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Scythopolis*

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A. THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME

FROM the Hellenistic period until the Arab conquest biblical Beth-Shean was known as Scythopolis, Σκυθῶν πόλις, 'City of the *Scythians*'. The Scythians were a group of nomad tribes living in classical times in what is now South Russia. The earliest author to mention Scythopolis is Polybius,¹ in connection with the conquest of Palestine in 218 B. C. by Antiochus III of Syria. The other sources in which this name appears are less certain in date. They are: (a) The Septuagint in a gloss on Beth-Shean (τὴν Βαιθσοαν, ἣ ἔστιν Σκυθῶν πόλις) in Judges 1:27; (b) Judith 3:10, and (c) Josephus² in his chapter on the Tobiads. There it is referred to the period of Ptolemy II, even if only in what is really a historical novel. The name Scythopolis, however, was used only in Hellenized circles; Josephus³ states twice that it was so called 'by the Greeks'. Conversely, Stephanus Byzantinus in his *Ethnika*⁴ says that Scythopolis was called Beth-Shean 'by the barbarians'. A bilingual ossuary inscription found in Jerusalem confirms this. It says in Judeo-Aramaic: *Ammiyah ba-Beshanit* and *Hanin ba-Beshani* and beside this in Greek: Ἀμμιά Σκυθοπολίτισσα and Ἀνὶν Σκυθοπολείτης.⁵ In talmudic literature the name Scythopolis does not appear at all; the city is invariably called Beth-Shean or Bêshan. Thus, if the town itself was Hellenistic, the district remained inhabited by people speaking a Semitic language.

'Scythopolis' as such was therefore a Ptolemaic foundation. The name chosen for it seems strange at first sight. As a rule the Ptolemies, when hellenizing the name of a city, either chose a dynastic name or translated the Semitic name into Greek. As examples of the first category we may mention Accho-Ptolemais, Rabbath Ammon-Philadelphia, Elath-Berenice; as an example of the second —

* Published in Hebrew in: *The Beth-Shean Valley*, Israel Exploration Society, Jerusalem, 1962, pp. 45-62. ¹ V, 70. ² *Antiquities*, XII, 183.

³ *Ibid.*, XII, 348; XIII, 188.

⁴ Edit. Meinecke, Berlin, 1849, pp. 578-579.

⁵ J. B. Frey: *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, II, Roma, 1952, Nos. 1372-1373.

Susitha-Hippos. But why choose such an outlandish name as 'Scythopolis' which was and has remained unique in the whole of classical geography?⁶ The Scythian tribes were nomadic and did not found cities; the towns existing in their country were Greek colonies, which in the Hellenistic period were subject to what was known as the kingdom of the Bosphorus.

The existence of a 'Town of the Scythians' in Palestine early aroused the curiosity of Byzantine authors, as we shall see. In the eighteenth century, Reland regarded the name Scythopolis as a Greek distortion of the biblical Succoth,⁷ an opinion sustained by Hölscher as late as 1903.⁸ Smith, while repudiating this suggestion, made another, most ingenious one. Assuming that the name Beth-Shean was derived from *sha'an* — 'peaceful, quiet' and therefore synonymous with *shaqet*, he proposed to explain 'Scythopolis' as a transliteration into Greek of the Hebrew *Beth-Sheqet* or *Sheqet* with the Greek suffix *polis*.⁹

The Byzantine chroniclers Eusebius¹⁰ and Syncellus¹¹ connect the name of Scythopolis with the Scythian invasion in the days of King Josiah towards the end of the seventh century B.C. According to them, some of the invaders settled in Beth-Shean, and gave their name to the city. This Scythian invasion is originally recorded by Herodotus (I, 103-105) as follows: The Scythians invaded Media in the days of King Cyaxares in the course of a pursuit after their fleeing enemies the Cimmerians. They defeated the Medes and overcame all Hither Asia, which they continued to dominate for 28 years. They even arrived at the gates of Egypt, but were turned back. On the retreat some of their bands plundered the sanctuary of Aphrodite Urania near Ascalon. The end of their rule came in characteristic fashion. The king of Media invited their chiefs to a feast, and had them dispatched while they lay in a drunken stupor. Not for nothing were the Scythians regarded by the Greeks as habitual drunkards. They drank their wine neat, contrary to Greek custom. The verb ἐπίσκοπιζω 'to act like a Scythian' means to get thoroughly sozzled. According to another version, also to be found in Herodotus,¹² the Scythian warriors had learned that during their prolonged absence their wives, left at home, had mated with

