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HELENOPOLIS OF *PALESTINA SECUNDA*: A ‘LOST’ CITY AND ITS BISHOPRIC

Abstract: Scholarly failure to agree on the location of Helenopolis in the late Roman province *Palestina Secunda* has been compounded by recent conflation of the two places most favoured, in important works on Niš-born Constantine the Great, and his mother Helena, respectively. This paper reviews the evidence for Helenopolis the city, and the diocese created there by 535. Though the see survives as a non-residential episcopal title in the Roman Catholic church, its fortunes are cloaked in mystery after the impoverishment of Christianity in the Holy Land as a result of the Muslim conquest. Early medieval geographies placed Helenopolis in the neighbourhood of Mount Tabor, traditionally held to be the place of Christ’s Transfiguration and supposedly visited by Helena. The settlement at the foot of Mount Tabor, Dabbūriya, has long been advanced as a candidate for the site of Helenopolis the city, its claims contested since 1961 on behalf of Kfar Kama, closer to the Sea of Galilee. Arguing from the symmetry of Helen’s veneration of the places of Christ’s Crucifixion and Transfiguration, the author argues for the greater likelihood that the bishop’s see would have been established on the Mount itself.

Key words: Constantine, Helena, Palestine, Galilee, Late Roman administration, Byzantine episcopal sees, Transfiguration, church archaeology, etymology,

A step on the road towards the likely honouring of Helena, mother of Niš-born Constantine the Great, as a member of the divine imperial pantheon (as argued by the author in previous papers in this symposium) and her subsequent treatment as a Christian saint was the attachment of her name to two cities and a province, Helenopontus, formerly Amaseia in northern Anatolia.¹ One Helenopolis was in her presumed home province of Bithynia,² the other

¹ A reliquary cross seen in Homs, ancient Emesa, half-way between Damascus and Aleppo, suggests that in Byzantium’s eastern provinces sainthood had been attributed to her at least by the sixth or seventh century.

² Most recently discussed by Noel Lenski, *Constantine and the Cities: Imperial Authority and Christian Politics* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), hereaf-

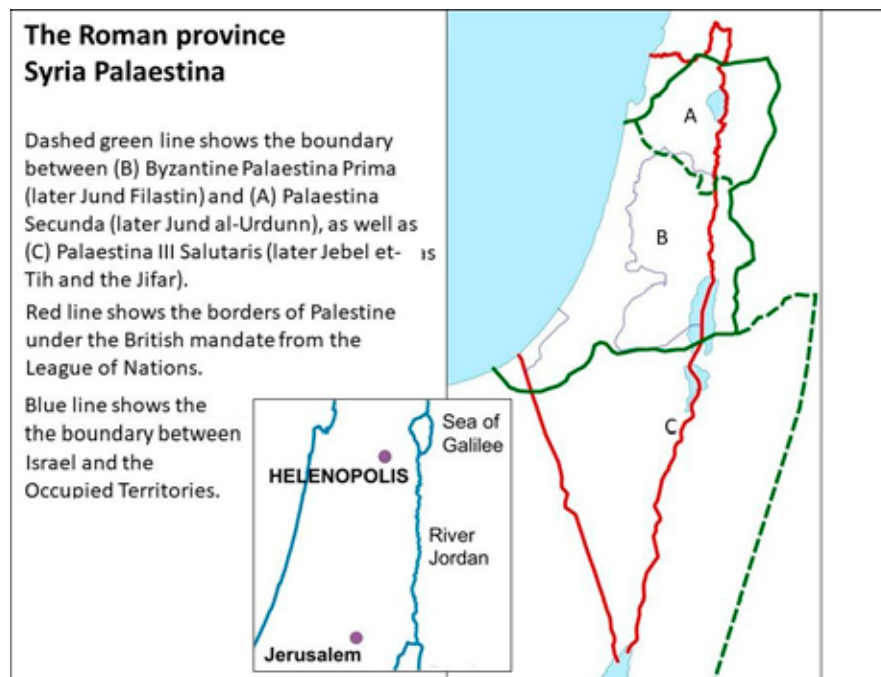


Fig.1: Helenopolis in its Holy Land and Late Roman contexts (Maps by the author).

Сл. 1 Хеленополис и Света Земља у позноримском контексту (карта аутора)

in Galilee, within 20km of what had come to be accepted as Christ's childhood town, Nazareth (Fig.1). A problem for scholars has been a failure to agree on the latter Helenopolis' actual location. The problem has been compounded by the recent conflation of the two leading candidates in two academically important and influential volumes. Both Noel Lenski, in *Constantine and the Cities*, 2016,³ and Julia Hillner, in *Helena Augusta, Mother of the Empire*, published in 2022,⁴ treat them as one and the same place. They are, in fact, 7km apart as the crow flies, 12km by main roads.

