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Forty
Groundbreaking
Articles from
Forty Years of
Biblical
Archaeology
Review



SUSSITA

THE SPADE HITS SUSSITA

BAR Article –
“Sussita Awaits the
Spade”–Leads to
Excavation

ARTHUR SEGAL
AND
MICHAEL EISENBERG

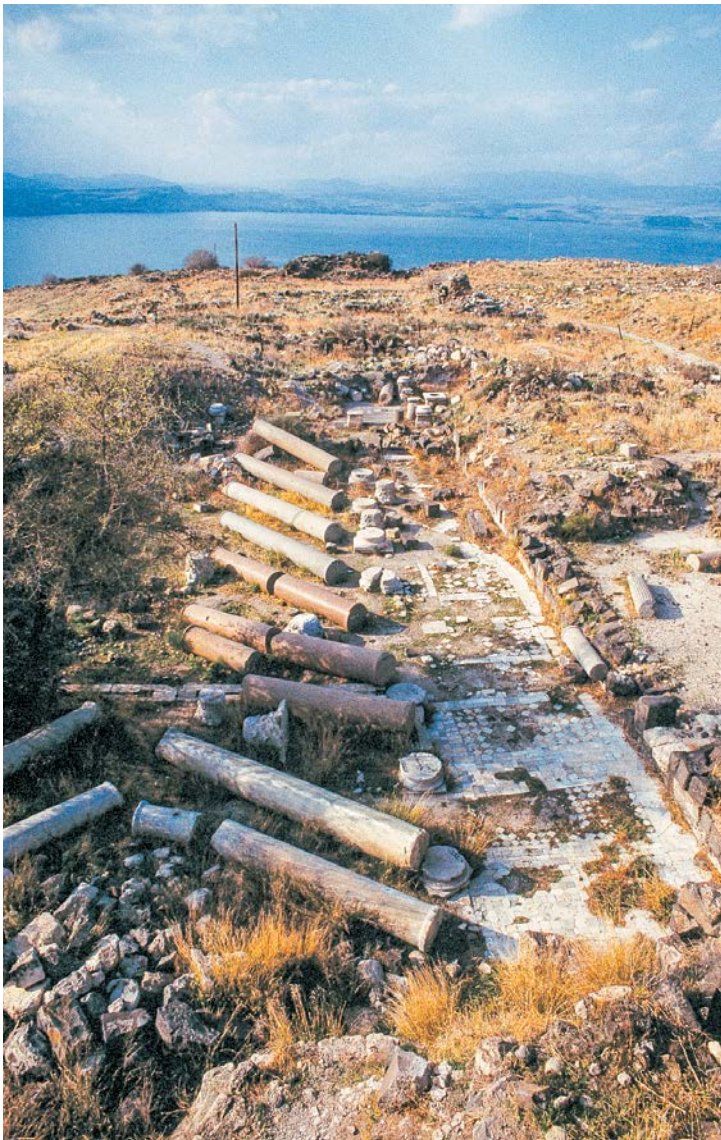
FIFTEEN YEARS AGO, I (Arthur Segal) sat in my study reading an article in BAR by Vassilios Tzaferis about Sussita, a dramatic site overlooking the Sea of Galilee that had been destroyed in a violent earthquake in 749 C.E. and had never been resettled. The columns of a church at the center of the site were still lying on the ground like toothpicks, just where they had fallen 1,250 years ago.

The site had been surveyed at the end of the 19th century by the German engineer and excavator Gottlieb Schumacher, who located the main street, a city gate, the remains of walls and towers, as well as a monumental Roman structure. In 1937 members of Kibbutz Ein Gev, led by the redoubtable Mendel Nun, an expert on the entire region surrounding the Sea of Galilee and now in his ninth decade, identified the two anchorages of the city. After Israeli independence in 1948, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) built a frontier outpost here facing the Syrian border, unfortunately causing considerable damage to the site. In the 1950s a rescue excavation of areas exposed by the IDF uncovered a church, baptistery and what was probably a monastery.¹ In the 1990s an Israeli-German expedition conducted a number of surveys and trial excavations over the traces





PRECEDING PAGES: COMMANDING a dramatic view of the Galilee, Sussita sits atop a thousand-foot-high hill. A zigzag road leads to the site from the west. The oblong-shaped site is 2,000 feet long and 700 feet wide. During the New Testament era, Sussita was a member of the *Decapolis*, a group of ten cities governed according to the principles of a Greek city-state (*polis*). A stunning cross (inset) is preserved on the chancel screen marking an area at the end of the southern aisle of the Northwest Church, where rites for saints were held (see p. 576).



