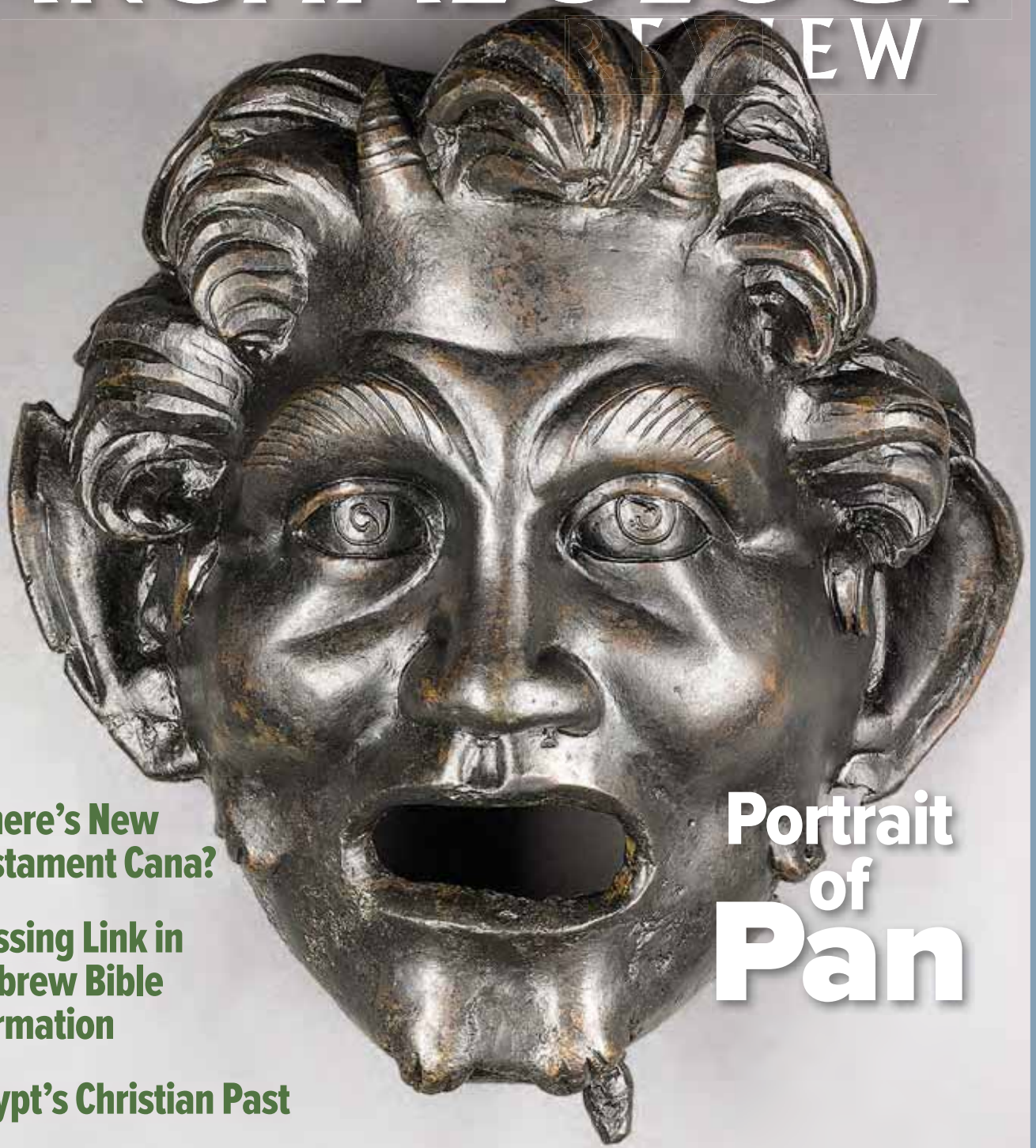


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# Pan at Hippos

## Face of Greek God Unearthed

By Michael Eisenberg

**“YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH A FIND!”** yelled Alexander Iermolin at Antiochia Hippos (Sussita),\* located a thousand feet above the Sea of Galilee. A group of 15 of us were excavating the site’s outworks in November 2014.