There can be no doubt of the Galilean Helenopolis' significance, for an unsurprising link with Helena's progress through Palestine within the time window 326x328 has long been conjectured, for example by the German Byzantinist Ernst Honigmann (1892-1954).⁵ A leading British historian of Late

ter Lenski, 'Constantine and the Cities', 159-61; and Mike Kajava, 'The name and the origin of Helena Augusta', *Arctos, Acta Philologica Fennica* 19 (Helsinki, 1985), 41-54, hereafter Kajava, 'Name of Helena'.

³ Lenski, 'Constantine and the Cities', 159-61, p. 159.

⁴ Julia Hillner, *Helena Augusta, Mother of the Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁵ Ernst Honigmann (ed.), *Le Synekdèmos d'Hièroklès et l'opuscule géographique de Georges de Chypre (Forma Imperii Byzantini, fasc. 1)* (Brussels, 1939), 42-44 (720, 8). Cited by Jan Willem Drijvers, *Helena Augusta. The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden, Brill, 1992), 9-10. Drijvers refers also to



Fig.2: The Late Antique/Early Byzantine dioceses of Galilee (Map by the author; Background courtesy of Israeli Biking Map).

Сл. 2 Позноантичка / рановизантијска дијацеза Галилеје, карта аутора; позадина: израелска бициклистичка карта

Antiquity, A. H. M. (Hugo) Jones (1904-1970) went further, suggesting that this Helenopolis, noted by Sozomen (400-c.450) simply as named for Helena,⁶ was founded by the empress herself.⁷

After 390 the Palestinian Helenopolis fell within the province Palaestina Secunda, founded in that year to incorporate the Galilee region and Transjordan. Our sources for this are two geographers, the sixth-century Hierocles and George of Cyprus in the seventh century. Hierocles, writing before 535, listed Helenopolis between Tiberias, the port on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee, and Diocæsarea (Sepphoris), 25km to the west.⁸ George's list of cities in the province appears to go from west to east, but not in a strict geographic or-

Kajava, 'Name of Helena', 43.

⁶ *The Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, trs. Edward Walford (London, Henry G. Bohn, 1855), II, 2.5 (p. 53): 'It is certain that her name will be transmitted to future generations, for two cities are named after her, the one in Bithynia, and the other in Palestine'.

⁷ A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (2nd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971). See also Adriaan Reland, *Palaestina ex Monumentis Veteris Illustrata* (Utrecht, William Broedelet, 1714), 1, p. 211; 2, p. 818; Peter Thomsen, *Loca Sancta* (Hildesheim, Georg Olms, 1966), p. 592.

⁸ August Burckhardt (ed.), *Hieraclis Synecdemus* (Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1893), 720, 8 (p. 42) [Also *Patrologia Graeca* 113, p. 153].

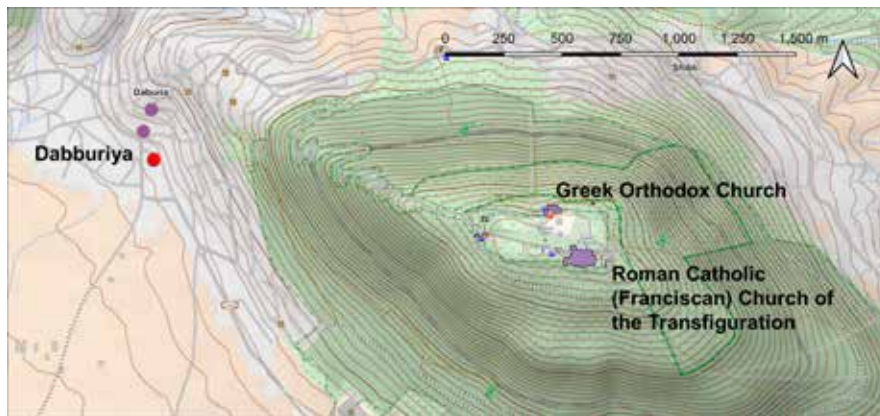


Fig.3: Dabbūriya and Tabor and their neighbourhood. Red dot, Church site in 1940; Mauve dots, Mosque sites ditto (Map by the author; Background courtesy of Israeli Biking Map).