⁶ Cf. R. Beer, in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopädie*, II A, 1, Stuttgart, 1923, col. 947.

⁷ H. Relandus: *Palaestina ex monumentis veteribus illustrata*, II, Utrecht, 1714, pp. 992-998.

⁸ G. Hölscher: *Palästina in d. pers. u. hellen. Zeit*, Berlin, 1903, pp. 43-46.

⁹ G. A. Smith: *Historical Geography of the Holy Land*, 22nd ed., London, n. d., pp. 363-364.

¹⁰ *Chronicon* (ed. Schoene), II, p. 88.

¹¹ Edit. W. Dindorf, Bonn, 1892, I, p. 405.

¹² IV, 1.

slaves and had raised a new breed to rule their land. Hence their hurried return. Justinus¹³ repeats the same story, but shortens the period of Scythian rule over Asia to fifteen years.

This astonishing hypothesis of the foundation and continued existence of a Scythian settlement in Palestine from the seventh century B.C. onwards has been accepted by serious scholars almost down to our own time.¹⁴ It was, however, demolished completely by the late Professor Tcherikower in 1927.¹⁵ According to some scholars the true history of the Scythian 'invasion' has been revealed in a Babylonian chronicle from the time of Nabopalassar.¹⁶ These scholars believe that the Scythians (whom they identify with the *ummān-manda* of the Chronicle) arrived before Nineveh in the hour of the final decline of the Assyrian empire. They did not come as enemies of Media, but as allies of the Medes and Babylonians against the Assyrians and the Egyptians. They took part in the siege of Nineveh, which ended in 612 B.C. Then they helped to besiege Harran for another two years. Moreover, it has recently been assumed¹⁷ that profiting from the increasing anarchy in the Orient the Scythians invaded Palestine in Adar (February-March) 609 B.C. In the following Nissan-Sivan (April-June) they retreated from the borders of Egypt and disappeared from the history of Palestine. Thus instead of a conquest which lasted a whole generation, as implied in Herodotus, we have a short raid, lasting barely a couple of months. The Scythian raid then—even if we are to accept its historicity—is unlikely to have sufficed for the foundation of any permanent settlements. How indeed could a city of foreign horsemen maintain itself in hostile surroundings for three hundred years until the arrival of the Greeks and still keep its identity? And what did this Scythian city call itself in pre-Hellenistic times? We do not even know what the Scythians called themselves. In Assyrian documents their name was *Asbquza* (which corresponds to the

¹³ II, 3, 8.

¹⁴ Cf. e.g. E. Schürer: *Gesch. d. jüd. Volkes*, II, Leipzig, 1906, p.170; F. M. Abel: *Exploration de la vallée du Jourdain*, RB 9 N. S. (1912), pp. 413-414 (but cf. below, n. 26); Beer, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 6).

¹⁵ V. Tcherikower: *Die hellenistischen Städtegründungen*, Leipzig, 1927, pp. 71-72.

¹⁶ Especially C. J. Gadd, E. Dhorme, J. Lewy. Others (P. Schnabel, F. Thureau-Dangin, B. Landsberger, Th. Bauer) identify the *ummān-manda* with the Medes. For the latest discussion of the subject and its bibliography, see D. J. Wiseman: *Chronicles of Chaldaean Kings*, London, 1956, pp. 15-16, with full bibliography.