GARO NALBANDIAN

LIKE FALLEN MATCHSTICKS, the columns of an ancient church lie on the ground on the ridge of Sussita, about a mile east of the Sea of Galilee. The columns had been toppled by an earthquake in 749 C.E. This photo served as an illustration in a 1990 BAR article entitled “Sussita Awaits the Spade,” which noted that although the site had been surveyed in the past it had never undergone a major excavation. That article spurred Arthur Segal to propose to his colleagues that they lead a dig at the site. After six seasons of excavation, he and his co-author report on their discoveries in the accompanying article.

of the aqueduct leading to Sussita and its internal water system.² But that was it. No major excavation of the site. The BAR article was tantalizingly entitled “Sussita Awaits the Spade.”*

As I finished reading the article, I asked myself how it could be possible that no one was interested in excavating one of the best-preserved and most beautiful classical sites in the country. A few days later, I proposed to my colleagues at the University of Haifa that we adopt Sussita as a project of our Department of Archaeology. We have now finished our sixth season of excavation, and it is time to report to BAR readers.³

Sussita is located on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret in Hebrew), a little over a mile from the shore. The site itself is flat with an oblong shape about 2,000 feet long and 700 feet wide. A saddle on the east links it to the Golan Heights. The site has many advantages. It is close to the lake, but rises a thousand feet above it. It is near the road that circles the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee and at the same time dominates it, so the inhabitants of Sussita could view and exert control over the entire area that spreads to the east and southeast of the lake. At the base of the steep northern and southern slopes run the Ein Gev stream and the Sussita stream.

The crest of the mountain contains a little over 20 acres and is surrounded by a strong wall that follows the line of the cliffs. In some places the wall passes over the edge of the abyss and actually appears to be part of the cliffs. The city had two gates, one at the eastern end and another at the western end. Within, a network of streets intersects at right

*BAR, September/October 1990.

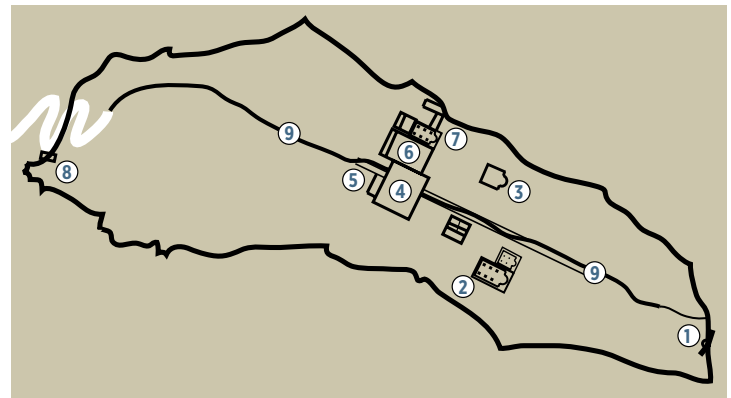


DUBY TAL/ALBATROSS



THE HEART OF SUSSITA appears in this aerial view taken from the north; in the foreground is a church that the excavators call the Northwest Church [7] (see photo, p. 575); beyond it, in the center of the photo, is the temenos of the city's main sanctuary during the Hellenistic period [6] (late second century B.C.E.) (see photo, p. 573); and at top is the *decumanus* [9] and the forum [4] (see photos, pp. 570–571).

The plan at right shows Sussita's major features: the *decumanus*, or the major east-west road [9]; the east gate [1]; the Cathedral [2]; the Northeast Church [3] (see photo, p. 574); the forum [4]; the *kalybe* [5], an open-air temple that featured a statue of the emperor; the Hellenistic compound [6] (see photo, p. 573); the Northwest Church [7]; and the west gate [8].



angles creating *insulae* in which public buildings and residential quarters were constructed. Even today, a visitor can clearly see the main thoroughfare of the city that traverses its entire length from east to west. This street, the *decumanus maximus*, was lined with impressive columns, some of which are still at the site.

Sussita traces its origins to the period after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E., when his empire was divided among the Ptolemies in Egypt and the Seleucids in Syria, leaving them to fight over the hinterland between. Palestine changed

hands several times. Pottery from our excavations found beneath a Hellenistic compound indicates that the site was first inhabited by the Ptolemies in the third century B.C.E. Whether it was a semi-urban settlement or simply an outpost fortress is still uncertain, although the latter seems more likely. When it was captured by the Seleucids (we also found pottery from this level), it was given the name Hippos. The full Greek name was Antiochia Hippos. This suggests that a semi-urban settlement was established only in the Seleucid period, most



likely by Antiochus III or Antiochus IV.

In the last half of the second century B.C.E., the successful Jewish revolt against the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (a victory still celebrated in the Jewish festival of Hanukkah) led to the creation of the first independent Jewish state since the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. A series of Hellenistic Jewish kings known as the Hasmonean dynasty then ruled the country. One of the last Hasmonean rulers, Alexander Jannaeus, conquered the area of Hippos between 83 and 80 B.C.E., according to the ancient historian Josephus,⁴ and the city became known as Sussita, which means “Horse” in Aramaic (just as the earlier name, Hippos, means “horse” in Greek). We really can’t account for this name.

