

BET SHEAN

LOCATION

The Israeli city of Bet Shean¹ is situated at the junction of two important roads: the transversal road leading from the Jezreel and Harod valleys to Gilead, and the road running the length of the Jordan Valley (Foerster 214)². It is the first city you meet when approaching Israel from the East, through the Yarmuk valley. At 390 feet (120 m) below sea level, it is a well-watered, fertile and desirable region

Just to the north of the city is Tel Bet She'an³, one of the most important stratified mounds in Palestine (Britannica 1). The mound covers approximately 10 acres, and is situated on a high hill that slopes towards the northwest, overlooking the city. Until the beginning of the Roman Period, the city was located on top of the mound (rather than in the valley to the south and west), with the gates to the city located in the northwest.

HISTORY

The city of Bet Shean has been traced back to biblical times. As a Canaanite stronghold, the tribes of Menasseh and Asher could not drive out the inhabitants (Josh. 17:11) for they were "well armed with chariots and armor" (Joshua 17:16). There are at least six additional references to Bet Shean in the Bible, all of which are listed on page 155-156 of The Iron Age at Beth Shan by Frances James. Each of these references, along with archeological evidence, help to construct a chronological history for this ancient city.

Originally located on top of the mound, the existence of Bet Shean has been traced back to the middle of the 4th millennium. Excavations of the mound by University of Pennsylvania archaeologists from 1921-1933 found 18 levels of occupation, "extending from the Chalcolithis . . . to the early Arab period" (Judaica 758). The first dwellings were small pits dug into the bedrock " . . . apparently dating from the Pottery Neolithic period (fifth millennium)"⁴(Foerster 215).

Written data from Egyptian sources dating back to the time of Thutmose III (15th century B.C.E.) and Ramses III (12th century B.C.E.), confirms the existence of Bet Shean during this time period. Used as a station for caravans traveling back and forth from Israel to Jordan, Bet

¹ Beth Shean, Bet She'an, Beth-Shan, Baysan or Beisan (both Arabic) are alternative ways to spell Bet Shean. For the purposes of this paper, "Bet Shean" will be used to refer to the city.

² See figure 1.

³ See figure 2.

⁴ Different sources give different dates for the start of civilization in Bet Shean—The New England Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land states that the city first developed in the 5th millennium, while the Encyclopedia Judaica states the 4th millennium.

Shean soon became a center of Egyptian rule “due to its strategic location, as well as the fact that it did not serve as the center of a Canaanite city-state” (Judaica 223). Excavations of the mound revealed numerous temples built by Egyptians to honor local deities, and three basalt victory stelaes⁵—two from the reign of Seti I⁶ (1290-1279 B.C.) and the other from the reign of his son, Ramses II (1279-12 B.C.) (Judaica 758). These relics provide information on the military route taken by the Egyptians along the northern Sinai Peninsula and the political confrontations that occurred during this time period.

“By the time of Judah Maccabee [161 B.C.E.], many Jews lived in Beth-Shean” (Judaica 758). During the Hellenistic period, the city was called Scythopolis. The Romans took control of the city in 64 B.C.E., and Bet Shean was given the status of an imperial free city by Pompey (Judaica 758). The city became an important center of the Decapolis (a league of 10 Hellenistic cities) and under Byzantine rule was the capital of the northern province of Palaestina Secunda. In the seventh-ninth centuries, Bet Shean was under Arab control. In all three of these later periods (Hellenistic-Roman, Byzantine and Early Arab), the entire city (referred to as Bet Shean’s civic area) was built around the mound, rather than on top of it. During the Byzantine period, when the city encompassed the greatest area, 320 acres, a wall surrounded it (Foerster 23).

The discovery of a theater in the valley below the mound in 1961, led to the excavation of Bet Shean’s civic area. Along with this 5000 stone seat theater, an amphitheater, baths,, cemeteries and colonnaded streets lined with shops were also discovered⁷. The streets lead from the theater to the mound, coming together at a plaza in front of a temple. All structures feature Roman-style architecture.

Bet Shean declined after Arab conquest in 636. The great earthquake of 749 destroyed the city, forcing this historical urban center into even further collapse (Nur 30)⁸. “Beth-Shean reached the lowest ebb in its development at the beginning of the 19th century when it was no more than a miserable village with at most 200 inhabitants” (Judaica 760).