Сл. 3 Дабирија и Тавор и њихова околина. Црвена тачка означава место храма (1940.); љубичасте тачке показују места цамија (карта аутора, позадина: израелска бициклистичка карта).

der. Its sequence reads Diocæsarea, Tiberias, Gabai [Γάβαι, also spelled γάδα; Jerome distinguished between the *oppidum* Gabe, 60 *miliari* from Caesarea and a villa Gabatha ‘on the border of Diocaesarea near the fortress Legio (at Megiddo)’, Helenopolis, Hippos [Sussita, overlooking the Sea of Galilee from the Golan Heights, roughly opposite Tiberias], Tetrachumia.⁹ The Arab geographer Yakut al-Hamawi (1179-1229) described the town as near Tiberias in Urdunn (Jordan), the Arab province which succeeded the Byzantine province.¹⁰

A further source for Helenopolis is a list of those who attended the Council of Palestinian bishops at Jerusalem in 536. It includes

- Araxius *episcopus Gadarenius* (Gadara, just east of the Jordan at the southern end of the sea of Galilee, immortalised in the story of the Gadarene swine, Mark 5:1-13),
- Procopius *episcopus Helenopolitanus*,
- Dominicus *episcopus Diocæsareensis*.¹¹

⁹ Trs. Honigmann, see above; Heinrich Gelzer (ed.), *Georgii Cyprii Descriptio Orbis Romani* (Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1890), lines 1035-40 (pp. 52-53); notes on pp. 196-97.

¹⁰ Felix-Marie Abel, *Géographie de la Palestine* 2 ([1938] 3rd edn, Paris, J. Gabalda et Cie, 1967), hereafter Abel, ‘Geographie’, 301 (see also pp. 205, 347); Josephus (see below); *Palästina Jahrbuch* 1925, 60; 1934, 25; Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions: A Journal of Travels in the Years 1838 & 1852*. By Edward Robinson, Eli Smith, and Others, Vol. II (2nd edn, London, John Murray, 1856), hereafter Robinson and Smith, ‘Biblical Researches’; Victor Guérin, *Description de la Palestine*, III, Galilée (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1880), I, 140; Aldolphe Neubauer *La Géographie du Talmud*, (Paris, Michel Lévy Frères, 1868), p. 265.

¹¹ Giovanni Domenico Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* VIII (Florence, Antoni Zatta Veneti, 1762), cols. 1173-74. Abel (see below) notes the negative evidence that Dabūriya does not figure in the lists of places in the neighbouring eparchy of Bostra: Alfred Baudrillart *et al.* (eds), *Dictionnaire d’Histoire et de Géographie ecclésiastique*, 3 (Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1912), col. 1187.

So Helenopolis was an episcopal seat, at least in the sixth century, and indeed provides to this day a titular, non-residentiary see in the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Its most recent occupant, an auxiliary bishop of Hartford, Connecticut, died in 1990. The French archaeologist, geographer, professor at the École Biblique in Jerusalem, and Dominican priest Felix-Marie Abel (1878-1953) wrote in the 1930s of the titular see as ‘*qui passa ensoute au mont Tabor*’, ‘buried under Mount Tabor’, ‘*demeura fixé au Thabor*’, as a result of the (literally in this case) dislocating impacts on the Church of the Muslim conquests.¹²

Tabor rises spectacularly and strategically on the northern edge of the Plain of Jezreel or Megiddo on the southern limits of Galilee. It appears to have been a cult centre for the northern Jewish tribes and its biblical associations also include the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20), and the Transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36; 2 Peter 1:16-18). The place of the Transfiguration is claimed to be encompassed within a Roman Catholic Franciscan church, built in 1924.¹³

Judging from Hierocles’ list at least, Helenopolis lay somewhere in the neighbourhood of Tabor. Together with an autonomous civil territory, Come Nais, the diocese of Helenopolis had been carved out of the much larger Diocæsarea and its presumed area has been mapped as quite small (Fig.2). There are two principal candidates for the location of the city itself. Michael Avi-Yonah (1904-1974), professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in working on the gazetteer of antiquities drawn up by the British Mandate government of Palestine, joined Abel in thinking it likely that the episcopal see had been at Dabūry[y]a (also spelled Dabbūriye and on the Palestine Exploration Fund map Debūrieh), a small town on Tabor’s north-western slope (Figs.3,4). It is labelled Daburia on Israeli maps (not to be confused with Dabura east of the Galilee lake on the Golan Heights).¹⁴ This paper will use the modern Palestinian transcription of the Arabic form *دبروبد*, adding the diacritic: Dabbūriya. The other main candidate is Kfar Kama.