The short-lived independent Jewish kingdom was brought under Roman rule by Pompey in 63 B.C.E. Pompey renewed the settlement of Hellenistic cities like Sussita east of the Sea of Galilee and included them in *Provincia Syria*, which he founded.

Sussita was subsequently included in the group of ten cities known as the *Decapolis*, literally “ten cities.” These cities formed a broad settlement bloc stretching from Philadelphia (today Amman) in the south to Damascus in the north, and from Beth-Shean in the west to Canatha (today Kanawat, in Syria) in the east. Beth-Shean, incidentally, is the only city of the *Decapolis* west of the Sea of Galilee. The cities of the

THE FORUM IS shown in a general view in the photo (above), while the photo at upper right shows the remains of several columns and a cracked column base; at lower right is a semi-circular base for a statue or a memorial plaque.

The forum was a grand public space; it was paved with basalt flagstones and was lined on at least two sides with colonnades. The columns were made of gray granite and supported a roof, thus providing a shaded walkway along the edges of the forum. The bases that supported the columns were round and made of white marble; they sat on square pedestals made of local limestone. The semi-circular statue base, which measures 6 feet in diameter, was also made of limestone. Such semi-circular bases are common in Greece and Asia Minor but have never before been found in ancient Israel. The decision to erect a statue or plaque in Sussita’s forum could only have been made by the city’s council and indicates a high level of local governance.

Decapolis, contrary to widespread view, never created a city league based on the model of the Delian League formed by Athens against the Persians in the fifth century B.C.E. The *Decapolis* was instead merely a group of cities that, besides their shared location within a certain geographical area, conducted their lives according to the principles of a *polis** and

*A polis (city state in Greek) was an independent entity in which every citizen, i.e., an adult male being a member of an “ecclesia” (general assembly), could elect or be elected to any of the city’s governing bodies, but mainly to the *boule*, the city council, whose members (200–700, on average, according to the size of the population), elected the officials, especially the *strategoi*, who ran the city’s affairs.



HERSHEL SHANKS



HERSHEL SHANKS

constituted an outstanding Greek cultural entity in an area that was mainly Semitic.

Herod the Great ruled Judea as a Roman vassal monarch (he was confirmed by the Roman Senate) beginning in 37 B.C.E. Shortly thereafter, Augustus, the Roman emperor, extended the borders of the Herodian kingdom, transferring Sussita, among other areas, to Herod's rule. The citizens of Sussita were bitterly vexed at this decision; they wished to remain part of *Provincia Syria*.⁵ After Herod's death in 4 B.C.E., Sussita reverted to the Province of Syria.⁶

But the city continued to be home to a Jewish minority,⁷ and a number of Jewish villages existed around Sussita as the hub.⁸

Relations between Jewish Tiberias on the southwestern shore of the lake and Hellenistic Sussita were

of trade and competition. The term used for Sussita in a Jewish source as the “bane of Tiberias”⁹ must have originated from the competition between the two cities.¹⁰

Although the references are scant, it is safe to assume that Sussita, like the other cities of the Decapolis, flourished and thrived during the second and third centuries C.E. as the *Pax Romana* brought quiet, open borders and wide-ranging commercial links. The main public buildings, the ruins of which are much in evidence in the urban landscape of Sussita, were most probably erected during this time, expressing the city's pride as well as loyalty to the Roman Empire.

In the Byzantine period (beginning in the fourth century C.E.), ancient Palestine was divided into three districts. Sussita was one of the cities of *Palaestina Secunda*, which included the Galilee, and most of the population was Christian. From the writings of the church fathers, we learn that, in this period, the city was the seat of an *Episcopus* (bishop). The five churches located so far in Sussita confirm the range and depth of Christianization that the city underwent.

Archaeological evidence shows that the transition from the Byzantine to the early Arab period (the Umayyad Caliphate) in the seventh century C.E. was not accompanied by a destruction. The churches continued to exist and flourish even during the seventh and early-eighth centuries. The wealth of Umayyad pottery and coins found in the area of the Northwest Church confirms the continued existence of this church until the mid-eighth century C.E.

Sussita came to an end in a catastrophic earthquake in 749 C.E. The destructive force of this earthquake is evident in the fallen columns, crushed walls and the small finds scattered over the area, all testifying to the fact that the shock was sudden and devastating. The city was abandoned and has never been inhabited since.