¹⁷ A. Malamat: *The Historical Setting of Two Biblical Prophecies on the Nations*, IEJ 1 (1950/1), pp. 155-159.

biblical Ashkenaz), in Persian they are called *Sākā*, but we may well ask whether this is their autochthonous name.

In view of these difficulties, many Greek and Latin writers looked for another explanation of the name Scythopolis: they drew on the world of mythology. Their tales were either connected with the myth of Dionysus, the local deity, or with Scythian history. Solinus, for example, tells us¹⁸ that in the course of his triumphal progress from India to Greece Dionysus buried his nurse Nysa there. He settled some of his Scythian companions to guard her tomb. Malalas and Cedrenus, on the other hand,¹⁹ connect the foundation of Scythopolis with the flight of Iphigenia, Orestes, and Pylades from Tauris in Scythia. On their way the fugitives reached a locality in Palestine which was called Tricomias (the 'Three Villages'). The natives identified Iphigenia by her dress as a priestess of Artemis. They asked her to build them a sanctuary of the goddess. She did so and according to custom sacrificed a virgin. The town, founded around the sanctuary by a synoecism of the three villages, was called Nysa after the foundation victim. Iphigenia set up a brass pillar in honour of the local Tyche and a high place as a sanctuary of the Goddess 'Poa'.²⁰ The fugitives continued their journey and embarked on the sea. Scythian horsemen were sent after them by Thoas, king of Tauris. They pursued them as far as Nysa only to learn to their dismay that Iphigenia, Orestes, and Pylades were now beyond the sea and out of cavalry range. Not daring to return, the Scythians, enchanted by the spot, refounded the city and called it 'Town of the Scythians' or Scythopolis. Obviously these are mere fables. No objects with any conceivable Scythian connotation have been found at Beth-Shean, certainly not in the pre-Hellenistic strata.²¹

We should not, however, go to the other extreme and regard any and all connection between the Scythians and Scythopolis as fictitious.²² It has been

¹⁸ Ed. Th. Mommsen, chap. 36.

¹⁹ Malalas, *Patrol. graeca*, 97, col. 237; Cedrenus, *ibid.*, 121, col. 272.

²⁰ This story is apparently based on some monuments visible in Byzantine Scythopolis. Perhaps 'Poa' is connected with the monument of 'Pagotia' mentioned among the boundary marks of the Beth-Shean territory in the *Jerusalem Talmud*, *Demai*, 22c, line 2 from below.

²¹ The so-called 'Scythian' figurine from Beth-Shean, now in the Ustinow collection (cf. A. Rowe: *Topography and History of Beth-Shean*, Philadelphia, 1930, p. 42, Pl. 54, 1) is earlier than the seventh century B.C., the date of the assumed Scythian raid. The relief from Beth-She'arim, 26 miles north-west of Beth-Shean (M. Avi-Yonah: *Oriental Art in Roman Palestine*, Rome, 1961, pp. 40-41 and Pl. VI, 1) can indeed be associated with steppe art, but belongs to the third century A.D.

²² A. H. M. Jones: *The Cities of the Eastern Empire*, Oxford, 1937, pp. 233, 242.

suggested that this name is one of the fanciful Greek appellations favoured by the Ptolemies for native cities under their dominion. This assumption does not in fact apply even in the case of Egyptian cities. They were called by the Grecized name of the deity of the nome or the animal sacred to it. The name Scythopolis certainly must have had some factual basis in historical reality. The Scythians were famous archers and horsemen throughout classical antiquity. In the fifth and fourth centuries B. C. Scythian archers formed the city-police of Athens. Soldiers of Scythian origin or natives of the Greek cities of the Bosphoran kingdom (also called 'Scythians') served in the armies of Alexander and his successors, including the Ptolemaic army.²³ It is thus quite probable that a nucleus of cleruchs, settled by Ptolemy II on his Beth-Shean estate, consisted of veterans of these 'Scythian' units, which need not have been ethnically pure. We know from Ptolemaic papyri that the designations 'Macedonian' or 'Persian' were applied in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt to whole classes who had nothing in common with those nations but the name.²⁴ Perhaps the Beth-Shean region was chosen for a settlement of horse-archers, because it had ample grazing grounds for horses — ample that is to say in comparison with the crowded cultivable area of Egypt proper. Perhaps also the king of Egypt preferred to settle the natives of a semi-barbarian country outside the Nile Valley. The horse-archers known as Dahians who fought in the army of Antiochus III at Raphia (217 B. C.) might have included some of the settlers at Scythopolis, who had gone over to the conqueror's side. Dahians reappear in the army of Antiochus III at Magnesia in 188 B. C.²⁵

