Chapter 14

Imperial Cult in the Decapolis

Nysa-Scythopolis as a Test Case

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The imperial cult, an elusive phenomenon, which generated its own cultic perspectives and political ideology, is a vague and much disputed topic among scholars. It was formerly much more intensively researched in the center of the empire and its satellite regions, for instance in Greece and Asia Minor, than in the relatively remote eastern provinces of Syria Palaestina and Arabia (Taylor 1931; Cerfau and Tondriau 1957; Herz 1978; Price 1984). Shortly after Actium (30/29 BCE), the koina of Asia and Bithynia requested permission to worship Octavian as their savior (σωτήρ) (Cassius Dio Roman History 51, 20, 6–7; Fishwick 1987–2005, 3:3). They were soon followed by Pergamon and Nicomedia worshiping him with Dea Roma and divus Julius, and Dea Roma in Ephesus and Nicaea (Suetonius, Aug. 52; Tacitus, Ann. 4.37; Fishwick 1987–2005, 1:77, 126–30). In 29 BCE, Octavian dedicated the temple of divus Julius and by the legal power of adoption became divi filius. First in Asia Minor and the East and later in the West, the practice of the ruler cult was rapidly promoted into a central cultic theme. In the East, Herod, king of Judea, was the first (under political circumstances) to devote remarkable and unprecedented efforts in dedicating re-founded cities, a newly constructed harbor, palaces, and imperial cult temples and temene in honor of his new patron Augustus (Sebastos) and his ruler cult, along with celebrating festivals and hosting quinquennial games honoring Caesar, all accomplished in less than two decades (30–10 BCE).

Herod truly believed in Rome’s irresistible power and mission in world dominion; he was absolutely faithful, first to Republican Rome, the senate who enthroned him as king of Judea, and later to the sole ruler, princeps of the empire, who ratified his status and generously enlarged his kingdom. At the early stage of his reign, he regarded himself as Φιλορώμαιος and later as Φιλόκαισαρ.1 His rule as princeps brought peace to a weary world torn by an endless civil war. He was the beneficent (εὐεργέτης) savior (σωτήρ) and, according to Hellenistic philosophy, was regarded as almost god (ηρως; ημίθεος),

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1 Stated by two inscriptions from Athens CIA III, 1 nr. 550 = OGIS 414; IG III 1, nr. 551; Schalit 1978, King Herod. 215, nos. 869–70 (Hebrew).
partner of a temple (σύνναος θεός), and entitled to festivals (Schalit 1978, 224). It is therefore no surprise that following those early initiations the ongoing practice of the imperial cult in the Hellenic East rapidly spread, while its architectural presentation was remarkably varied.

Ongoing excavations conducted in a growing number of Greco-Roman cities of the Decapolis revealed monumental civic centers, most of which possess numerous architectural monuments devoted to the practice of the imperial cult that were not always adequately recognized as such by archaeologists. Supplemented by abundant evidence retrieved from inscriptions, sculptures, and coins, a vast accumulation of data has been retrieved to date, which indicates the widespread practice of the imperial cult in the East. Presenting the archaeological evidence revealed during the excavations and research work at Nysa-Scythopolis of the Decapolis might, if one may hope, lead to further studies of the phenomenon in other cities of the region in general and those of the Decapolis in particular, thus achieving a more comprehensive insight into the topic. Coherent as it might be, it would not necessarily be inclusive; unlike in Greece and Asia Minor, the eastern provinces reflect a far more complex ethnic and cultural diversity. Apart from the Decapolis cities, which homogenously reflect their Hellenic tradition, the other urban centers of the region are rather heterogenic with regard to their ethnic composition, cultural and political affiliations, and religious practices; thus, they express diverse attitudes toward Roman cults in general and the imperial cult in particular.

Extended excavations at Nysa-Scythopolis (Beth Shean) commenced with the expedition of the University of Pennsylvania Museum directed by Clarence S. Fisher (1921–1923), Alan Rowe (1925–1928), and Gerald M. FitzGerald (1930–1931, 1933), which concentrated on the Beth Shean mound. Shimon Applebaum (1960–1962) followed with the southern theater excavations and later expeditions directed by Gabriel Mazor and Rachel Bar-Nathan of the IAA and Yoram Tsafrir and Gideon Foerster of the Institute of Archaeology of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1986–2000), under the auspices of the Bet She’an Archaeological Project, revealed the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine strata of Nysa-Scythopolis (Fig. 14.1). Accumulated evidence originating from temple sites, statues, inscriptions, and coins discovered during the excavations helped in clarifying some of the earlier assumptions about the nature of the various cults practiced in the city throughout the Hellenistic and Roman

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2 Recently, some pioneering works have been published by the excavators of Gadara and Hippos, where a monumental altar and a kalybe dedicated to the imperial cult were identified (see Hoffmann 1997 and Segal et al. 2004, 14).

3 See preface and extensive bibliography in Mazor and Najjar 2007.