The editors of Dabbūriya’s Wikipedia entry, under ‘Daberath’, derive its name from a Hebrew word for ‘pasture’, though the town’s Late Antique name-element *Dabūr-* seems to connect it to the mountain Tabor. Etymologically, this appears to be a back-formation, late rationalisation from the town’s location. As Abel noted, Dabbūriya was a town of the Gershonite division of the Levites in a northern salient of the territory of the tribe of Issachar surrounded on three sides by that of Zebulon with Mount Tabor in the latter.¹⁵ In the Book of Joshua it is called *Daberath*, Latin *Dabare[t]h*.¹⁶ Travelling from Aleppo to Jerusalem

¹² Abel, ‘Geographie’, pp. 201, 205.

¹³ Rafael Frankel, ‘Tabor, Mount (Place)’, in David Noel Freedman *et al.* (eds), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, 6: Si-Z (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992), gives a detailed summary account of the mountain’s biblical and cultic associations.

¹⁴ M[ihael] Avi-Yonah, *Map of Roman Palestine* (2nd edn rev., Jerusalem, Oxford University Press for the Government of Palestine, 1940).

¹⁵ I Chronicles 6:58, 72; George Philip, [Map of] *Palestine or the Holy Land according to its ancient divisions & Tribes* (Liverpool, George Philip & Son, 1852).

¹⁶ Joshua 19:12, 21:28. See, for example, John Gill, *An Exposition of the Old Testament...* (London, printed for the author, and sold by George Keith, at the Bible and Crown,

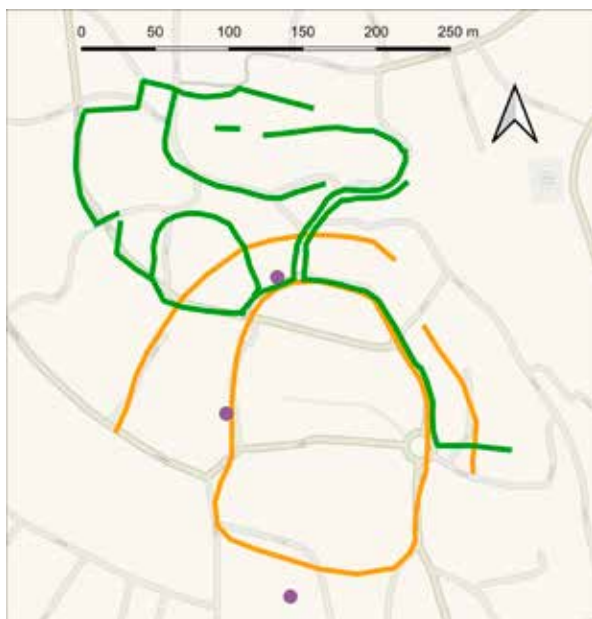


Fig.4: Plan-elements of Dabbūriya urban core, traced by the author from Google Earth image over 2023 street layout from Israeli government open-access Waze map. Northern mauve dots mark mosques, southernmost dot the church site in 1940.

Сл. 4 Елементи плана урбаног језгра Дабирије, ауторска ознака улице од стране Вазе карте Владе Израела. Северна љубичаста тачка означава место џамија, крајња јужна тачка означава локацију цркве 1940. године.

in the spring of 1697, the English clergyman Henry Maundrell, chaplain to the British Levant Company reported: ‘At the bottom of Tabor westward stands Daberah, supposed by some to take its name from Deborah, that famous judge and deliverer of Israel.’¹⁷ By the first century of the Common Era, as Abel noted, the place was called *Dabaritta* by the rebel leader Joseph of Tiberias, who had a military garrison there.¹⁸

According to the undated chronicle by the scribe known as the Syrian Anonymus, perhaps using sources from the seventh or eighth century, ‘*Dabeira* is a village of Jews at Mount Tabor in the territory of Diocesarée.’ This writer was probably following Jerome, who in the fourth century mentioned ‘a little village of the Jews by Mount Tabor, of the country belonging to Diocaesarea, called Dabira’.¹⁹

The American biblical scholar Edward Robinson (1794-1863) visited Palestine in 1838 and 1852 and judged ‘the village of Debūrieh’ as ‘small and unimportant, lying on the side of a ledge of rocks just at the base of Tabor. It

Grace-Church-Street, [1763]-1765). Following Maundrell (below), Gill observed ‘This place is still in being’.

¹⁷ Henry Maundrell, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter, A.D. 1697* (Oxford, Printed at the Theatre, 1703), 115.

¹⁸ In Josephus’ ‘Life’, *Josephus with an English Translation by H. St. J. Thackeray in eight volumes, I, The Life [and] Against Apion* (London, William Heinemann, 1926), 48-49 (Line 126), 116-17 (Line 319).