Scythopolis was thus indeed called after the Scythians. Not, however, after the early invaders of the seventh century B. C., who were the enemies of Pharaonic Egypt, but after their later descendants, the friends and allies of Hellenistic Egypt.²⁶

B. THE FOUNDATION DATE

It is tempting to try to establish an exact date for the founding of Scythopolis. According to one of the papyri in Zenon's archives, dated to the 21 September

²³ M. Launey: *Recherches sur les armées hellénistiques*, II, Paris, 1950, pp. 421-423, 1205.

²⁴ A. V. Tcherikower-A. Fuks: *Corpus Papyrorum Iudaicarum*, I, Cambridge, Mass., 1957, pp. 13-15; W. W. Tarn-G. T. Griffith: *Hellenistic Civilization*, London, 1952, p. 218.

²⁵ Launey, *op. cit.* (above, n. 23), p. 568, n. 3.

²⁶ This solution has been hinted at by the late P. Abel in his *Histoire de la Palestine*, I, Paris, 1952, p. 57. He leaves open the question of the founder of the Scythian settlement.

254 B. C., he was instructed to take care of a deputation sent to Egypt by Paerisades, king of the Bosphorus, the deputation being on a visit to the district of Arsinoe in the Fayyum.²⁷

Paerisades II, king of the Bosphorus — his official title was 'King of the Sindians, all the Maitians and the Thatians' — reigned from c. 284 to c. 250 B. C. He belonged to the dynasty of Spartocids who had set up their Bosphoran kingdom on the northern shore of the Black Sea. The 'Scythian' soldiers in the Ptolemaic army were probably his subjects. In his days the Bosphoran kingdom reached its apogee. It established commercial and political relations with Rhodes and other Greek centres, as well as with Ptolemaic Egypt. It has been suggested²⁸ that this embassy was sent by Paerisades in order to regulate the wheat trade with Greece. For the two countries, Egypt and Bosphorus, supplied it with the bulk of this vital necessity. The Bosphorans would be interested in securing the safety of their wheat cargoes in the Aegean Sea, then dominated by the Ptolemaic fleet. The occasion of such a visit would be most suitable for the official inauguration of a settlement of the soldiers from Bosphorus in the Ptolemaic army. We learn from the Zenon papyrus that the Bosphoran delegation was not restricted to Alexandria. On the contrary, it visited areas outside the capital. We can therefore presume that it was present at the setting-up of Scythopolis. The foundation date of this city would then be a day in the autumn of 254 B. C.

C. TOWN AND COUNTRY IN ANCIENT SCYTHOPOLIS

As we learn from the Bible, the Canaanites of Beth-Shean — stiffened perhaps by some Philistine troops — held out against the Israelites till the time of David. Neither the weak tribe of Issachar nor the stronger Manasseh, of the House of Joseph, was able to subdue them. The Davidic conquest does not seem to have changed the composition of the local population. Taken by the king's troops, the territory of Beth-Shean became a domain of the kings of Israel. The separation of its inhabitants from the general fate of the Israelites is evidenced by the fact that Tiglath Pileser III passed them by.²⁹ A scholion on *Megillat Ta'ani*³⁰ states expressly that 'the people of Beth-Shean and of

²⁷ Launey, *op. cit.* (above, n. 23), p. 22.

²⁸ M. Rostovtzeff: Greek Sightseers in Egypt, *JEA* 14 (1928), pp. 13 ff.

²⁹ 2 Kings 15:29; 1 Chron. 5:26.

