

Judaea/Palaestina and Arabia: Cities and Hinterlands in Roman and Byzantine Times

Introductory Notes

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While already for several decades, survey archaeology and the investigation of city – hinterland relations have been in the focus of Mediterranean archaeology¹, the systematic implementation of this method in the southern Levant, is not commonly practiced in the region. Only a few cities in this region were investigated by systematic intensive or extensive field surveys, among them Abila, Gadara, Hesbon/Esbous, Gerasa, Philadelphia and Petra in Transjordan.² Major urban centers in ancient Palestine were often integrated in systematic field surveys especially into the Archaeological Survey of Israel,³ sometimes accompanied by excavations of different scale, as was the case in Caesarea, Apollonia, Scythopolis, Sepphoris, Ascalon and Elusa to name several examples. Some of these sites are partially covered in this work by contributions. However, it is obvious that a small collection such as ours cannot fill the gap of a systematic study of city – hinterland relations in the southern Levant. It is therefore our aim to provide the status quo of these relations in some selected cities and towns and to illustrate the variety of research methods and disciplines used to examine this topic.

It is remarkable that systematic field surveys were hardly implemented in Transjordan and Arabia, given the long tradition of systematic field reconnaissance in the Near East, starting in the 19th century and continued by scholars like N. Glueck, S. Mittmann and many others.⁴ These surveys aimed at a general overview of the settlement history of whole regions and at identifying ancient sites. Today, research questions have changed, and in many cases the study of micro-regions with their hinterlands are the focus of research. Such studies can only be undertaken in a systematic fashion, using multi-disciplinary approaches and high-resolution analyses looking at all kinds of zones of urban settlements and connections within the site and its hinterland.

The AIAC panel dedicated to urban infrastructure aimed at exploring the relationships between the city (or town) and its hinterland (as reference to its agricultural terrains) or periphery (as reference to its subjected settlements). It focused on some southern Levantine major and secondary administrative centers of Judaea/Palaestina and Arabia under Roman and Byzantine rule (1st to 7th century CE). Papers in the three sessions presented several test-cases in which information on the hinterland/periphery of a center is well documented through surveys, excavations, and other means of documentations (i.e. LiDAR, aerial photography, geophysical surveys and so forth). Some papers addressed a range of issues connected with the Graeco-Roman city and its chora/hinterland/periphery. Among these, networking and communication, territory, definitions of a city/town, fortifications, citizenship, road networks, villages and estates,

aqueducts and dams, rivers, streams and seafronts, industrial quarters and production facilities, agricultural terrains and field towers, centralized dumps and necropoleis, were considered means of defining the urban infrastructure. The papers in many cases aimed at both the economical perspective and the political and social perceptions.

Given the scarcity of studies addressing these issues in a southern Levantine milieu, our intention was to produce a collective volume on the subject, but we became fully aware that this is only the start of an urgently needed research program on hinterlands and peripheries of urban centers in the southern Levant. Especially notwithstanding the intensive urban encroachment and modern development in the region threatening the ancient remains.

Among the papers, the more systematic approach of Nicolò Pini aimed at discussing the terminology of city – hinterland relations in the southern Levant. He discussed the important phenomenon of Roman settlements that according to size were more than villages, but in administrative terms lacked the polis status and often also lacked the urban fabric. Such sites underline that we are dealing with a variety of settlements in the region and highlight the problems of looking at center – periphery phenomena in limited dimensions.

All of the other papers dealt with one particular urban center and its hinterland. Several studies related to coastal sites such as Caesarea (discussed by Uzi ‘Ad, Peter Gendelman, Rivka Gersht, Joseph Patrich) and Apollonia (discussed by Oren Tal), with Caesarea being studied from many perspectives by different scholars. The comparison between the two coastal centers was enlightening because of their different size, economic potential and political status.

Jerusalem (Aelia Capitolina) (discussed by Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah) and Sepphoris (Diocaesarea) (discussed by Zeev Weiss) can also be regarded as two test-cases in Western Palestine. Both cities were important regional centers, one in Judaea, the other in the Galilee, the former quite large and connected to the Roman army, the latter a medium-sized center largely populated by Jews. In addition, Beth Guvrin-Eleutheropolis was also discussed during the conference (by Boaz Zissu). This regional center in southern Judaea had a remarkably multi-religious profile with pagans, Jews and Christians living in the hinterland. Unfortunately, the paper did not make it into the publication.

During our three-sessions panel much time was spent on discussing cities of the Decapolis. These major urban centers in the region had a long history stretching back at least to the Hellenistic period. They come very close to the ideal of a Graeco-Roman city with a marked political status and urban center as well as hinterland settlements. Scythopolis (by Gabi Mazor), Gerasa (by Achim Lichtenberger and Rubina Raja), Hippos (by Michael Eisenberg and Mechael Osband) and Gadara (by Claudia Bührig) were the cities that received attention during the panel; unfortunately, the papers on Scythopolis, Hippos and Gadara did not make it into the publication. The lack of detailed studies underlines the importance of a systematic study of the settlement history of this region.⁵

Some of the cities of the Decapolis later belonged to the Roman province of Arabia, the province that was established after the incorporation of the Nabataean kingdom by Trajan in 106 CE. Before the provincialization phase, the Nabataean kingdom was urbanized on a small scale, but it developed enormously in the context of the *pax Romana* and its settlements turned into large cities. During the conference, Petra (discussed by Will M. Kennedy) and Elusa (discussed by Christian A. Schöne, Michael Heinzemann, Tali Erickson-Gini and Diana Wozniok) were two such sites. Although it is difficult to compare the two, one being the capital and religious center for a long time, the other developing mainly during the Byzantine period, it was important to discuss these two centers since they broadened the perspective into more arid regions. Yet they have to be seen as warnings that generalizations from one site are not permissible for other sites.

It is obvious that this collection of papers is a start at best and an appetizer for more detailed studies on the city – hinterland (and periphery) relations in the southern Levant during the Roman and Byzantine periods. There is an enormous variety of sites and regions, a variety that makes any selection not suitable for generalizations. Although being part of the Roman or Byzantine Empire provided the cities with a shared political framework, culturally, these cities were quite diverse. Thoroughly Romanized cities such as Caesarea on the one hand and more indigenous cities such as Sepphoris on the other can hardly be compared to each other. From a geographical point of view, generalizations are not applicable with cities in the fertile and water rich plains such as Caesarea or Scythopolis nor with others in semi-arid regions such as most of the cities of the Decapolis or cities in arid desert environments such as Petra and Elusa. Desired are more detailed test-cases of city – hinterland studies in Roman and Byzantine Palestine and Arabia. Still, also systematic studies dealing with terminology, concepts and modelling are urgently needed. Only if we could find a common ground on terminology of a city, territory, networks, infrastructure and economy, comparative and systematic perspectives, will we be able to reach more general conclusions about city – hinterland relations in this particular part of the ancient Mediterranean.

Notes

¹ See e.g. Alcock – Osborne 2007, 118–119.

² See the contributions in this volume on Gerasa and Petra. On Abila see Fuller – Fuller 1992, on Gadara cf. Bührig 2016, on Hesbon see LaBianca – Hubbard – Running 1990 and Kennedy 2017 on Philadelphia.

³ See http://survey.antiquities.org.il/index_Eng.html#/MapSurvey.

⁴ Glueck 1945–1949; Mittmann 1970. Regarding Jordan, <http://www.megajordan.org/Map> is an important resource for settlement history although it is not up to date.

⁵ Cf. also the collection by El-Khoury 2009.

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