Now let's take an archaeological tour of the city. We enter by the eastern gate—over the saddle from the Golan Heights. (The route to the western gate that faces the Galilee follows a zigzag, snake-like route to overcome a thousand-foot difference in height over a steep and rocky slope in less than one mile; it is not in use today because it is so steep and dangerous.) The road over the saddle is carved into soft limestone and on both sides are clearly visible remains of mausoleums, or, to use the Greek or Latin plural, *mausolea*. Building stones from these structures (mostly limestone, some basalt) are scattered about, surveyed but unexcavated; sections of architraves, engaged half-columns, capitals and bases, all fashioned with great care, testify to the

“GOOD LUCK AELIUS CALPURNIANUS” begins a 13-line inscription in Greek that covers one side of a white marble column found in Sussita’s forum plaza. The man was a high official in the Roman provincial administration; the inscription also mentions his wife, Domitia Ulpia, and bears a date of the Pompeian era that corresponds to 238/239 C.E. The inscription refers to Domitia as “Matrona Stolata,” a title that suggests that she was granted the right to conduct her financial and legal affairs independently of her husband. The inscription indicates that the provincial administrative system of the Roman Empire had successfully spread Greek Hellenistic culture to Sussita, just as it had spread it in scores of cities throughout its domain.



magnificence of the original structures. Pieces of sarcophagi are also strewn about. This was no doubt the burial place of the city’s elite.

A second cemetery on a slope south of the city served the rest of the inhabitants. They used a totally different system of burial. Here, the graves form a system of rock-carved tombs. Unlike the *mausolea*, however, each tomb has a central burial chamber in which three of the walls (all but the entrance wall) have burial niches (*loculi*) carved into them. The number of niches in each burial chamber varies from three to eleven. The burial chambers were usually sealed by doors made of dressed and ornamented stone, the broken pieces of which still lie around.

The existence of two cemeteries, one for the wealthy people of Sussita and one for the rest of the residents, reflects in a clear, spatial way the social relationships of the *polis*. We hope one day to excavate both of these cemeteries.

The East Gate has a single passageway, about 10 feet wide with towers on either side, one round and one square. The round tower was incorporated into the city wall, creating a killing field in front of the passageway. We have also exposed a section of the city wall into which the round tower was integrated.

Two Prominent Citizens

εὐτυχῶς·
 Αἰλῖος Καλπουρ-
 νιανὸς ἀπὸ
 κορνουκ(λαρίων) τοῦ κα-
 θολικοῦ δ() καὶ
 Δομέτια Οὐλ-
 πία ματρ(ῶνα) στολ(ᾶτα)
 σύνβιος αὐ[τοῦ]
 τὸν πρεσβέα
 τῇ κυρίᾳ πα-
 τρίδι· ἔτι
 βτ
 Δεῖος ἦ .

“Good Luck Aelius Calpurnianus, the former cornicularius (in the office) of the procurator summanum nationum, and Domitia Ulpia, matrona stolata, his wife (erected the statue of) the ambassador, to the native city. In the year 302 (in the month of) Dios (day) 8.”



The wall is built of carefully dressed ashlars with delicate margins and smooth, slightly raised bosses that are typical of the first century C.E. and have been discovered in *Provincia Arabia*, Syria and the northern part of Israel. Hence, we feel comfortable dating the gate to the first century C.E. The towers probably rose to a height of three stories, with the upper one serving as a station for catapults.*

This round tower—including the method of construction, the way the layers were placed and the type of stone dressing—closely resembles the round towers at Tiberias and Gadara (on the Sea of Galilee), which are better preserved and therefore easier to visualize.

Inside the gate a few flagstones hint at a plaza that led to the eastern end of the *decumanus maximus*. We intend to excavate this area in the near future.

The *decumanus maximus*, the main street of the city, traversed the full length of the city. On either side the street was lined with a colonnade of gray granite columns imported from Aswan in Egypt. Each column weighs nearly five tons and is about 15 feet high.

The importation of hundreds of columns and

*The Roman Army used several types of siege weapons for discharging missiles. The largest was the *onager*, also called a *scorpio*. This siege machine could hurl massive stones. The Jewish historian Josephus states that at the siege of Jerusalem the machines of Legio X Fretensis hurled stones that weighed a talent (more than 50 pounds) a distance of two furlongs (about 1,400 feet [*The Jewish War* V, 6,3]). The smaller machines, to which the Roman architect Vitruvius gives the general term of catapult (*catapulta*) were of various sizes. The smaller ones were called *scorpiones* and the larger, *ballistae*. (See G. Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* [London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1985, 3rd ed.], pp. 243–244.)

