatre at Beth-Shean, excavated in the early 60's and recently published, was apparently erected at the beginning of the 3rd century CE. Beside it, an amphitheatre was recently uncovered, also apparently of the same period.<sup>33</sup>

- 31 See, for example, for Gadara, U. Wagner — Lux, E.W. Krueger, 'Bericht über die Oberflächenforschung in Gadara (Umm-Qes) in Jordanien im Jahre 1974,' *ZDPV* 94 (1978) 135–141, plan I; A. Segal, *The Planning of the Cities along the Via Traiana Nova in the Roman Period* (Jerusalem 1975 Dissertation) 1–21 (Hebrew); M. Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* (Princeton 1961) 201, figs. 678–679; notes 20–21; A.N. Modona, *Gli Edifici Teatrali Greci e Romani*, (Firenze 1961) 88–96, figs. 48.
- 32 H.C. Butler, *P.U.A.E.S.*, Div. 2 — *Ancient Architecture in Syria*, Sec. A. — *Southern Syria Part 5* (Kanawat) pp. 346–351. On the inscription see: W.H. Waddington, *Inscriptions Grecques et Latines de la Syrie* ('L'Erma' di Bretschneider, Roma 1968) (inscr. 2341), p. 537. See also: J.P. Rey-Coquais, 'Kanawat' in: S. Stillwell (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* (Princeton 1976) 192.
- 33 About the theatre and amphitheatre at Beth-Shean see: S. Applebaum, 'The Roman Theatre of Scythopolis,' *SCI* 4 (1978) 77–105; A. Ovadia, C.G. De Silva,

The theatre at Samaria, excavated as early as the 30's, and the one at Shechem (Neapolis) being excavated now, were also erected during the Severan dynasty.<sup>34</sup>

The theatre at Birketein, the open ritual site of Gerasa, located 1200 meters north of the city, is dated to that same period, i.e. the beginning of the 3rd century CE.<sup>35</sup> It is incorporated in a religious site at whose center is a large pool of water, remains of altars, a decorative gate, and colonnades. Epigraphic and literary evidence confirm that the open ritual site of Gerasa was famed for the water festivals held there.<sup>36</sup>

It seems that the small theatre uncovered in the 30's at Hammat-Gader, near the baths, was incorporated into the open religious sanctuary near the large city of Gadara. Here too there is an abundance of water, greenery, and therapeutic springs. This theatre is dated to the first half of the 3rd century CE.<sup>37</sup>

'Some Notes on the Roman Theatre of Beth-Shean (Scythopolis),' *SCI* 6 (1981/82) 85–97. For a comprehensive study on the theatre and especially its historical and epigraphic sources, see: G. Fuks, *Scythopolis — A Greek City in Eretz Israel* (Yad Izhak Ben Zvi Publications, Jerusalem 1983) (see chapter 14: 'The Theatre and other Forms of Mass Entertainment,' pp. 123–141) (Hebrew); H. Plommer, 'Scythopolis, Caesarea and Vitruvius,' *Levant* 15 (1983) 132–140; G.C. Izenour *Theater Design* (McGraw-Hill, New York 1977) 39–40. The excavations at Beth-Shean begun in 1980 were discontinued after two brief seasons, see: G. Fuks, *ibid.*, pp. 139–141; 'Archaeological News' about this (October 1981), p. 8; during the 1985–1987 seasons, the amphitheatre has been excavated and partly restored, in the context of the huge archaeological park to be created in Beth-Shean.

- 34 On the theatre in Samaria see J.W. Crowfoot et al., *The Buildings at Samaria* (London 1942) 57–61; F. Zayadine, *ADAJ* 12–13 (1967/68) 77–79. The theatre at Shechem (Neapolis) was partially excavated in recent years but has not yet been fully published. See: Y. Magen, 'The Roman Theatre at Shechem,' *Zev Vilnay Memorial Volume* (Ariel Publishing House, Jerusalem 1984) 269–277 (Hebrew).
- 35 On the theatre at Birketein see: G. Schumacher, 'Dscherasch,' pp. 165–171, figs. 39–42; C. McCown, *Gerasa* (The Festival Theatre at Birketein) 159–167, pls. 32B–35a.
- 36 C.B. Welles, *Gerasa* (Inscriptions), inscr. 279, p. 470–471; P. Thomsen, *Loca Sancta* (Halle 1907) 51–52.
- 37 G. Schumacher, *The Jaulan* (London 1888) 153–155, figs. 54–58; E. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of El-Hammeh (Hammath of Gadara)* (Jerusalem 1935) fig. 7; M. Avi-Yonah (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem 1975) vol. 2, 469–473. Also see: L. Di Segni, Y. Hirschfeld, 'Four Greek Inscriptions from Hammath-Gader,' *IEJ* 36 (1986) 251–268.