In September of 1918, British forces captured Bet Shean (Judaica 760). From 1936-1939, it was one of the centers of Arab terrorism (Britannica 1). As part of the territory allocated to Israel by the United Nations partition plan of November 1947, the Arab population fled from Bet Shean during the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. After the finish of the war, the town was resettled with new immigrants, including many refugees from Arab countries. Currently, Bet Shean is the center of Israel cotton-growing region.

EARTHQUAKES AT BET SHEAN

Bet Shean sits on the Mediterranean plate, which moves South (Nur 31). According to archeological evidence, two earthquakes have hit this city: one in 363 and another in 749 (Nur 57-58).

⁵ According to Webster’s Dictionary, a stela is a “carved or inscribed stone slab or pillar used for commemorative purposes.”

⁶ See figure 3.

⁷ See figures 4 and 5.

⁸ See the next section entitled EARTHQUAKES for more information about the earthquake of 749.

Compared to the earthquake of 749, there is little archeological evidence that an earthquake hit in 363. In fact, the 363 earthquake wasn't discovered until after evidence for the earthquake of 749 was discovered. It turns out that while the 363 earthquake did destroy parts of the city, Bet Shean was eventually repaired. Evidence that supports this theory includes the fact that free standing columns which were shipped from upper Egypt and most likely used as decoration in the city, were destroyed in the 363 earthquake, but were used to re-build the city after the earthquake. As Professor Amos Nur says in his book *Geophysics and Earthquakes*, "Although they were no longer suitable for use as columns in the new design, they were put to good use as part of the foundations for the Byzantine main street colonnade [after the earthquake of 363]" (Nur 31).

The earthquake of 749, on the other hand, destroyed the city. It is estimated that the earthquake occurred on January 18, 749, around 10:00 a.m.⁹ and was somewhere between a magnitude 6.7-7.2 (Tsafrir 18). Almost the entire city collapsed: the theater, temple, baths and the colonnade streets, with covered sidewalks held up by large columns, were destroyed¹⁰. Objects found in some of the shops that line the colonnade include scales and weights (from the shop of a goldsmith), jewelry, glass, pottery, and a Jewish bronze oil lamp from the Byzantine period decorated with a menorah¹¹. The most critical evidence in support of the occurrence of this earthquake is the gold coins found inside collapsed shops along the colonnade. The oldest of these coins is dated 697, while the youngest is dated 749 A.D.—the year of the earthquake. "Clearly this coin, which has survived in mint condition, had found it's way into the hands of a trader a very short time before it was buried by the earthquake . . ." (Tsafrir 234).

"The earthquake came as a final blow after the Arab conquest, and there was almost no rebuilding after that" (Nur 58). It led to the demise of Bet Shean, as the city was never able to recover from the destruction. "Only a few primitive stone huts built within—and with—the rubble of the fallen city testify to continued human habitation after the disaster. It is even possible that these huts were emergency shelters, desperately cobbled together by survivors of the earthquake" (Nur 31). With this horrific natural disaster in which it is estimated that tens of thousands of people lost their lives, Bet Shean was transformed from a thriving cultural center, to an abandoned pile of ruins.

WORKS CITED

"Bet(h)-Shean." *Encyclopedia Judaica*. 1982 ed.

"Bet She'an." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. 2000 ed.

⁹ Note that this is an approximation made by Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster—different archaeologists estimate different dates and times of the quake.

¹⁰ See figures 6 and 7.

¹¹ See figure 8.

- Foerster, Gideon. "Beth-Shean: Tel Beth-Shean and the Northern Cemetery." The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land. 1993 ed.
- James, Francis. The Iron Age at Beth Shan. Philadelphia: The University Museum, 1966.
- Nur, Amos. Geophysics and Earthquakes. Not yet published. p.57-58 and 30-32.
- Tsafirir, Yorman & Foerster, Gideon (1992). The Dating of the ' Earthquake of the Sabbatical Year' of 749 _{C.E.} In Palestine.
- Yadin, Yigael & Geva, Shulamit. Investigations at Beth Shean: The Early Iron Age Strata. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1986.