CHAPTER SIX

CAESAREA IN TRANSITION: THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FROM THE SOUTHWEST ZONE (AREAS CC, KK, NN)

The impact of the Muslim conquest of 641 on urban life in the Southwest Zone of Caesarea (Figs. 29 and 77) is at the core of our topic. Were urban space and urban life just modified, or did they come to an abrupt end following this historical event? Or perhaps was the process of transformation gradual, beginning earlier in the sixth century, the result of internal, long-term processes, such as the sixth-century Samaritan revolts or the plague, enhanced by the Persian occupation of Palestine (614–627)? K.G. Holum examined the transition period at Caesarea in several places, as L.E. Toombs had earlier. While Toombs was of the opinion that these events, and especially the Arab conquest, were major causes of urban decline, Holum, in his more recent

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4 Toombs 1978. Reifenberg 1951 is a general survey derived from analysis of aerial photographs, and written before any excavations took place at the site.

5 The Toombs article pertains to excavations in 1971–1974 of the American Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima (JECM) in its fields A, B (both to the east of the Old City), C (our field CC, now recognized as the site of the praetorium of the Byzantine governor), and H (the eastern hippodrome, or Roman circus of Caesarea). In order to establish an overall stratigraphy valid for excavation areas remote from one another, JECM adopted the destruction layers overlying the latest Byzantine occupation as the stratigraphic key to the site, and then adopted a system of “general phases” by working upward and downward in the balk section from this reference layer. The result was checked against the ceramic and coin evidence, and if the results matched the phases were considered contemporary (1978: 223). This method seems to have been most logical. In squares C10 (at the western entrance to vault 1) and C16 (above vaults 5 and 6) “the final Byzantine surfaces rest on leveled destruction debris, and are overlaid by the massive destruction layers which mark the end of the Byzantine period. They are associated with poorly-constructed rebuilds of earlier Byzantine structures” (1978: 228). In the “archive building” (now recognized as the provincial revenue office of the
articles, emphasized that it was not the purposeful, physical plundering and destruction of the city, for which there is little evidence, so he claimed, that was the cause of decline but the desertion of the elite, of the bouleutic class. The more we explore and excavate, the more praeutorium), the floors of the “Main Byzantine Period” (330–614 CE), were overlaid by debris attributed tentatively to the Persian conquest, which was leveled off and became the base for the surfacing of the "Final Byzantine Period" (614–40 CE). This is overlaid by a heavy destruction layer (attributed to the Arab conquest), characteristic of the close of the Byzantine era (1978: 228). Toombs’ concluding remarks pertaining to the effects of these two conquests on the urban space of Caesarea at large are these: "This <the Persian> invasion caused widespread destruction and brought the Main Byzantine Period to a close, but recovery was rapid and the city was restored, although its magnificence was greatly reduced. In A.D. 640 Caesarea fell to Arab invaders. This time the destruction was complete and irretrievable. Battered columns and the empty shells of buildings stood naked above heaps of tangled debris. Among these ruins a few survivors attempted to clear enough space among the rubble to make life possible” (1978: 230).

Whereas in his early article (Wiemken and Holum 1981), Holum agreed with Toombs’ stratigraphic and historical interpretation, in his later publications, he expressed reservations on various grounds. On the literary sources on the Arab conquest he claimed in his 1992 article (1992b: 74) that “the relevant literary sources are brief, late, and mostly unreliable,” and that “no literary evidence suggests pillage, burning, and destruction on a scale catastrophic enough to interrupt urban life.” As will be indicated below, the literary sources do suggest an abrupt and violent end, though not widespread purposeful plundering or destruction caused by the conquering Arabs. About Toombs’ method of stratigraphy he argues (ibid.), that “without positive evidence there is no reason to associate so-called ‘destruction’ layers in various parts of the site with one another in a single episode of muslim pillage. These layers might just as well present discrete cases of conflagration and collapse separated from one another by decades or even centuries and of completely innocent or even natural etiology.” But, one wonders, would loci “separated from one another by decades or even centuries” yield similar small finds? This was an essential point in Toombs’ methodology, and if sustained by a reliable pottery and numismatics reading, it seems to be sound. As for the finds in area LL, formerly excavated by Netzer and Levine on behalf of the Hebrew University (Holum 1992b: 75), cf. their present interpretation by Holum in Holum and Lapin (forthcoming), which corresponds very much with finds in other areas, indicating a ruined layer of desertion, a result of the Arab conquest, followed by a new stage of resettlement with floors raised over the earlier ruins, and humbler architecture. In Field K (our Area KK, located to south of the Joint Expedition’s Field C), no remains that could be associated with the Persian conquest came to light, but deposits associated with the Muslim sack were reported (namely, by Wiemken and Holum 1981), but in 1992 he preferred to attribute “much of the alleged Muslim destruction to accidental or natural causes” (1992b: 80). He also suggests that “the long Muslim siege and subsequent storming of Caesarea may have proven much more devastating ultimately to the city’s society and economy than to its buildings. During the siege many of the Caesarea’s wealthy, Christian, Greek-speaking inhabitants, may have elected to escape by sea, and other Christian Caesareans, especially the wealthy and prominent, may have preferred to emigrate to Byzantine lands after the conquest rather than live in their native city under Muslim rule” (1992b: 83). See also Holum et al. 1988: 204. The present excavations indicate that he was right about the effect of the conquest on the local society; the result was an abrupt architectural transformation