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Bet She'an
National Park

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Please Follow the General Rules of the Bet She'an National Park

- Follow the instructions of national park personnel.
- Make sure to walk only along the marked trails.
- Entrance is permitted only to sites officially open to visitors.
- Do not harm the antiquities and archaeological finds in any way.
- Scaling walls of any kind is dangerous and absolutely forbidden.
- Do not throw stones or cause stone slides.
- Maintain order and cleanliness throughout the national park.



Text: Yaacov Shkolnik **Author:** Nili Graicer; **Editor:** Tsvika Tsuk;
Translation: Kashat Ltd
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Welcome to Bet She'an National Park



Corinthian capital bearing the head of the god Dionysus

Bet She'an National Park, which extends over an area of 400 acres, includes the ancient city of Bet She'an-Scythopolis and the imposing Tel Bet She'an. Archaeological excavations were first carried out in Bet She'an in the 1920s. Major excavations have been going on since 1986 in the framework of a joint enterprise run by the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Hebrew University. The archaeological excavations, which have uncovered about one tenth of the city's area, are accompanied by architectural – reconstruction of buildings, installations and streets.

Bet She'an – Historical Background

Settlement of Bet She'an first began in the fifth millennium BCE on the tell rising to the south of the Harod Stream, in the heart of a fertile area enjoying an abundance of water and located on a major crossroads.

In the Late Canaanite period (16th–12th centuries BCE), the city became the seat of Egyptian rule. The Israelite tribes did not succeed in conquering Canaanite Bet She'an. After the battle waged at Mt. Gilboa, the Philistine lords of Bet She'an displayed the bodies of Saul and his sons on the city walls. The city was later taken by King David along with Megiddo and Ta'anach, becoming the administrative center of the region during King Solomon's reign. The site was destroyed in 732 BCE, with the conquest of the northern part of the country by the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III.

During the Hellenistic period, the city known as Nysa-Scythopolis was founded on this spot. Local lore has it that Dionysos, the god of wine, buried his nurse Nysa here, and subsequently settled the region with Scythians from among his followers.

At the end of the 2nd century BCE the city fell to the Hasmoneans. Its gentile residents were exiled, and the city's population became predominantly Jewish. The city was once again dominated by gentiles following the Roman conquest in 63 BCE As one of the ten cities of the Decapolis, it became the most important city in northern Israel. During the revolt against the Romans in 66 CE, the city's Jewish residents were murdered by their gentile neighbors. Under Roman rule, when the population consisted of pagans, Jews and Samaritans, the city thrived and expanded, with magnificent public buildings going up, engraved with inscriptions and adorned with statues. In the Byzantine period, Bet She'an became largely Christian, its population reaching 30,000–40,000. A wall was erected around the city, with churches and monasteries near it. In the aftermath of the Arab conquest, the city



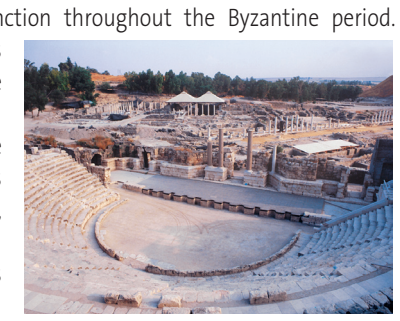
Figure of a lion in the mosaic of the Byzantine agora

steadily declined in prominence and the number of its inhabitants dwindled. A severe earthquake in 749 CE devastated the city. The name Scythopolis was forgotten and the place became known as Beisan. A rural settlement was built at the site during the Abbassid period. During the medieval period, the settlement was concentrated in the city's southern part, and during the Crusader period, a fortress was put up to the east of the destroyed amphitheater. Under Ottoman rule, Beisan remained a small settlement.

Bet She'an has begun to develop and flourish once again since the establishment of the State of Israel. The city takes great pride in the impressive remains of the ancient city which is slowly being uncovered in its midst.

The Recommended Tour

1. Theater – Built in the 1st century CE, the 7,000-seat theater seen today is the product of renovations carried out at the end of the 2nd century. It continued to function throughout the Byzantine period. The theater had three tiers of seating, of which only the lowermost was preserved intact. Rising behind the stage was a 20-meter scaenae frons – an elaborate backdrop wall, comprising a row of imported granite and marble columns adorned by ornate capitals, a richly decorated entablature and statues.