¹⁹ Syrian Anonymus, 78, 6. See Andy Hilken, ‘The anonymous Syriac Chronicle up to the Year 1234 and its sources’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Ghent, available on-line at <<https://library.net/document/q7emm4kz-anonymous-syriac-chronicle-year-sources.html>>, accessed January 20, 2023.

is said to have once had a Christian church, the ruins of which are still visible. This would seem not improbably to be the Daberath of the Old Testament, but assigned to the Levites;²⁰ the same apparently with the Dabira of Eusebius and Jerome by Mount Tabor in the region of Diocæsarea; and probably too the Dabaritta of Josephus in the great plain.’ In a note to his report of a ruined church, Robinson cited George Christoff von Neitzschitz, who visited Palestine in 1636.²¹

When the village was visited by Victor Guérin (1821-1890), he found ‘among the houses the remains of an ancient edifice once constructed with cut stone and a certain number of courses still standing. The interior was occupied by a private house and a stable, above which rises the *medafeh*, a house set apart for strangers. In all probability this was a Christian church.’ Here, Guérin remarked, Carel Willem Meredith van de Velde in a surveying visit in 1851 ‘found a tradition that the miracle of Matthew 17:14 was wrought in this place’.²²

That the cathedral of Helenopolis, and therefore Helenopolis itself might have been situated on the mountain and not at its foot was suggested by Richard Pococke, who visited between 1737 and 1741. He wrote that on the east side of Mount Tabor he saw the remains of a ‘strong castle’ and within its precinct ‘a grotto with three altars, in memory of the three tabernacles which St Peter proposed to build; and where the Latin fathers always celebrate on the day of the transfiguration. It is said, there was *a magnificent church built here by St Helena, which was a cathedral when this town was made a bishop’s see* [present writer’s italics]... There was formerly a convent of Benedictine monks here; and on another part of the hill a monastery of Basilians, where the Greeks have an altar, and perform their divine service on the festival of the transfiguration... [Van de Velde reported a community of ‘Greek monks, who as hermits inhabit a part of the ancient ruins’²³] At the foot of Mount Tabor, to the west, on a rising ground, there is a village called Debourah, probably the same that is mentioned in scripture... There is likewise a ruined church at that place, where, it is said, Christ left the rest of his disciples before his transfiguration.’²⁴

However, for Abel Helenopolis would be ‘well placed’ at the village location, lying as Dabbūriya does on the spur which connects Tabor to the hills in which Nazareth sits, and at what he saw as an important point on the ancient

²⁰ On the Old Testament identification, Robinson appears to advise caution and refers to Reland, who treats them separately (‘Palestina’, 2, 733, 737).

²¹ Robinson and Smith, ‘Biblical Researches’, p. 350; Georg Christoph von Neitzschitz, *Sieben-Jährige und gefährliche Welt-Beschauung... Europa, Asia und Africa (Budissin, 1666)*, trs. as George Christoff von Neitzschitz, *Voyage en Egypte de George Christoff von Neitzschitz* (Cairo, 1974), 233.

²² E. H. Palmer and Walter Besant (eds), *The Survey of Western Palestine... by Lieut. C. R. Conder and Lieut. H. H. Kitchener, Vol. 1, Sheets 1-6. Galilee* (London, Committee of the Palestine Exploration Fund), hereafter Palmer and Besant, ‘Western Palestine’, p. 384; C. W. M. van de Velde, *Memoir to Accompany the Map of the Holy Lands* (Gotha, Julius Perthes, 1858), hereafter Van de Velde, ‘Memoir’ (remark not found by the present writer).

²³ Van de Velde, ‘Memoir’, 142.

²⁴ Richard Pococke, *A Description of the East and Some other Countries II, Part I* (London, Printed for the Author by W. Bowyer, 1745), 64-65.

route between Damascus and the great plain. The village, he argued, seemed to have been raised by Christians who built a church. Its remains were mentioned by ancient pilgrims to the village of *Buria* or *Boria*. The town, or village, was indeed an ancient site of settlement, for an Egyptian scarab was found there.²⁵

Moreover, a coin of Elagabalus (203-222) acquired by Louis de Saulcy in the mid-nineteenth century was described by him as bearing on its reverse the inscription ΔΑΒΟΡ-ΙΩΝ (ITΩΝ).²⁶ The reverse portrait was of Pallas, casqued and looking to the right; his right hand on his buckler and his left ‘*sur la haste*’. Though the piece was ‘barbarous’ in its fabric, De Saulcy took the reverse inscription to refer to ‘*Dabora ou Daborath*’.