The theatre at Dor, in spite of being only partially excavated, can be dated to the 3rd century CE.<sup>38</sup>

It stands to reason that the theatre at Kefar Shumi (Syna) too, located north of Binyaminah and not yet excavated, was part of an open religious sanctuary and fulfilled the same function for Caesarea as did the theatre of Hammat-Gader for Gadara. Historiographic and literary evidence strengthen this claim.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, we have a group of theatres, located in open sanctuaries, all integrated with pools of water and situated in verdant surroundings, isolated and cut off from the urban centers, yet, for all that, near them. The most famous such site was Daphne, near Antioch on the Orontes.<sup>40</sup>

What induced the cities throughout Ancient Palestine, southern Syria and Provincia Arabia to build, in the course of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, tens of theatres which, by their very nature, were very costly entertainment structures whose construction certainly constituted a heavy burden upon their economies? We have seen that there were cities for whom one theatre did not suffice, which built two and even three, in addition to an amphitheatre and/or a hippodrome.<sup>41</sup>

We have already mentioned that the cities in the area prospered from the end of the 1st century CE and especially during the 2nd century. Naturally, their residents wished to demonstrate their affluence and their civic pride. Since political and military avenues were barred to them, they turned their energies to construction. Their building activities, as we have said, included installations for amusement, among which were theatres. Like the other buildings, these too expressed their desire for ostentation but they were not "street ornamentation" like triumphal arches, *nymphaea*, or *tetrapyla*. The theatres served their purpose: they held the thousands who came to see the

38 J. Leibowitz, *Alon 3* (1951) (Hebrew) 38–39; M. Avi-Yonah (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1975) vol. 1, 334–337.

39 C.R. Conder, H.H. Kitchener, *Survey of Western Palestine 2* (London 1881–83) 66–67.

40 D. Wilber, *Antioch on the Orontes 2, Excavations 1933–36* (Princeton 1938) (The Plateau of Daphne, pp. 49–53; The Theatre of Daphne); G. Downey, 'The Olympic Games of Antioch in the Fourth Cent. A.D.,' in G. Fatouros, T. Krischer (eds.), *Libanios* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1983) 173–211.

41 At Gerasa, for example, there were three theatres and a hippodrome; at Gadara, two theatres and a hippodrome; and at Caesarea, a theatre, a hippodrome and an amphitheatre; see also note 2.

various presentations. As previously stressed, the initiative for the building of theatres was local, municipal, and the spectators were essentially the local residents.

When most of the theatres in Ancient Palestine were built, i.e. at the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd centuries CE, classical plays were disappearing from the stage throughout the Roman world and being replaced by lighter and less select forms of entertainment. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire, especially in our area, classical tragedy and comedy had never earned a permanent place; the residents of Beth-Shean or Shechem apparently knew no theatre other than mime.<sup>42</sup>

Archaeological data confirm that in the course of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE the theatres of Shechem, Caesarea, and Beth-Shean were adapted to the production of naumachies, the "water-theatre." Water pipes were installed and the orchestra was enclosed by a low, solid wall and could be filled with