The Roman theater. In the background – western bathhouse

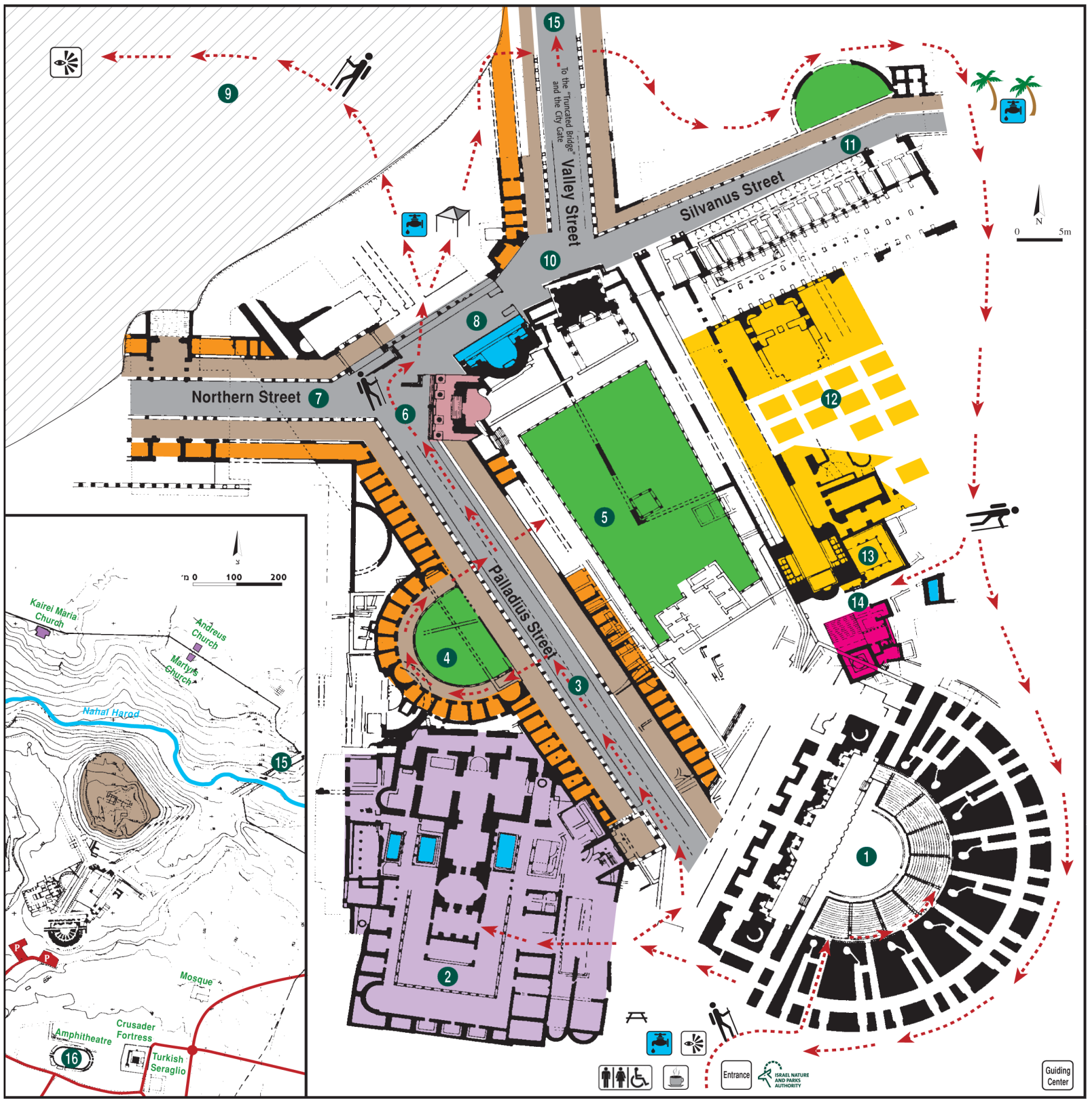
2. Western Bathhouse – This Byzantine bathhouse, covering about 2.2 acres, contains hot and tepid bathing halls with a heating system (hypocaust). Its walls were coated with colored plaster and its floors were paved with marble slabs and mosaics. The main structure opens on all sides onto rooms and exedras. Frequent changes made to the building, with the funding of the province's governors, are documented in Greek dedicatory inscriptions.

3. "Palladius Street" – The 150-meter long colonnaded street crossed the city from the slopes of the tell to the theater. Originally built during the Roman period, the street was renovated at the beginning of the Byzantine period. On its northwest side is a covered portico that opens opens onto a row of shops whose facade was faced with marble. A dedicatory inscription from the 4th century CE found in the portico mosaic, recounts the construction of the portico in the days of Palladius, governor of the province. Thus the road came to be named Palladius Street by excavators. On the opposite side of the street, a two-story row of shops was erected on an ancient foundation from the Roman period.

4. Sigma – A semicircular concourse of the Byzantine period, referred to as the Sigma in an inscription found at the site, surrounded by rooms opening onto it. Several of these rooms were paved with colored mosaics displaying geometric, plant and animal motifs as well as Greek inscriptions. One mosaic medallion depicts Tyche, guardian goddess of the city, wearing a crown of city walls and holding a cornucopia.