We hurried over as Alexander pulled out a large piece of metal covered in dirt near one of the basalt tower walls. After a few seconds, we realized that we were looking at a face. We removed some dirt from the metal and recognized a large bronze mask of the Greek god Pan (Faunus in the Roman pantheon) or possibly a satyr (a mythological creature resembling a man with equine or goat-like

features). The face stared back at us with glazed, furious—almost tragic—eyes and a gaping mouth.

We marveled at the size of the mask—and its quality. Perhaps we should not have been surprised, however, because Hippos was a flourishing *polis* of the Decapolis during the Roman period.

Located east of the Sea of Galilee on the crest of Sussita Mountain, Hippos was founded around the middle of the second century B.C.E. by the Seleucids. The Greeks named the site Antiochia Hippos (“hippos” is Greek for “horse”).

Hippos was conquered by the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus in 101 B.C.E., but the tide shifted again in 64 B.C.E. when the region fell under Roman control. Hippos became a Decapolis city, one of ten administrative Greco-Roman cities that had internal autonomy and jurisdiction over a large area in what is now Jordan, Israel and Syria. At that time, a pagan population and a Jewish minority lived at the site. When Hippos later became part of the domain of Herod the Great, it remained a primarily pagan city.

During the First Jewish Revolt against Rome, Jews from the western side of the lake, from

\*Michael Eisenberg and Arthur Segal, “The Spade Hits Sussita,” *BAR*, May/June 2006; Vassilios Tzaferis, “Sussita Awaits the Spade,” *BAR*, September/October 1990; Hershel Shanks, “Archaeological High Horse,” *BAR*, November/December 2014.

**FACE OF PAN.** The bronze mask uncovered at Hippos depicts a young man—most likely Pan or the Roman god Faunus—with small horns on his head, a forelock, long pointed ears and strands of a goat beard. With a gaping mouth and glazed, furious eyes, he stares out at the passing world. Here the mask is shown after its full conservation treatment.





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Tiberias and around, came to the eastern side, torching and devastating Hippos's region, but they could not take the fortified city itself. Hippos's Jewish minority was imprisoned and sold into slavery.

Hippos remained predominantly pagan until the fourth century C.E., when it became a Christian city; by the mid-fourth century, it had become a bishop's seat.\* At least seven Byzantine churches were built in Hippos, five of which have been partially or fully excavated.

In 636 C.E., the region was conquered by the Early Islamic forces, and it began diminishing in importance.

Hippos was destroyed—never to be resettled—after the devastating earthquake of January 18, 749 C.E. This catastrophe, together with the isolated location of Hippos on the crest, preserved the site exceptionally well for 21st-century archaeologists.

The scarce historical sources dealing with Hippos and the archaeological remains exposed so far provide a glimpse into the daily lives and religion of the site's inhabitants. Pagans,

\*Michael Eisenberg and Arthur Segal, "Hercules in Galilee," *BAR*, November/December 2011.

**SUSSITA'S SADDLE RIDGE.** As seen from the east toward the saddle ridge and the crest, the Sussita Mountain overlooks the Sea of Galilee. Antiochia Hippos (Sussita) boasts archaeological remains from the Hellenistic through Islamic periods. The mausoleum, the ditch and the new area of excavations are marked above.

Christians, Jews and Muslims all left their marks on the stones of the city.

Which pagan gods did Hippos's inhabitants worship? The remains of a Roman temple inside the

Hellenistic compound were probably for Tyche (Fortuna), the city's protector, who is known from the



**DECAPOLIS CITIES.** During the Roman period, Hippos was one of ten Decapolis cities that governed one of Rome's eastern provinces. It had jurisdiction over its surrounding area and internal autonomy. The other Decapolis cities are situated in modern Israel, Jordan and Syria.