42 In the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, classical plays were still being presented in the eastern Roman Empire. See M. Bieber, (above n. 31) p. 250. But during the course of the 3rd and 4th centuries tragedy and comedy gave way to lighter, more popular forms of entertainment: mime and pantomime became very popular throughout the Empire. Mime's primary aim was to show the amusing and the confusing side of everyday life. To this end, crude vulgarities, ridiculous hand gestures, and *double entendres* were employed. Parody also became an integral part of mime. Qualities of character and behavioral patterns were underscored by improvised spontaneous dialogue (for the most part there was no script). Negative human qualities, weakness of character, and human foibles were held up to ridicule. Dance, acrobatics, song, and even callisthenics were introduced between acts. Fun was poked at all classes, at the representatives of all sections of the community, and at the professions. — Mime was notable for its licentiousness, its crude and daring humor. The actors and actresses who appeared in it did not wear masks. The mime actors even allowed themselves to voice criticism of the Emperors and the members of the ruling class, by hinting at what was happening in the imperial family: for example, they alluded to the infidelities of Faustina, the wife of Marcus Aurelius. — If mime was a sort of substitute for classical comedy, pantomime was destined to be tragedy's replacement. There were two distinct types of pantomime: tragic and light — a kind of burlesque or parody. — In "tragic" pantomime, the actor/dancer imitated the events of the drama by means of hand movements and dance, against a background of choral song portraying the different characters in their order of appearance in the original drama. In the lighter form of pantomime, the actors concentrated on parodies of the gods and the various mythological figures. See: M. Bieber, (above n.31) pp. 237–239 (pantomime); 248–250 (mime).

water in a few hours.<sup>43</sup> The “water-theatre” productions were reputed to be of doubtful character, to say the least, but they became very popular throughout the entire Roman empire during that period. Early Christian sources, especially of the 4th–6th centuries CE, report that the Church came out vehemently against such entertainment, but had difficulty uprooting the presentations which were so precious to urban residents in Ancient Palestine, southern Syria and Provincia Arabia. In both Talmudic and Christian sources, a relatively large amount of space is given to the theatre, amphitheatre and hippodrome. This is not the place to discuss the Jewish and Christian establishments’ attitudes to the theatre and other forms of mass entertainment customary during this period, but it is very important to note that the only sort of theatrical presentation mentioned in these sources is the mime, which had gained immense popularity. In addition to the mime and “water-theatre” presentations, sports events such as boxing, wrestling, and callisthenics may also have been held in the theatres.<sup>44</sup>

43 In the reports of the excavation of the three aforementioned theatres, it is clearly noted that in the later stage of their existence the orchestras were adapted to serve as pools, see notes 6, 33, 34. The phenomenon of adapting the orchestras of the theatres to the creation of pools of water to be used for the production of ‘water-theatre’ is well known; see: G. Traversai, *Gli Spettacoli in Acqua nel Teatro Tardo-Antico* (‘L’Erma’ di Bretschneider, Rome 1960).

Installations used to fill the orchestras with water have been excavated and studied in various theatres, for example, see: *Antioch*: D.B. Wilber, ‘The Theatre at Daphne’ in R. Stillwell (ed.), *Antioch on the Orontes* (Princeton 1938) 59–73, pls. 5–6. — *Athens*: E. Fiechter, *Das Dionysos Theater in Athen* — 3. (Stuttgart 1938) 82. — *Corinth*: R. Stillwell, *Corinth 2 — The Theatre* (Princeton 1952) 13, 74, 140.

Representations of the spectacles in “water-theatre” are also recorded in some mosaic pavements, see: *Antioch*: D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton 1947) (Vol. 2, pl. 79). — *Piazza Armerina*: G.V. Gentili, *La Villa Imperiale di Piazza Armerina* (Roma 1954) 47–48. *Idem*, *La Villa Erculia di Piazza Armerina — I Mosaici Figurati* (Roma 1964) pl. 14; B. Pace, *I Mosaici di Piazza Armerina*, (Roma 1955) (ch. 5, pp. 77–91, pls. 14–16).

44 The theatres and other institutions of entertainment are mentioned often, both in Talmudic literature (mainly in the Jerusalem Talmud) and in Christian literature. In Jewish literature, the theatre is considered primarily as a negative phenomenon, as a form of idolatry, in which Jews are not to participate; only when community needs demanded it, was it permissible to attend theatrical performances. The theatre is usually mentioned together with ‘circuses,’ i.e., with the hippodrome and amphitheatre. — A hostile approach to the theatre, and espe-