Ancient Dabaritta had a certain importance in the Roman age, Abel continued; with the Persian and Arab invasions the superficial name of Helenopolis was effaced, its episcopal title becoming fixed to Tabor. While archaeology has uncovered artefacts from the Iron Age to Ottoman periods,²⁷ by Crusading times the village appears to have been small but with a defensive tower which besieging forces brought down after four hours of undermining. At harvest-time the village was also able to call on labour from ‘large numbers of people from neighbouring places’, the land being ‘very productive’.²⁸

Morphological analysis of modern Dabbūriya’s central area plan-units suggests evolution through a number of phases, perhaps including periods of desertion. A (double-banked?) curvilinear element partly underlies the extent of the village as it was in the mid-twentieth century under the British Mandate (Fig.5).

What Abel referred to as *The Life of Constantine and Helen* ‘brings the empress precisely in this place and at Tabor where she created important foundations’.²⁹ This may be the Byzantine biography of Constantine which reported that Helena visited towns in southern Galilee.³⁰ However, Noel Lenski has now argued that Dabbūriya as Helenopolis was ‘a clear-cut example’ of ‘a small polity that used the power of the petition to win extraordinary favors from the first Christian emperor on the basis of its willingness to self-represent as a Christian

²⁵ Abel, ‘Geographie’, p. 16.

²⁶ Louis Félicien Caignart de Saulcy, *Numismatique de la Terre sainte* (Paris, J. Rothschild, 1874), 331-32.

²⁷ e.g. ‘Dabburiya: Final Report[s]’ in *Hadashot Arkheologiyot: Excavations and Surveys in Israel* (Israel Antiquities Authority): Zvi Gal and Nabil Abu-Yunes, 109 (1999); Rafah Abu Raya, 121 (2009); Gilad Cinamon, and Zohar Daniel, both 122 (2010); Butros Hanna, 123 (2011), and 124 (2012).

²⁸ William, of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, 2, trs. and ed. Emily Atwater Babcock and A. C. Krey (New York, Columbia University Press, 1943), 470.

²⁹ Abel cited *Revue de l’Orient Chretien*, 1905, p. 166; Donato Baldi, *Enchiridion Locorum Sanctorum* (rev. edn, Jerusalem, Typis PP. Franciscanorum, 1955), nos. 502, 503, 507, 508, 515, 517 ss.

³⁰ Michelangelo Guidi, *Un Bios di Costantino* (Rome, Tipografia della R. Accademia dei Lincei, 1908), p. 646. Cf., according to Lenski, F. Beetham, trs., ‘Constantine Byzantinus: The Anonymous Life of Constantine (BHG 364)’, in S. N. C. Lieu and D. Montserrat (eds), *From Constantine to Julian: Pagan and Byzantine Views. A Source History* (London, Routledge, 1996), 136.



Fig.5: Dabbūriya church ruins, 1930, looking east (Corbo, 1976).

Сл. 5 Рушевине цркве у Дабирији, 1930., изглед према истоку (Корбо, 1976)

town in the midst of a staunchy non-Christian landscape'.³¹ His basis for this argument appears to be first an assumption, based on evidence from elsewhere, that the town's new name was acquired by petition, rather than by direct act of the emperor,³² and second Eusebius' location of Dabbūriya as a dependency of Diocaesarea-Sepphoris, which as a mainly Jewish city was the epicentre of a revolt led by Joseph of Tiberias in 352.³³

However, identification of Helenopolis has also been made since 1961 with Kfar Kama, also in Lower Galilee but north-east of Mount Tabor.³⁴ In support of Kfar Kama, while conflating it with Dabbūriya, Lenski cites the *Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World*,³⁵ and the *Tabula Imperii Romani*.³⁶ Napoleon's surveyor in his Egyptian campaign, Pierre Jacotin, re-

³¹ Lenski, 'Constantine and the Cities', 161.

³² Lenski, 'Constantine and the Cities', 87-89.

³³ Joan E. Taylor (ed.), trs. G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, *Palestine in the Fourth Century A.D.: The Onomasticon by Eusebius of Caesarea* (Jerusalem, Carta, 2003), pp. 47, 125 (compares entries with those of Jerome's *Onomasticon*).

³⁴ Bellarmino Bagatti, *Ancient Christian villages of Galilee* (Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 2001), 226-67. See earlier note on recent confusion of Kfar Kama with Dabūrya.

³⁵ Talbert, Richard, *The Barrington Atlas of the Greek and Roman World* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000), Map 69, Damascus-Caesarea, B4: Helenoupolis.