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numismatic evidence and a fresco found at the site. On the highest area of the crest in the southeast, several architectural fragments of a monumental building have been found and are perhaps remnants of a temple to Zeus. From coins minted at Hippos, we know that a temple for Zeus of the mountains existed at Hippos, and normally temples to Zeus were located on the highest area. The bronze mask of the Greek god Pan may suggest that Pan or his companion Dionysus was also worshiped here.

Pan, the rustic Greek god of the wild, shepherds and music, is often depicted as half goat and half man. He was worshiped at least as early as the fifth century B.C.E. in Arcadia (Greece), which was the focal point of his cult. His name comes from old Arcadian, meaning “to pasture.” Pan later became a popular god in the east, often appearing as part of the Dionysian procession. His main attributes are the syrinx (Pan flute) and the pedum (shepherd’s crook). He is frequently described as chasing and lusting after nymphs. Pan is also associated with love of the countryside and the pursuit of rustic simplicity, which explains why he was worshiped mainly in open fields, caves or grottoes.

As with many Greek gods, the Romans adopted Pan into their own pantheon, syncretizing him with the Roman god Faunus, the rustic god of the forests.

**EARTHQUAKE EVIDENCE.** A devastating earthquake on January 18, 749 C.E. destroyed the site of Hippos. All of the columns in the South Church toppled off their bases in a neat row (seen above). After this tragedy, Hippos was abandoned and never resettled.

Faunus, Pan and satyri appear in various mythological tales and are among the most popularly depicted subjects in Classical art.

Sussita Mountain is surrounded by three riverbeds cutting it off on all sides, except the southeast, where a saddle ridge connects the crest with its surroundings. Naturally the main road to the city was built here, since it was the most accessible, but also the most vulnerable, area. The inhabitants sought to protect it with fortifications and a defensive ditch—26 feet wide—which cuts through the middle of the saddle ridge and has fortification walls on either side.

While surveying this area, we identified a basalt fortification wall running along the northwestern part of the saddle ridge in the direction of the bastion (a Roman period artillery post) in the middle of the southern cliff. A series of four basalt structures was located near this fortification wall, beneath the main defense ditch.

We initiated the excavation on the southernmost

structure of the hangars that housed projectiles, *ballistae* and catapults alike. After a few excavation days, a large, round tower—apparently part of a bathhouse—was partially exposed. We have not reached its foundations yet, but in its fill we located a fragment of a ballista ball. It was not the first ballista ball to be found at Hippos, but unlike the usual basalt ballista balls, this ball was made of hard limestone—not of the local basalt. It is likely that the ball was brought and shot by an enemy *ballistae* machine toward the saddle ridge fortifications and broke on impact.

About 100 feet south of the round tower, we started clearing another basalt structure, set beneath the ditch. Its 6.5-foot-wide exterior walls, built of fine basalt ashlar, made it a promising candidate for a corner defense tower connected to the fortifications on the saddle ridge. It was here that our institute's head conservator, Dr. Alexander Iermolin, was operating the metal detector during surface clearing when he discovered the Pan mask beside one of the basalt tower walls.

Following further excavations at the basalt tower, we exposed a pressed earth floor, above which the mask was found. The floor was dated to the first

century C.E., but the mask was not found here *in situ*.

Before cleaning or conserving the mask, we had it scanned via radiography by Izhak Hershko and Dan Breitman of the Department of Radiography at the Soreq Nuclear Research Center. After verifying that there were no flaws in the original cast and no severe trauma or corrosion, Alexander began the conservation treatment at the Zinman Institute of Archaeology. The process is basically a mechanical one—cleaning inch by inch under a microscope while documenting each stage.

During the first phase of conservation, we cleaned one half of the front of the mask. After checking the results, we moved to the other half. In the final phase of conservation, we stabilized the metal and applied patina to the front of the mask. The back of the mask is rough and was never intended to

**BASALT TOWER.** This photograph shows the basalt tower where the Pan mask was discovered—with Dr. Iermolin sitting on one of its corners. With 6.5-foot thick exterior walls, it served as a corner defense tower and was connected to the fortifications on Hippos's saddle ridge. The mask was uncovered near one of the tower's walls. It rested above a pressed earth floor, which has been dated to the first century C.E. Hippos itself is at the upper left.