³⁰ H. Lichtenstein: Die Fastenrolle, *Hebrew Union Coll. Annual* 8-9 (1931-2), pp. 288-289.

its valley were not sentenced to the First Exile'. Their lands remained successively the property of the kings of Assyria, of Babylonia, and of Persia, and passed in the course of time into the Ptolemaic royal domain, which extended along the Jordan from the Sea of Galilee southwards.

With the establishment of the Ptolemaic cleruchy, the ethnic composition of the area need not have changed overmuch. The new settlers, who were allotted estates in return for military service, could not devote all their attention to the cultivation of their lands. They had to rely on native help. The former 'royal peasants' continued to till the ground for their new masters. The cleruchs seem to have tried to turn these 'natives' (λαοί) into slaves proper. The king, however, protected by decree the 'free native bodies' (σώματα λαϊκὰ ἐλεύθερα).³¹ It is to be presumed that the cleruchs formed not a city proper but only a politeuma (πολίτευμα), like the military settlers in other places, such as Sidon.³² The Ptolemies disliked endowing new settlements with the full rights of a polis.³³ The new settlement was placed under the protection of Dionysus, who had 'Scythian' associations for the educated Greek and who occupied in the Ptolemaic pantheon a place parallel to that of Apollo in the Seleucid kingdom.³⁴ It is only with Antiochus IV that the town received the dynastic name 'Nysa'³⁵ and the status of a city. In accordance with Seleucid custom the cleruchies were transformed into private estates, which they had already become in practice. This is brought out by the — unpublished — inscription found at Hefzibah.³⁶ In it Antiochus III promises his protection to various village estates in the area. The city of Scythopolis appears in Seleucid times organized in wards, called by local products.³⁷ The list of the priests of Olympian Zeus, the favourite god of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, includes some Hellenized Egyptians or Egyptianized Greeks, such as Herakleides the son of Sarapion.³⁸ This element in the population of Scythopolis was the result of half a century of Ptolemaic rule.

³¹ M. Rostovtzeff: *Social and Econ. History of the Hellenistic World*, I, Oxford, 1941, pp. 341-342.

³² *Ibid.*, III, p. 1401, n. 137.

³³ The suffix 'polis' in the name of the settlement does not mean that it had full city rights; the Greek names of the capitals of the Egyptian nomes, which were certainly not cities in the Greek sense, also carried the suffix; cf. Jones *op. cit.* (above, n. 22), map V, opposite p. 297.

³⁴ Tschirikover, *op. cit.* (above, n. 15), p. 72; cf. H. Thiersch: *Hellenistischer Kolossalsockel aus Besan*, *Göttinger Nachrichten* (1932), 1.

³⁵ W. Ruge, in Pauly-Wissowa's *Real-Encyclopädie*, XVII, 2, Stuttgart, 1937, s. v. Nysa, col. 1634; Jones, *op. cit.* (above n. 22), p. 252.

³⁶ *IEJ* 10 (1960), pp. 262-263.

³⁷ *Suppl. epigr. graec.* 8 (1937), No. 43 ἀμφόδου σειτικῆς. ³⁸ Rowe, *op. cit.* (above, n. 21), p. 45.

Jews first appear in Scythopolis towards the end of the Seleucid era. Their settlement there might have coincided with the Seleucid conquest and Antiochus' III favourable attitude to the nation. The text mentioning them (2 Macc. 12:30) speaks of Jews 'living there' (ἐκεῖ καθεστῶτων), i.e. in the city of Scythopolis itself. They attested before Judas Maccabaeus that they had been well treated by the local authorities at a time when many Greek cities persecuted the Jewish minority living in them.