SACRED SPACE. This area, across the *decumanus* from the forum, was home to several of Sussita's religious structures over many centuries. Shown here is the area from the Hellenistic period (late second century B.C.E.), when it served as a *temenos*, or religious compound. The surviving column bases, column drums and elegantly carved Corinthian capitals (believed to be the earliest ever found in Israel) testify to the area's past grandeur. The Hellenistic temple here was made of limestone and was likely destroyed in 83 B.C.E., when the Hasmonean ruler Alexander Jannaeus conquered the city. A smaller temple, made of basalt, was erected on the site during the Roman period, probably at the end of the first century B.C.E. or early C.E. Atop the ruins of that temple, in the late-fifth or early-sixth century C.E., rose a Byzantine-era church (see photos on p. 574) that used many of the building stones of its predecessors.

their installation along the colonnaded street (as well as in the forum; see below) must have been extremely expensive, not to mention the logistic and engineering skills required for their transfer up to the site and subsequent erection. The ability of a medium-sized city like Sussita to plan, finance and carry out such a project surely arouses admiration. It was probably undertaken sometime in the second century C.E.

Near the midpoint of the *decumanus maximus* was the urban center of Sussita. Adjoining the *decumanus maximus* on the south lay the forum; on the northern side was the main sanctuary (*temenos*) of Sussita. This compound continued to function in its original capacity from the Hellenistic down to the Byzantine period, when a church—what we call the Northwest Church—was built upon the remains of pagan temples.



BEARING CONSULAR ROBES and a crown, a figure decorates a coin minted in about 601 C.E. (below). Coins are crucial for dating the Northwest Church; this one belongs to the Byzantine era, but most of the recovered coins date to the Umayyad, or early Arab, period (630–750 C.E.). From the numismatic evidence, the excavators determined that the Northwest Church continued to function even after the Muslim conquest of the Holy Land and was not destroyed until the earthquake of 749 C.E.

Found just last summer, the elegant Byzantine-era structure at left is called by the excavators the Northeast Church and lies just 150 feet from the Northwest Church (see plan, p. 569). Though smaller than its counterpart, the Northeast Church also is divided into thirds by columns and features a semi-circular apse at the end of the central nave.



In the summer of 2005, we excavated the junction between the forum and the *decumanus maximus*. There we uncovered a pair of piers, facing each other and meticulously executed in basalt stone. They apparently belonged to a decorative gate that must have stood here proclaiming to passersby that they were about to enter the forum.

The forum is paved with basalt flagstones. Colonnades lined two sides of the forum (north and east; the southern side remains unexcavated). The columns supported entablatures, above which were roofs, creating shady roofed promenades along the northern and eastern sides of the forum. The columns were made of the same gray granite as the columns lining the *decumanus maximus* and were crowned with Corinthian capitals of white marble. The columns were placed on Attic bases made of white marble, which in turn were set on square pedestals made of local limestone. The use of three types of stone so different from each other

was hardly fortuitous. The architects clearly showed great sensitivity for the aesthetic aspects of the forum layout.

On the southern part of the forum, a well-preserved stairway leads to an underground water reservoir with impressive barrel-vault roofing. The bottom part is carved into the rock surface, the upper part is built of limestone. It is one of the largest and best-preserved reservoirs in the area. Water was brought into the underground reservoir from an aqueduct more than 15 miles long. Some of the stone piping is still visible, especially near an eastern gate of the city, as are fragments of a built channel that passes under the *decumanus maximus* on its way to the reservoir under the forum plaza.

In the northern part of the forum plaza between the fallen columns lying on the pavement, we discovered a D-shaped (semicircular) podium of limestone about 6 feet in diameter. Podiums (*podia*) like this are widespread in Greece and Asia Minor, but were

A COLORFUL MOSAIC decorates the Northwest Church. Its floor contains simple floral and geometric patterns, and the walls, columns and even the capitals were colored. Painted plaster covered the walls, and some even bore murals depicting flowers, fruits and leaves.

never before found in Israel. They served mostly for statues or memorial tablets to commemorate the exploits of one of the citizens or of some high-ranking visitor. Such a monument in the central city plaza could not be the act of an individual. The decision to place this kind of monument in a public area could only have been made by the city council, the *boule* of Hippos-Sussita. The Sussita podium is clear testimony to the organization of its urban government and cultural character.

Fronting on the plaza on the west side were two monumental structures. One appears to have been a decorative gate. All that remains of it are the foundations, and its exact design is unknown.

The other structure, however, is a monumental building built of basalt ashlars of superior quality. Even before excavation it stood to a height of more than 10 feet and was the best-preserved structure on the site. What purpose it served has been a puzzle. Gottlieb Schumacher, who surveyed the building in 1885, thought it was a synagogue. More-recent scholars speculated that it might be a *nymphaeum*—a large, decorative, architecturally intricate fountain—like the *nymphaea* that graced so many Roman cities (for example, Beth-Shean). This suggestion was based on the decorative eastern façade of the building, in the center of which is a semi-circular niche nearly 20 feet wide. The lower part of the niche is stepped; the upper part, which did not survive, was a half-dome, with some of its stones lying scattered at the foot of the building.