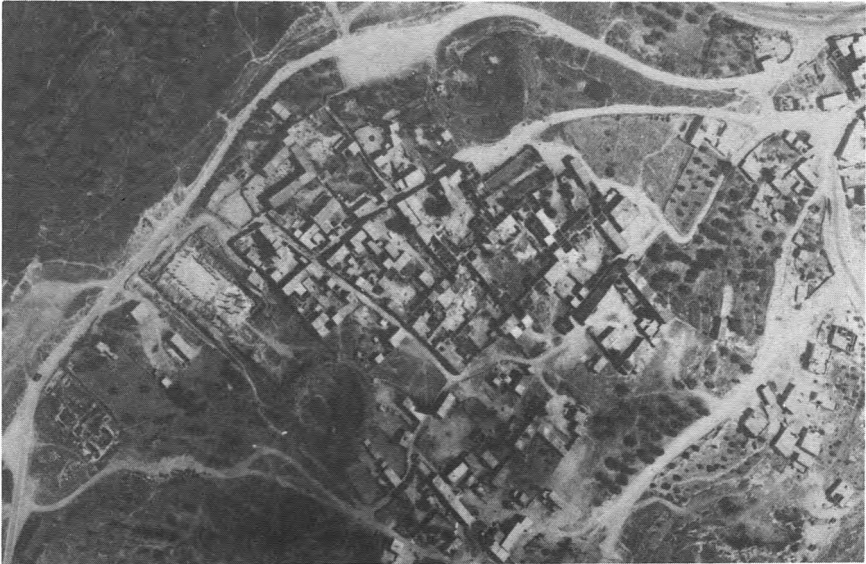


Caesarea, air photograph of the theatre [Government Press Office Photography Dept.]

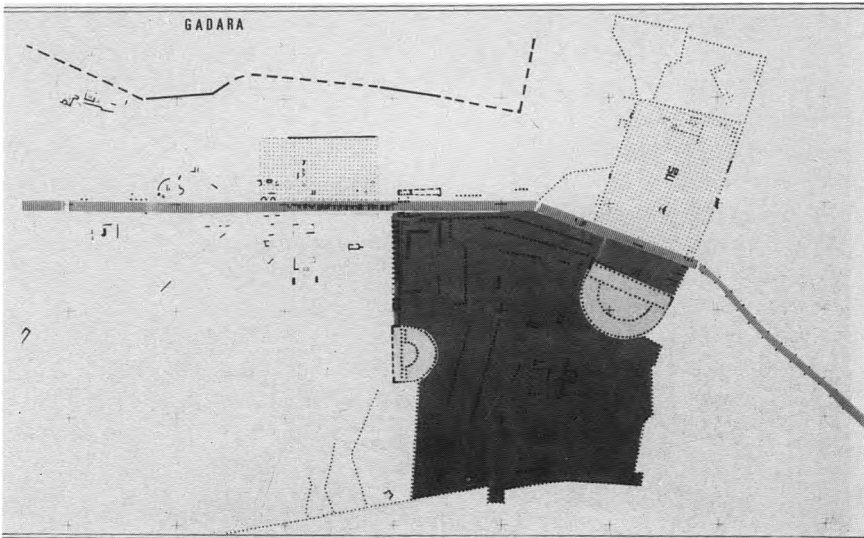


Halutza (Elusa), the theatre, fragment of the cavea and the circular supporting walls [author's collection].





Gadara, the acropolis, aerial view. Note the two theatres.



Gadara, the schematic plan of the acropolis with the two theatres.



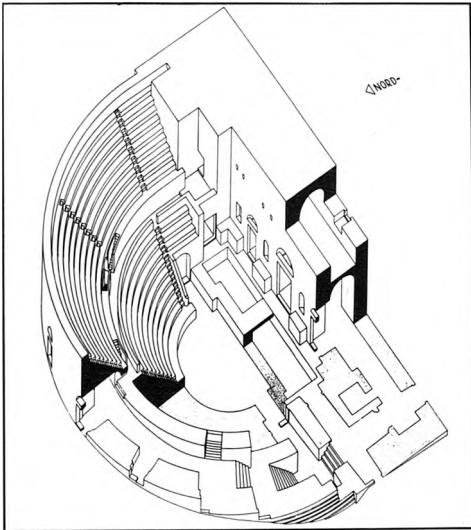
Amman (Philadelphia), city centre. View from the acropolis. (Photograph from the early 30's.) (The theatre and the forum — before restoration.)



Schechem (Neapolis), Roman theatre (partly exposed).



Philippopolis, the theatre, fragment of the cavea [author's collection].