It seems indeed that the Scythopolitans tried to keep neutral throughout the stormy years that followed. When Jonathan set out to meet the Seleucid general Tryphon, he chose this city as a convenient 'no-man's land'.³⁹ Later on, however, Scythopolis was used by Antiochus VIII Gryphus as a base for his attempt to relieve besieged Samaria; he even set up a mint there.⁴⁰ The Hasmonians struck back. The town passed into their power by force (according to Josephus' *Jewish War*⁴¹) or by bribes (according to the same author's *Antiquities*⁴²). In conformity with the usual Hasmonian policy, the inhabitants were given a choice between adopting Judaism or leaving. Possibly the new rulers hoped that they would choose to remain in view of the good relations which had hitherto existed between the townspeople and the Jews. Scythopolis was in fact the first city not openly hostile to the Hasmonians which became part of their dominions.

The experiment miscarried, however. The Hellenized town dwellers preferred to leave. Even the villagers followed them. This is evident from the passage in *Megillat Ta'anit* which records that 'on the 15th and 16th of Sivan the people of Beth-Shean and its valley went into exile'. Their status had been considerably raised in the Seleucid period as compared to the Ptolemaic (they were now κάτοικοι—'dwelling *with*' the city rather than 'free bodies' (—σώματα ἐλεύθερα) and this may explain their choice. Their places were taken by Jewish settlers. Josephus indeed lists Scythopolis among the 'deserted' cities restored subsequently by Pompey.⁴³ However, the fact—also recorded by Josephus—that Jannaeus received Cleopatra III there and concluded an alliance with her shows that it was only 'deserted' in a technical sense.⁴⁴

³⁹ 1 Macc. 12:40-41.

⁴⁰ *Ant.*, XIII, 277; *War*, I, 65; E. Rogers: Three Rare Seleucid Coins, *Numismatic Chronicle* 19 (1919), pp. 17-34.

⁴¹ I, 66.

⁴² XII, 280.

⁴³ *Ant.*, XVI, 88.

⁴⁴ *Ant.*, XIII, 355. The same is true of Samaria as has been shown by the latest excavations (J. W. Crowfoot et al.: *The Objects from Samaria* (Samaria III), London, 1957, pp. 5, 284-285.

Josephus or his source probably mean that the town no longer enjoyed the privileges of an autonomous Greek polis. Strabo lists the area of Scythopolis as one of the places where the Hasmoneans set up treasure houses and fortresses (ληστήρια — 'robbers' strongholds' in Strabo's language).⁴⁵

When Pompey and Gabinius 'restored' Scythopolis, they gave it back to its burgesses. The Jewish villages were apparently left undisturbed to a great extent. Many of the former non-Jewish peasants seem to have dispersed and only the owners of the landed estates were interested in returning. The continued existence of a Jewish element in the population of the Scythopolis region might explain how it was that the Herodian king, Agrippa II, enjoyed some kind of 'rights of supervision' over Scythopolis (τῆς ὑπηκόου βασιλείῃ),⁴⁶ although the city was never included in the domains of Herod or his dynasty.

The continued existence of a mass of Jewish villagers in the region is further attested by the dramatic story of the Jewish 'co-dwellers' (ἐνοῖκοι) enlisted by the city as 'allies' (σύμμαχοι) against their brethren in Galilee. Having served their turn, they were rounded up and massacred by the Scythopolitans to the number of thirteen thousand (!).⁴⁷ Without necessarily accepting this inflated figure, we can learn four things from the story. Firstly, that the Jews in the Scythopolis region were numerous in A. D. 66. Secondly, that they lived in villages (the townspeople dreaded a night attack, probably from outside). Thirdly, their warlike character too points to a rural environment. And lastly, their legal status was that of 'co-dwellers' with the city people proper.

This mass slaughter did not, however, put an end to the Jewish settlement in the Beth-Shean valley. But in the following centuries this population changes its character. The Jews now penetrate into the town itself. In the Mishnah (second century A. D.) Beth-Shean is mentioned once as a city where on the days of pagan festivals the garlanded shops of non-Jews jostle the undecorated shops of the Jews.⁴⁸ In another place⁴⁹ mention is made of wine bought at Beth-Shean by a Jew from a gentile. Apparently the Jewish town population derived part of its supplies from gentile farmers living in the vicinity.

