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Antiochia Hippos

REVEALING A LOST CITY OF THE ROMAN DECAPOLIS

Antiochia Hippos was once a famous city of the Decapolis, a group of Greco-Roman poleis on the eastern border of the Roman Empire. Destroyed in AD 749 by a devastating earthquake, it lay buried and undisturbed until excavation began in 2000. Project director Michael Eisenberg now takes CWA on a tour of this illustrious city, which is emerging from beneath the rubble.

Antiochia Hippos was a thriving metropolis, founded during the Hellenistic era and which flourished during the Roman and Byzantine periods. In its heyday, the city dominated the surrounding region, and though no longer the power it once was by the time it was razed in AD 749, the ruins preserved beneath earthquake debris reveal evidence of a wealthy city of the Roman Empire.

Cities of the Decapolis were Hellenised-Roman poleis, united by a shared language, culture, and political purpose distinct from the indigenous Semitic culture of the region that today lies mostly above Reverse of the Hippos city mint coin, dating to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD 161-180). It shows Tyche with corona muralis holding the reins of a horse, symbolising Hippos.

BELOW: The view from the southern Golan Heights, looking across the lowlands to Antiochia Hippos, which sits on the hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee.
Into the city

The Hippos-Sussita Excavation Project, a major international enterprise, has completed 15 seasons of investigation, beginning in 2000. Recent work revealed a necropolis, and to date we have uncovered a mausoleum and exposed the first burial tombs with portraiture, giving us a better understanding of the world of the dead at Hippos.

The main necropoleis are set on a hill and wadi just south of Sussita, to the east of the mountain and along the saddle-ridge. This is the only natural ridge that connects the mountain with its surroundings, and it is therefore the route for the major road to the city, which leads to the East Gate main entrance. A field of sarcophagi, strewn with hundreds of carved rectangular graves and a series of elaborate mausolea with ornate upper storeys runs along the ridge. A ditch defence cuts through the middle of the saddle-ridge, marking the city’s urban boundary. Burials in Roman times were only permitted beyond the city limits, and accordingly all the graves or mausolea found at Hippos are outside this boundary.

Finding Hippos-Sussita

The Sussita Mountain dominates the surrounding landscape, rising to a height of about 350m above the Sea of Galilee. The long, narrow crest drops away on its east and west sides, extending about 550m along a south-east to north-west axis, and about 150m at its widest point from east to west. The encircling sharp basalt cliffs offer superb natural defences, and it was on these that the city’s fortified wall was built.

The polis of Antiochia Hippos was established about 50 years after the Battle of Panion in 200 BC, when the Seleucids seized control of the Land of Israel from the Ptolemies. Hippos rose to become the dominant city in the region. Both the Greek word hippos and the Aramaic sussita mean ‘horse’, but why this name should have been given to the city remains a mystery.

Perhaps it is a reference to the Seleucid horsemen veterans who first settled on the mountain.

The city was occupied for about a millennium before it was abruptly and permanently abandoned following the catastrophic earthquake of AD 749. The level of destruction and the site’s isolated position high up on the mountain created a time capsule – and an archaeological opportunity to uncover a lost polis, one of the most famous of the Decapolis.
typical of that era. One tower is square, but the other – dominant – tower is round, and faces out towards the southern slopes. It is ideally placed to ward off attackers, and served as a military post with catapults or other projective machines positioned on its upper storeys – though, sadly, none now survive.

The **decumanus maximus** runs from the east of the city to the west, cutting along the crest of the mountain and dividing the site in two. But the city’s long, narrow layout had no need for the usual **cardo**...
maximus (the main street that runs in a north–south orientation). Instead, several cardines intersect the decumanus maximus to create an orthogonal city plan divided into insulae.

Exploring the city
So far, we have excavated the east segment of the decumanus maximus from the gate to the forum, which lies at the centre of the city. To reach this paved and slightly descending street, we have had to remove debris and topsoil up to 5m deep in places. This had gradually accumulated over the centuries following the earthquake of AD 749 and the subsequent abandonment of the city.

The cathedral and large baptistery are located on the left of the street. Both buildings were investigated during the 1950s as part of a rescue excavation. The cathedral is a mono-apsidal Byzantine church, constructed with reused Roman monolithic marble and granite columns robbed from earlier structures. The church was destroyed by the 8th-century earthquake, and today the great columns, which once stood 4.7m high, remain where they fell, dramatic testimony to that fateful day – and much admired by visiting tectonic experts.

The forum was paved with carefully dressed basalt flagstones, and was planned as a broadly square plaza, about 42m × 42m, bordered on three sides by colonnades. Fourteen columns of Egyptian grey granite have been uncovered, scattered across the forum’s pavement where they fell in AD 749. Many architectural fragments were also recovered amid this deposit, including bases, pedestals, and capitals made of local basalt or limestone, and of imported marble or granite.

The most significant find yet uncovered in the forum area is a 1.6m-high marble column that once held a statue at the top. It was badly damaged when the huge
However, during the Byzantine era, the north-west church was built over the remains of the temple, a deliberate symbolic gesture signifying Christianity’s victory over paganism. At least seven churches were built at Hippos during the Byzantine period, of which five have already been either fully or partially excavated.