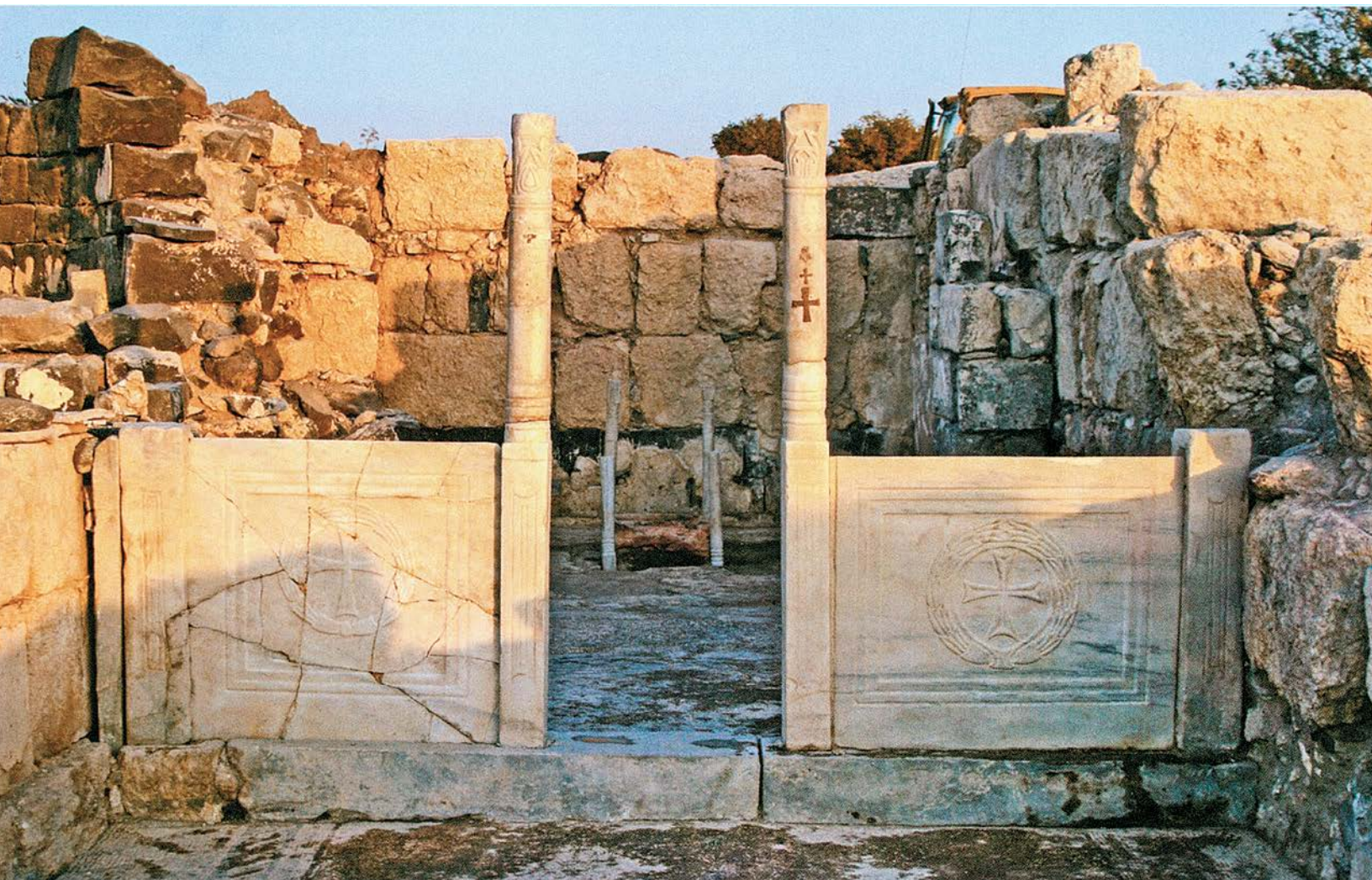
At first we, too, thought it was a *nymphaeum*, but we soon found that neither there nor in its immediate vicinity was there any kind of water installation, pipes or channels that would indicate its function as a *nymphaeum*. In addition, the building did not have a decorative water pool typical of all *nymphaea*.

We finally decided that the structure was a *kalybe*, an open-air temple, in which a statue of the emperor stood in the niche. Buildings of this kind have been discovered in many cities throughout the region, invariably erected at sites in city centers and facing public streets or the main colonnaded thoroughfare.



What is uniquely common to *kalybe* structures, wherever they might be, is that they are open buildings with a broad façade and a central niche for the emperor's statue. In contrast to temples dedicated to the gods, the *kalybe* temples were not set up in sacred compounds separate from the rest of the city area, but were erected with an explicit link to the forum or to the colonnaded street. The emperor's statue was in full view for all to see. This type of temple was an innovation in the urban panorama in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire. The salient presence of these *kalybe* temples in the very heart of the city and their accessibility and relationship to daily city life are all blunt and powerful expressions of the presence of imperial rule represented by the image of the emperor.