⁴⁵ XIV, 2, 40. These include possibly the fortress at Kaukab el-Hawa, later on called Agrippina.

⁴⁶ Josephus: *Life*, 349.

⁴⁷ *War*, II, 466-476; VII, 365.

⁴⁸ *Abodah zarah*, i, 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, iv, 12.

In the third century, the movement of population from country to town grew perceptibly. The Jewish sages regarded this drift with severe disapproval. To counter it they sang the praises of the valley of Beth-Shean and of its fertility. It was lauded as a terrestrial gate of Paradise.⁵⁰ One *seah* of wheat produced there seventy *kors* (i. e. 2100-fold).⁵¹ The 'Beshanite' olives 'shamed'⁵² all the others. A gentile friend of R. Hiyya living in Beth-Shean regaled the Rabbi with 'everything that was made in the Six Days of Creation'.⁵³

As usual, propaganda, even when emanating from the highest rabbinical authorities, was powerless against economic facts. Already in the time of R. Meir (first half of the second century A. D.) the sage had to allow that the produce of Beth-Shean was exempted from the legislation governing Jewish crops in the Sabbatica year, i. e. that it came mostly from fields worked by gentiles.⁵⁴ Judah I th Patriarch followed in R. Meir's footsteps and 'freed Beth-Shean' in spite of his family and the sages. They asked scornfully: 'A town which your fathers and forefathers regarded as "subject" (to the law of the Sabbatical year) you declare "free"'.⁵⁵ The abolition of the Sabbatical year in the Beth-Shean valley therefore preceded by almost two generations its suspension elsewhere.

The magnet that drew the Jewish villagers to town is apparent in a passage of the Jerusalem Talmud.⁵⁶ There the text speaks of the 'fine linen vestments which come from Beth-Shean'. The dispersion of industry throughout the provinces of the Roman Empire characterizes the period from the second century A. D. onwards and becomes most marked in the Orient. Beth-Shean-Scythopolis then became one of the great weaving centres of the Empire. In the *Descriptio totius orbis*, a Latin work of the fourth century, it is described as one of the cities which supply textiles to the entire world.⁵⁷ A detailed enumeration of Scythopolis produce is to be found in the relevant chapter of the Diocletian Edict of Maximum Prices. In the chapter headed *περὶ λίνου*⁵⁸ are listed: Scythopolitan tunics without stripes, dalmatics (upper garments) for men and women, short and light mantles, short cloaks with hoods for women, kerchiefs

⁵⁰ *Bab. Talmud, Erubbin* 19a.

⁵¹ *Mishnah Peab* vii, 1.

⁵² *Jer. Talm., Peab* 20a—a play of words on *beshani* 'of Beth-Shean' and *lebayesh* 'to shame'.

⁵³ *Midrash Esther Rabbah* i, 4.

⁵⁴ *Jer. Talmud, Demai* 22c.

⁵⁵ *Bab. Talmud, Hullin* 6b.

⁵⁶ *Qiddushin* ii, 5-62 c.

⁵⁷ Schürer, *op. cit.* (above, n. 14), p. 77, n. 205.

⁵⁸ Th. Mommsen, ed.: *Der Maximaltarif des Diocletian*, Berlin, 1893, Cap. 26-28.

and sheets. The textile goods are divided into three qualities: first, second, and third. In each group the produce of Scythopolis appears in the first class. Only the produce of Tarsus competes with it occasionally. In addition to finished goods, raw materials were also obtainable at Beth-Shean.⁵⁹

During the great crisis in the Roman Empire in the third century A. D., many Jewish villagers must have migrated to the town. For the first impact of the crisis was felt by the peasants who supplied the *annona*, and the propertied classes in the towns who paid the *aurum coronarium*. The city workers—who in the textile industry were free men organized in guilds (*collegia*) and not slaves—were affected by the crisis only towards the middle of the third century.⁶⁰

The rise of a Jewish urban community at Scythopolis explains the rebuilding of the local synagogue in the time of R. Ammi (at the end of the third century A. D.).⁶¹ The community was fairly observant. Jews from Beth-Shean on a visit to Sidon (on textile business?) refused to leave on a Friday, lest they should desecrate the Sabbath;⁶² their Hebrew pronunciation was, however, faulty.