Tyche, the city's guardian goddess



5. Byzantine Agora – A concourse surrounded by porticoes at the center of the city, built in the Byzantine period, which served as a commercial center. The western portico is paved with mosaics depicting animals.

6. Roman Temple – The semicircular temple, built in the 2nd century CE and destroyed during the Byzantine period, was in the Classical style. The structure's adornments, imposing in size and ornate in style, were found collapsed nearby. Its facade consisted of four columns surmounted by capitals, supporting an ornamented gabled roof to a height of about 15 meters. Two collapsed columns were found in the ruins left by the earthquake of 749 CE.

7. Northern Street – A colonnaded street of the Roman period, leading to the northwest city gate. A staircase ascended from the street to the tell which served as the acropolis of the city. On the other side was a resplendent passage to a large Roman compound, surrounded by columns (a temple?). During the Byzantine period, most of the columns were taken down and a public building paved with mosaics was erected on the spot.

8. Nymphaeum – A public fountain of the 2nd century CE, remodeled in the 4th century. Water spilled into a pool situated in front of the structure, on the side facing the street. Decorative elements found at the site await incorporation in future reconstruction of the nymphaeum.

9. Tel Bet She'an (In Arabic: Tell El-Husn – "The Fortress Mound")

Some twenty settlement strata were uncovered on the tell, the most ancient dating from the Neolithic period (5th millennium BCE) and the most recent, from medieval times. Discovered among the remains of the walled Canaanite city were five temples, one constructed on top of the other, public and residential buildings, a governor's house and basalt monuments with inscriptions from the period of Egyptian rule. A citadel as well as residential and administrative buildings erected by the kings of Israel were destroyed in the Assyrian conquest. The tell was resettled during the Hellenistic period. A temple of Zeus, some of whose column drums and Corinthian capitals can be seen, was built in the Roman period. During the Byzantine period, a round church was constructed on the summit, and in the medieval period the tell was surrounded by a wall. The top of the tell provides a vantage point over the city and its surroundings.

10. "Valley Street" and the Central Monument – The street was paved during the Roman period along the valley of the Amal Stream, leading from the center of the city to the northeast gate (No. 15). Next to the junction, opposite Valley Street, is the Central Monument – a platform decorated with niches on which stood marble columns. Covered sidewalks and stores were built on both sides of the street. The street's colonnades collapsed in the earthquake, and a residential quarter was built over them during the Abbassid period.

Stone decorative elements of the nymphaeum, which collapsed during the earthquake of 746 CE

11. "Silvanus Street" – Originally, the street was a Roman road flanked on one side by a monumental colonnade. A marble-reveted pool was built parallel to the road. During the Byzantine period, this Roman road was overlaid by a new street, and a new hall was erected on top of the pool, its ceiling supported by the colonnade. This street was named "Silvanus Street" by the excavators after a lawyer named Silvanus, mentioned in inscriptions as having been involved in the hall's construction. In the Early Muslim period, this hall fell into disuse, and was replaced by stores fronted by a portico of columns



The monumntal colonnade running along Silvanus Street

and arches. The earthquake of 749 CE leveled columns and structures along the street. A segment of the stores' facade has been restored and reconstructed, but the portico's arches still lie in the heap of ruins.

12. Eastern Bathhouse – The bathhouse was built in the Roman period and renovated during the Byzantine period. A caldarium and hypocaust were uncovered on its eastern side. On the western side, excavation revealed a square structure with four pillars adorned with niches at its corners, supporting a stone vault. Cold water pools attest to its apparent function as a frigidarium (cold water bath hall).

13. Public lavatories – Built next to the bathhouse for the benefit of theater visitors and bathhouse users, the structure encloses a courtyard decorated with columns.

14. Sacred Compound – The compound, of the 1st–2nd centuries CE, comprises a temple, altars and nymphaeum. The temple was built on a square raised podium with a stairway leading up to it. The altars are engraved with inscriptions.

15. The "Truncated Bridge" (Jisr el-Maktu'a) and City Gate – Valley Street ran across the Harod Stream via a triple vaulted bridge (the "Truncated Bridge"), leading to the northeast city gate, where a marketplace was located.

16. Amphitheater and Surroundings – In the 2nd century CE, a Roman hippodrome for horse and chariot races was built outside the crowded city about 200 meters south of the theater. In the second half of the 4th century, the hippodrome was converted into the amphitheater we see today, serving as a venue for hunting displays and other entertainment (bloody gladiatorial contests were no longer held during this period). Only three rows remain of the original seating, which held some 6,000 spectators. In the 5th century CE a residential neighborhood sprang up beside the defunct amphitheater. A new road containing inscriptions and lined with shops was paved, and a water drainage system was installed. During the medieval period, seats were uprooted from the amphitheater to be used in the construction of the nearby Crusader fortress.