Just how closely Sussita was integrated with Rome is demonstrated in an unusual inscription discovered in the forum plaza. It was found on a white marble column a few yards from the semicircular podium. We have finally deciphered it; the text is printed in the box on page 572. The 13-line Greek inscription mentions a high-ranking official in the financial administration of the province, most probably *Provincia Syria-Palaestina*, named Aelius Calpurnianus and his wife Domitia Ulpia. It is dated according to the Pompeian era, the equivalent of 238/239 C.E. These two Sussita citizens with Roman names and belonging to the city nobility commemorated themselves in Greek. Aelius Calpurnianus's family



apparently received Roman citizenship during the reign of the emperor Hadrian (whose family name was Aelius), while his wife, Domitia Ulpia, was granted Roman citizenship during the reign of Trajan, whose full name was Marcus Ulpius Traianus (hence the name Ulpia). Domitia also bore the Latin title “*Matrona Stolata*.” The precise meaning of this title is still unclear; it seems to record her special status as an independent woman who is permitted to conduct legal and financial affairs in her own name, without her husband’s authorization.

In any event, this inscription clearly indicates that some Sussita citizens had attained the highest ranks in Roman provincial administration. It also reflects the degree to which Sussita had absorbed Greek Hellenistic culture within the system of Roman provincial administration. This phenomenon is not unique to Sussita alone, but appears in other cities of the Decapolis, as well as in other parts of the Roman Empire. Indeed, not long

ago a Latin inscription was found at Caesarea that mentions a certain Valerius Calpurnianus, perhaps a relative of our Aelius Calpurnianus. It is difficult not to speculate on the enormous success of the Roman Empire in creating around the Mediterranean basin a unified and standard system of administration that was one of the central components of its cultural uniformity during the second and third centuries C.E. Roman administration in the eastern provinces of the empire rested upon urban nobility in hundreds of *poleis* that fostered Greek cultural identity but that also saw themselves as an inseparable part of the Roman Empire.

On the other side of the *decumanus maximus*, opposite the forum, was an extensive religious compound or *temenos*. We have excavated only a small part of this area, but enough to reveal that, during the Hellenistic period (late second century B.C.E.), there was already a temple there. The column bases, column drums and Corinthian

CARVED WITH CROSSES, a chancel screen (photo at left) demarcates an area at the end of the southern aisle of the Northwest Church as a *martyrion*, where rites for saints were held. The photo at right shows a track on which a chancel stood. Beyond the chancel screen, four small columns (below) frame a red limestone *reliquarium*, which held the bones of a saint.



capitals are mute testimony to what once stood here. To the best of our knowledge, these Corinthian capitals are the earliest ever found in Israel. The Hellenistic temple was probably destroyed when Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmonean ruler of Judea, conquered the city around 83 B.C.E. Later, as early as the first century C.E., a smaller temple was built here of basalt stone, instead of the limestone of the earlier temple. Over the ruins of the Roman temple, a Byzantine church was erected at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century. It made extensive use of the building stones from both the Hellenistic temple and the Roman one.

The Byzantine church over the ruins of the ancient temples symbolized the victory of Christianity over paganism. A substantial part of the church walls were built of large limestone blocks from the Hellenistic temple; the columns of the church were set on marble bases that had once belonged to the Roman temple.

This church (we refer to it as the Northwest

Church) consists of a prayer hall and a courtyard atrium in front that is paved with basalt flagstones. Parallel with its four walls were four porticoes of columns that created a central courtyard and four shaded corridors. The column drums are fixed upon Attic bases crowned with pseudo-Ionic capitals. The architecture of the prayer hall and atrium resembles that of many contemporaneous churches and synagogues in the Galilee, Golan and Hauran regions. But we were astonished to find, near the southernmost of the three doorways leading into the prayer hall, a theater seat made of basalt. What is a theater seat doing in a Byzantine church? It probably came from Sussita's theater, which has not yet been located. We have an idea where it is, and we intend to excavate there to test the theory.

The central entrance to the church leads into the nave, the two secondary entrances lead into the aisles, separated from the nave by rows of columns. At the end of the nave is a semi-circular apse.

Unexpectedly, the two aisles are not the same. At the end of the northern aisle is a small apse, while the end of southern aisle is rectangular. This lack of symmetry in the internal arrangement of the prayer hall is very rare in churches of this region. In its earliest phase, the church was monoapsidal. On the north and south side of the central apse there were two rectangular shaped chambers. At a later stage a small apse was added to the northern aisle, while the shape of the south chamber remained unchanged.

In the central apse was a podium (the *bema*) that was separated from the rest of the prayer hall by a chancel screen placed between chancel posts. The church furniture—of white marble—is mostly well

preserved and has been reconstructed and placed in its original positions.