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**GODDESS OF FORTUNE.** This fresco fragment from Hippos depicts Tyche, the Greek goddess of fortune—or Fortuna in the Roman pantheon. Tyche was the city’s protector. The fresco was discovered on a plastered limestone block in the Peristyle House, which has been subsequently renamed the House of Tyche.

be seen. Traces of lead visible on the rear make it clear that the mask was installed from the back, so we decided to leave the rear alone and merely stabilize it.

Within several months the conservation treatment was complete, enabling us to analyze the mask in detail, assisted by photogrammetry techniques conducted by Eli Gerstein, head of the Photogrammetry Lab at the Zinman Institute and XRF (X-Ray Fluorescence) analysis by Professor Sariel Shalev of the Institute.

Made of well-cast bronze, the mask is almost perfectly preserved, weighing just above 11 pounds and measuring almost 12 inches high and nearly as wide. It portrays a young man with small horns on top of his head, slightly hidden by a forelock. He has strands of a goat beard (of which only one has survived) and long pointed ears.

Similar masks—perhaps influenced by the style of theater masks—are known from the Hellenistic and Roman world, but all of these are made of stone and



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**PARTIALLY CONSERVED.** Here the Pan mask is shown after being halfway cleaned. The difference between the two sides is striking, with the cleaned portion (on the left) sparkling in comparison to the other. After the conservators checked the results of this cleaning, they cleaned and stabilized the rest of the mask.

were never intended to be worn as actual masks.

Several sculptures depicting a similar portraiture as our mask, dated to the first–second centuries C.E., are made of marble and bronze. They are generally referred to as satyri and sometimes as Pans/Fauns. Their common characteristic is the young face, sometimes furious and sometimes mischievous; they often bear two small horns on their foreheads and long pointed ears.

The mask from Hippos bears all these features, but in addition it includes strands of a goat beard. Such features make it easy to identify the mask as depicting the Greek god Pan or, more likely, his Roman counterpart, Faunus—and not just a generic depiction of a satyr.

The Hippos mask should be dated to the first–second centuries C.E.

Although we have identified who the mask represents, we still are not certain about its function. Its weight, material and solid eyes made it

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"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to those of us who are being saved it is the Power of God" | Corinthians 1:18

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## Pan at Hippos

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immediately clear that it was never intended to be worn in the theater.

What was it doing outside the city gate?

We have come up with the following four hypotheses about the purpose of the mask:

1. The mask was set up in a shrine for the worship of Pan/Faunus by the main road leading to the city. The worship of rustic gods like Pan or Dionysus was often ecstatic in nature, involving occasional sacrifices, drinking, nudity and orgies. It was only natural that the city preferred such rituals to be performed outside its walls.

The very location of Pan's cult in the Hippos region should not come as a surprise. The polis north of Hippos in the Golan, Paneas (Caesarea Philippi), was dedicated to Pan. There lies one of the largest worship compounds of Pan, set up in a cave.

2. Another possibility is that the mask functioned as a fountain-head. Although no clear erosion marks appear by its open mouth, the main water supply system of the city runs along the saddle ridge. Perhaps the city of Hippos wished to supply drinking water to those passing by the city or to those continuing their journey to the cities of Syria.

3. Perhaps the mask served as a burial offering in one of the nearby mausolea. A mausoleum has been excavated on the eastern side of the saddle ridge, and a necropolis stretches in the area south of the ditch.

4. A final theory suggests that the mask functioned as an *oscillum*. *Oscilla* were medallions or masks hung from trees or in between columns for offerings, worship or apotropaic reasons. In some festivals, *oscilla* in the shape of masks of rustic gods—among them Pan—were hung upon the boughs of trees, and offerings were made below them.

While at the moment we cannot say which of these four theories—or another—is correct, perhaps the answer will reveal itself during future excavations at the site. Regardless of its purpose, the Pan mask is one of a kind. 📌