³⁶ Y. Tsafir, L. Di Segni, and J. Green (eds), *Tabula Imperii Romani. Iudaea-Palestina: Eretz Israel in the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), 142, s.v. Helenoupolis.

corded this settlement as El Hadaci. A recent commentator on Jacotin's survey notes that Kfar Kama was settled by Circassians from about 1870 and may have received its present name as a result.³⁷

Kfar Kama's claim rests on the archaeological discovery of two adjoining chapels, one a martyrion honouring St Tecla and the other a baptistery with a bishop's and other clergy's name included in mosaics. The chapels may have formed part of what the excavator, Aapeli Saarisalo, described as 'a large complex building (either a church or a monastery), the greater part of which is covered by the houses of the modern village'.³⁸ A mosaic prayer to Tecla is dated 536, but this might not have been the first church here and much hangs on the extent of the bishop's diocese. Avi-Yonah's atlas of Roman Palestine puts Kfar Kama within the diocese of Helenopolis.

There are other candidates to be identified with Helenopolis in the Galilee. James Strange has reported the claim of Nazareth though without going further than mentioning that Nazareth and Mount Tabor were 'cities of special interest to Helena... She understood the Transfiguration of Jesus to have taken place on Mt. Tabor. The Piacenza Pilgrim in A.D. 570 says that the house of Mary "is now a basilica".'³⁹ Andrew Petersen includes 'Helenopolis [Megiddo]' in his table of urban sites in Palaestina Secunda from Byzantine to early Ottoman times derived from A. H. M. Jones' *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*. Jones says of Helenopolis only that it was built by Constantine's mother and 'Its site is unknown, save that it lay in Byzantine Palestina Secunda, and must therefore have been in Galilee.'⁴⁰ He adds nothing about Megiddo, the name of the hill overlooking the Jezreel Valley or Plain of Armageddon where in Christian apocalyptic literature the final battle between the forces of good and evil must take place at the end of time (Revelation 16:16) and the site of Tel Megiddo, a rich prehistoric archaeological site, a town apportioned to the tribe of Manasseh, according to 1 Chronicles 7:29. At the site of the adjacent Roman town of Legio, archaeologists unearthed the remains of a Christian church probably of the late third or early fourth century, not of a type associated with the reign of Constantine.⁴¹ Avi-Yonah, in his *Gazetteer of Roman Palestine*, limited himself in locating the diocese of 'Helenopolis' in the 'Tabor-Nazareth area'

³⁷ Y. Karmon, 'An analysis of Jacotin's map of Palestine', *Israel Exploration Journal* 10.3 (1960), 155-73; 10.4 (1960), 244-53, hereafter Karmon, 'Jacotin's map', 167.

³⁸ On the north chapel, Aapeli Saarisalo, 'Kafr Kama', *Israel Exploration Journal* 11 (1961), 197, 13.2 (1963), 149-50; Asher Ovadiah, *Corpus of the Byzantine Churches in the Holy Land* (Bonn, P. Hanstein, 1970), 98 (no.90/91).

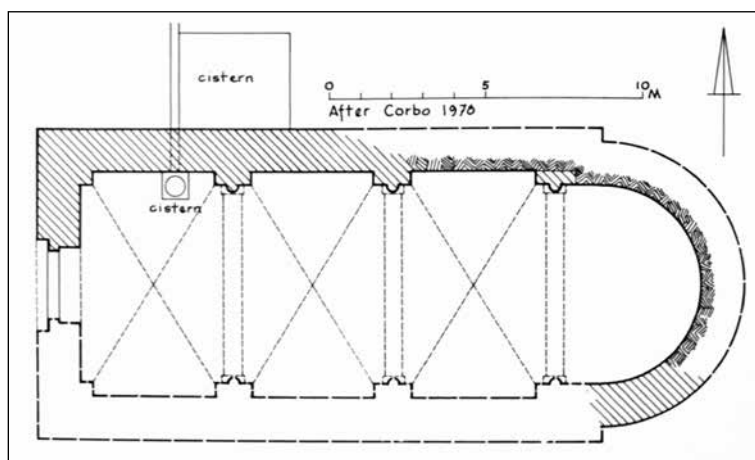
³⁹ James F. Strange, 'Nazareth', in David Noel Freedman *et al.*, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, K-N (New York, Doubleday, 1992), 1050.

⁴⁰ Andrew Petersen, *The Towns of Palestine under Muslim Rule AD 600-1600* (Oxford, Archaeopress, 2005), p. x (no. 38), citing Arnold H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 2nd edn, rev. Michael Avi-Yonah (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971), 279-78.