The floor of the prayer hall is paved with a colorful mosaic of simplified floral and geometrical patterns. The remains of the plaster on the walls, columns and even the capitals reveal that they were colored, giving the interior of the church a bright, attractive look. Some of the walls were covered not only with layers of ordinary painted plaster but also with simple murals, such as leaves, fruits and flowers. The dominant colors were red, blue, green and yellow.

A chamber south of the central apse served as the *martyrion*, where rites for saints were held. Entry into this chamber is through a doorway between two chancel screens and tall posts that created a kind of gate. On one of the two tall posts, three silver crosses remained undamaged and in their original locations *in situ*. Other finds in the *martyrion* included a bronze oil lamp in the shape of a dove which hung on a chain and two round bronze candelabra (in Greek, *polykandela*).

Near the eastern wall of the *martyrion* was a red limestone *reliquarium*, a receptacle for preserving the bones of a saint. On top of it was another smaller *reliquarium* with a gabled lid made of marble. In the center of the lid was a hole in which we found a bronze stick used for anointing ceremonies.

An annex to the church functioned as a *diakonikon* for storing food and tools. Among the metal findings here were sickles, scissors, an almost perfectly preserved Umayyad bronze decanter, scores of oil lamps and coins. A few of the coins were from the Byzantine period but most were from the Umayyad period. These coins are extremely important for dating the church. The church apparently continued to function throughout the Umayyad (Arab) period, only to be destroyed in the earthquake of 749 C.E. The collapse of the arches that supported the roof of the *diakonikon* and the way in which the amphorae and jars were scattered when they fell from wooden shelves evidence a life that ended abruptly.

To conclude on a somewhat mundane note, in our 2005 season we discovered in what we call the Northeast Church¹¹ (about 150 feet from the Northwest Church) an amulet assuring its wearer that he or she will have healthy digestion and no stomach problems. It consists of a medallion made of hematite and set in a beautifully executed gold frame with one Greek work engraved in the center—“Digest” (*Pepte*).

The excavation of Sussita is still in its initial stages. The first six seasons have unearthed only a small bit of what is hidden at the site. You are invited to come and uncover it with us. 📍

Uncredited photos courtesy of Hippos-Sussita Excavations.

¹ These excavations were conducted by Claire Epstein, Emmanuel Anati, Michael Avi-Yonah and Aaron Shulman.

² Participating in this project were Ze'ev Meshel, Tsvika Tsuk, Z. Felbush and Y. Peleg.

³ The excavations were conducted by the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa in cooperation with the Research Center for Mediterranean Archaeology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the National Museum in Warsaw, and the Concordia University in St. Paul, Minnesota. The project is headed by Prof. Arthur Segal and the co-directors of the Sussita expedition are Prof. Jolanta Mlynarczyk, Dr. Mariusz Burdajewicz and Prof. Mark Schuler.

⁴ *Antiquities* 13:394–397.

⁵ *Antiquities* 17:217; *War* 1:396.

⁶ *Antiquities* 17:320; *War* 2:97.

⁷ Jerusalem Talmud, *Ketubot* 12:4; Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hasbana* 2:1.

⁸ Tosefta, *Shevi'it* 4:10; Tosefta, *Obalot* 18:4.

⁹ *Lamentations Rabba*, Buber edition, 46a.

¹⁰ Jerusalem Talmud, *Shevi'it* 8:3.

¹¹ The Northeast Church was excavated by a team from Concordia University, St. Paul, Minnesota, headed by Prof. Mark Schuler.

The 15th season of ongoing excavations at Hippos/Sussita concluded in 2014. The project was directed by Arthur Segal and codirected by Michael Eisenberg, both of the University of Haifa's Zinman Institute of Archaeology, until 2012, at which time Eisenberg took over as sole director.

Since publication of the BAR article, the excavations have revealed the city's main forum, an odeion (a small, theater-like structure) and the remains of a high-quality mausoleum in the necropolis that dates to the second century C.E. According to Eisenberg, dozens of such mausoleums were built on both sides of the saddle ridge for the city's wealthy inhabitants.

The first volume of the excavation report is now available: Arthur Segal, Michael Eisenberg, Jolanta Mlynarczyk, Mariusz Burdajewicz and Mark Schuler, *Hippos (Sussita) of the Decapolis: The First Twelve Seasons of Excavations (2001-2011), Volume I* (Haifa: The Zinman Institute of Archaeology, 2013). The second volume is due to be published in 2015.

Related Reading

Vassilios Tzaferis, “Sussita Awaits the Spade,” BAR, September/October 1990.

Mendel Nun, “Ports of Galilee,” BAR, July/August 1999 (see p. 458 of this book for another article by Nun).

Michael Eisenberg, Archaeological Views: “What's Luck Got to Do with It?” BAR, November/December 2010.

Michael Eisenberg and Arthur Segal, “Hercules in Galilee,” BAR, November/December 2011.