From the 4th century AD, we see a rapid rise in Christianity around Galilee and the Golan Heights. Hippos is no exception, and we know that the bishop Petros made his seat at Hippos as early as AD 359. Although Hippos is not mentioned by its name in the New Testament, scholars believe it is the city referred to in the text from the Gospels that reads ‘A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid’ (Matthew 5:14).

**Seat of power**

The basilica is the main public building found in every Roman city, typically established next to the open plaza of the Roman period. However, during the Byzantine era, the north-west church was built over the remains of the temple, a deliberate symbolic gesture signifying Christianity’s victory over paganism. At least seven churches were built at Hippos during the Byzantine period, of which five have already been either fully or partially excavated.

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the forum as its roofed alternative when adverse weather conditions prevailed. But it was more than a shopping and administrative centre: it was also where the tribune – or magistrates – sat.

At Hippos, the basilica lies on a north–south axis. The rectangular ashlar building measures 55m × 30m, with three entrances on the southern wall: the main one leading from the forum and the decumanus maximus to the basilica main nave, and two smaller entrances to the east and west aisles. It was built at the end of the 1st century AD, but destroyed in a great earthquake of AD 363.

The roof is supported by four colonnades that run parallel to the four walls, creating a central hall with four aisles. The interior walls were painted in strong shades of green, red, blue, and orange, and decorated with stucco pilasters, each one facing a colonnade column. Architectural items found among the debris included column drums, Corinthian capitals, friezes, and bases, all displaying a high standard of workmanship. The walls, columns, and capitals are mostly of basalt, though occasionally marble was used.

The basilica was destroyed by the earthquake of AD 363, and during last season’s excavation along its northern side we discovered evidence of a human tragedy that occurred during those terrifying moments – the skeletal remains of two individuals. Both were covered by roofing and tiles, suggesting they were struck and killed by falling masonry during the quake. One, a woman, was wearing a golden pendant in the shape of a dove when she died; we found it beside her neck.

About 70m to the west of the forum is the odeon. It sits on a north–south axis, about 27m long and 21m wide. Odeon is a Greek word (ode means ‘song’) adopted by the Romans to describe a small, roofed theatre where small, select audiences would enjoy poetry readings and musical events. Such structures benefited from the acoustics attained by being a covered auditorium.

The semicircular tier of seats (cavea) faced eastwards, towards a rectangular stage structure (scaena) with the stage itself (pulpitum) at its centre. We estimate it had 11 rows of seats, with capacity for an audience of about 500 people. At the foot of these seats and in front of the stage was the orchestra, in an area paved with...
a narrow gap was made between two of the bathhouse walls. In this gap, we found hundreds of ceramic vessels and terracotta lamps dating to the mid 3rd century AD, as well as a unique relief in stucco of a Heracles bust.

During the last season, while clearing the debris of the caldarium vault that had collapsed during the AD 363 earthquake, we found part of another Roman statue. Made of marble, it is an example of superb Roman craftsmanship. Only the right leg of a muscular man leaning on a tree trunk has been recovered, but we hope to find more during the coming seasons. It once stood at least 2m high, but who or what it represents, whether an athlete or a god, we may never know.

Mountain fortress

Hippos’s fortification system is one of the most intriguing and elaborate in the region. Though the mountain is naturally well protected by cliffs and sharp slopes, during the Early Roman period the defenders decided to build a 1,550m-long city wall with towers that encircled the mountain crest. They also constructed an elaborate outwork system comprising

LEFT An aerial view towards the centre of the southern cliff, showing both the fortification wall, and the bastion with its series of chamber vaults. BELOW The western corner of the bastion, over the southern cliff. Note the basalt beam foundations after the mortar has been washed away.

rectangular marble slabs. Though the odeon in Hippos is smaller than those found elsewhere in the Roman Empire, it was an appropriate size for the city – and its construction was of the highest quality. It was built during the late 1st century AD, and dismantled during the 4th century. We now know that the earthquake of AD 363 left Hippos in a state of ruin for about 20 years, and some of the main public buildings, such as the basilica, odeon, and southern bathhouse, were never rebuilt.

We have not yet found the theatre in Hippos, which may be located just to the west of the odeon, and the search continues – for while it was not essential for a Roman city to have an odeon, it was unthinkable not to have a theatre.

Similarly, any decent Roman polis had its bathhouses, and Hippos was no exception. The bathhouse was built over the ruins of an earlier bastion on the southern cliff, enjoying westerly breezes and overlooking the spectacular panorama of the Sea of Galilee and the Jewish city of Tiberias on the west side of the lake. Just the palaestra (open court for exercises), pool (natatio), and some of the hot rooms (caldaria) have been exposed so far, but the bathhouse has nonetheless yielded several surprises. During some major renovations in the 3rd century AD,
Syria were stationed here, suggesting they were responsible for building the bastion. Such an unusual event could have happened during a time of emergency – possibly the Great Revolt in the Galilee in AD 66-67.

Spiral of decline
Hippos is just 10km west of one of the major battlefields that determined the future of the Levant: the Battle of Yammuk in AD 636. Within a short time, the victorious Muslim forces took the region of Syria-Palaestina from the Byzantines, and shortly after Tiberias (Tabariya) usurped Hippos as capital of the region. Hippos went into a spiral of decline: when the final earthquake struck on 18 January 749, it was little more than an industrial centre.

Today, Sussita Mountain is a national park under the supervision of the National Parks Authority of Israel, on the main tourist and pilgrim route along the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee – and it is one of the most important archaeological parks in the north of Israel.