The development of the weaving industry drew to Scythopolis others besides Jews. There is early evidence of a Christian community, formed of Aramaic (not Greek)-speaking people, evidently proletarians. The first martyr from Scythopolis, Procopius, was executed on 7 July A. D. 303. He was a native of Jerusalem, and his tasks at Scythopolis were threefold: he exorcised demons, read the Gospels, and translated them from Greek into Aramaic. Obviously his hearers were not familiar with the Greek language.⁶³ The name of the first virgin martyr (Martha) also points to a native (Aramean) origin.⁶⁴

The poor people of Scythopolis, whether Hellenes, Jews, or Christians, lived in ramshackle houses on the slopes of the old Canaanite tell in the centre of the Roman city. In the Jerusalem Talmud⁶⁵ we read of the houses of Beth-Shean, where the upper ones must be built before the lower, lest the former fall down. The sixth century pilgrim known as Antonius Placentinus speaks of 'Scythopolis built on a mountain'.⁶⁶ He probably refers to the same quarter.

⁵⁹ *Jer. Talmud*, *Abodah zarah*, 39c.

⁶⁰ M. Rostovtzeff: *Social and Econ. History of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, 1957, pp. 178; 661, n. 24.

⁶¹ *Jer. Talmud*, *Megillah* 73d.

⁶² *Bab. Talmud*, *Pessahim* 50b.

⁶³ B. Violet: *Die paläst. Martyrer des Eusebius (Texte u. Untersuchungen, XIV, 4)*, Leipzig, 1895, p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 116. The name was corrupted in the Greek version to Μαριαμ.

⁶⁵ *Baba mezia*, 12c (top).

⁶⁶ *Itineraria hierosol.* (ed. Geyer), Wien, 1897, p. 164.

The last stage (before the Arab conquest) in the evolution of the urban population of Scythopolis is marked by a movement of the Jewish population — and possibly other members of the lower classes — out of the town and back to the country. This is the period when the synagogues at Beth Alpha and Kefar Qarnayim were built in villages appertaining to Scythopolis. The reasons for this reflux from town to country are not far to seek. The progressive extension of state economy in the Late Roman Empire made the expert textile workers serfs working in state factories. Their craft was turned into a work tax and their status hardened into a hereditary caste. Naturally they tried to escape this legal servitude. A reflection of their evasive action may be seen in the Theodosian Code. In an edict of the emperors Valentinus and Valens of 15 February A. D. 374⁶⁷ we read: 'The threat of a fine of no less (five pounds of gold for each weaver) is proposed with reference to those persons also who hereafter attempt to harbour Scythopolitan linen workers (*Scytopolitanos linyfos*) who are bound to the regular public corvée.'

While the condition of the city worker worsened gradually, the great estates (*patrocinia*) formed in the countryside offered him employment and protection. Such estates were as far as possible planned as self-supplying units. Their needs, of course, included the weaving of cloth. Expert weavers were therefore made most welcome by the semi-feudal owners of such properties. Such lords were strong enough to protect their people against the state. If necessary the village-born soldiers would protect the villagers even from the estate owners themselves. Encouraged by such a change in the respective conditions of town and country, there was a corresponding shift of population. The Jews and Samaritans were especially ready to quit the cities which were ruled by hostile governors, supervised by bishops who had the full power of church and state behind them, and swayed on occasion by hostile mobs.⁶⁸ Even before the Arab conquest, which sealed the doom of most of the Byzantine cities, the native population had given their judgement 'with their feet'.

⁶⁷ *Codex Theodosianus*, X, 20, 8.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Kyrill v. Skythopolis* (ed. E. Schwartz), Leipzig, 1939, p. 162 on the treatment of the Samaritan Arsenius, who was burnt at Scythopolis in public.