Philippopolis, isometric reconstruction of the theatre [P. Coupel, E. Frezouls, *Le Théâtre de Philippopolis*, Paris, 1956, pl. XV].

cially to the mime, is also characteristic of the Christian sources. It is clear that the Church, with obvious dissatisfaction, made its peace with the very great popularity of the chariot races in the hippodrome, but it fought vehemently against the theatre. Its opposition even spawned legislation forbidding the performances of mimes. These bans prove how alive and widespread mimes still were in the Christian world of the 5th and 6th centuries CE, especially in Ancient Palestine, Syria and Provincia Arabia. — The light, licentious mime, and the pantomime which to a great extent drew upon the classical and pagan inspirational sources, were equally abominable in the view of the Church Establishment. The 'water-theatre,' known for its licentiousness, was still shown in the Byzantine period, in spite of the strong opposition of the Church (see, for example, the Birketein theatre in Gerasa). Caesarea, Ashkelon, and Gaza are cities often mentioned in both Jewish and Christian sources in connection with theatre, athletic competitions and other mass entertainment during the Roman period and until the latter days of the Byzantine era, see: V. Cottas, *Le Théâtre a Byzance* (Paul Geuthner Paris 1931); P. Petit, *Libanius et la vie municipale à Antioche au 4e siècle après J.C.* (Librairie Orientaliste, Paul Geuthner, Paris 1956); R. Pack, *Studies in Libanius and Antiochene Society under Theodosius* (Univ. of Michigan Press 1935); G. Downey, 'Malalas on the History of Antioch under Severus and Caracalla,' *TAP PhA* 68 (1937), 141–146; A.F. Norman (ed.), *Libanius Autobiography (Oratio 1)* (Oxford Univ. Press 1965) (for Libanius' attitude to the theatre, see p. 148); H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (Oxford 1964) (On Maïuma Festivals, pp. 977–978). — For the Talmudic sources on the theatre and other entertainment installations see: M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature* (Pardes Publishing House, New York 1950), vol. 2, p. 1663; all the references to theatre, circus and amphitheatre mentioned in the Midrash and Jerusalem Talmud are brought together and cited here in brief. — A more general discussion of the attitude of the Sages in Ancient Palestine at the time of the Mishna and the Talmud to the theatre and the other entertainment installations can be found in the comprehensive volume of S. Krauss, *Talmudische Archäologie* (Hildesheim 1966) Vol. 3, pp. 117–121 (notes 290–319). — On the nature of the Roman and Hellenistic theatre of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, see: M. Bieber, (above, n. 31), pp. 250–253. — For a comprehensive, in-depth summary of the Christian and Rabbinic sources dealing with the theatre in Ancient Palestine at the end of the Byzantine period, see: Y. Dan, *The City in Eretz-Israel During the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Publications, Jerusalem 1984) esp. pp. 203–209, and Lee I. Levine, *Caesarea*, (above, n. 6). Most noteworthy in the great number of Christian sources cited is the fact that from the 4th to the 6th centuries the only presentation mentioned in connection with the theatres in Ancient Palestine is the mime. An interesting detail is that certain sports, like pugilistic competitions or the pancration (a sort of free wrestling), were also held in the theatres. This phenomenon is known, for example from

During the first centuries of the Common Era, the theatres in Ancient Palestine, Southern Syria and Provincia Arabia were institutions of mass entertainment which provided amusements of the plainest kind. They catered to an eastern, Hellenized, audience which was satisfied to view mime presentations and which, it is reasonable to assume, never watched a classic tragedy or comedy. The Herodian theatres which did not reflect the true cultural needs of the majority of the population of Judaea were a foreign imposition upon its landscape; whereas the Nabatean theatres provided no more than an architectural setting in reality in no way related to theatre in its accepted sense. On the other hand, the lively and popular mimes faithfully reflected the cultural needs of the majority of the city-dwellers in Ancient Palestine during the late Roman and Byzantine periods.

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Athens as well, see: G. de Budé (ed.), *Dio Chrysost. Orat.* 31, 121 (Lipsiae, 1916). — At Caesarea too, gymnastic exercises, boxing and wrestling were regular events, held either at the theatre, amphitheatre, or hippodrome, see: Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, 6. 3; 7. 4; 8.2. See also note 8.