⁴¹ Andrew Lawler, 'First Churches of the Jesus Cult', *Archaeology* 2007; Yotam Tepper, and Leah di Segni, *A Christian Prayer Hall of the Third Century CE at Kfar 'Othnay (Legio). Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005* (Jerusalem, Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006).

Fig. 6: Dabbūriya church plan (Pringle, 1993, after Corbo, 1976).

Сл. 6 Рушевине цркве у Дабирији, 1930., изглед према истоку (Корбо, 1976)



(map reference 178/187231/36) as ‘created by Constantine I in honour of his mother, including probably Nazareth and Mount Tabor, as sacred sites of the Christians’.⁴²

In weighing the claims of these locations, the present writer finds most telling the symmetry in the association with Helena of Mount Tabor, the place of Christ’s Transfiguration, on the one hand, and on the other her commemoration at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, on the hill of Golgotha, the place of Christ’s Crucifixion. The former lies between Nazareth, reputed scene of Christ’s childhood and upbringing, and the Sea of Galilee and its centres of population including Capernaum, Christ’s adopted town. Here Christ carried out his ministry. Historians and theologians attributed to Helena the discovery of the Cross on which Christ died. Those responsible for the naming of Helenopolis in Palestina Secunda, whether an aspiring village council, imperial functionaries, or the emperor himself (and not necessarily Constantine I), may well have wished to associate the empress, mother of the first Christian emperor, with the reputed scene of Christ’s Transfiguration as at Jerusalem she was associated with his Crucifixion and Resurrection.

There may have been other factors for the naming, memories of Helena’s progress through Galilee and its towns included. Julia Hillner has described the ceremonies and festivities that doubtless marked Helena’s progress by analogies with others in that period: ‘speeches, processions, choirs, crowd acclamations, donations, dedications of buildings, games, and sacrifices’ could last for days.⁴³ Mika Kajava is among those who find it ‘highly probable’ that Helena visited the future Helenopolis.⁴⁴ A wish by a settlement’s Christian inhabitants to free

⁴² Michael Avi-Yonah, *Gazetteer of Roman Palestine, Qedem, Monographs of the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem 5, 1976* (Institute of Archaeology, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and CARTA, The Israel Map and Publishing Company), pp. 1-112, 64.

⁴³ Julia Hillner, *Helena Augusta: Mother of the Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022), 221.

⁴⁴ Kajava, ‘Name of Helena’, 43.



Fig.7: Dabbūriya, with Mount Tabor in the background (Photo, 'Welcome to Dabburiya' website, <https://www.palestineremembered.com/GeoPoints/Dabburiya_935/index.html>, accessed January 22, 2023).

Сл. 7 Дабирија са брдом Тавор у позадини

themselves from the authority of Jewish-dominated Diocaesarea, as suggested by Lenski, would also make sense. This was a time of flux, in which Christian-Jewish relations could be friendly and mutually supportive, or contentious. It is helpful to remember that the inclusion of Moses in the Transfiguration narrative is a metaphor for Christ's fulfilment of the Old Testament. Some archaeologists also see the late Roman and early Byzantine periods as a time of dramatic decline in settlement and demography in the eastern Lower Galilee, based on ceramic field-scatters.⁴⁵

These factors carry weight, certainly more than any attending the claim of Nazareth. The writer finds the claims of Kfar Kama similarly unconvincing. An inscription naming a bishop does not, by itself, make the place an episcopal see. At its simplest, Tabor and its immediate neighbourhood fit the Occam's Razor test. A settlement on the defended mountain-top might be thought to best warrant naming in Helena's honour. Against that is uncertainty as to the date of the settlement/defences, and the undoubted strategic location of the town at its foot, close to the important route between the Lake towns and the Mediterranean coast via Diocaesarea/Sepphoris (though by the time of Pierre Jacotin's survey in 1799 it seems not to have lain on any main route⁴⁶).

That said, the church ruins at Dabbūriya were excavated in 1930 (Fig.6) and again in 1976, and prove to be of a form consistent with a Crusader church rather than from early Byzantine times like the chapels at Kfar Kama. Father Corbo's plan of 1976 (Fig.7) shows a single cell nave, 7m by 16m internally, and

⁴⁵ Uzi Leibner, 'Settlement and demography in late Roman and Byzantine Eastern Galilee', in L. di Segni, Y. Hirschfeld, J. Patrich, and R. Talgam (eds), *Man Near a Roman Arch: Studies Presented to Prof. Yoram Tsafrir* (Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Society, 2009), 1-25.

⁴⁶ Karmon, 'Jacotin's Map', 164.

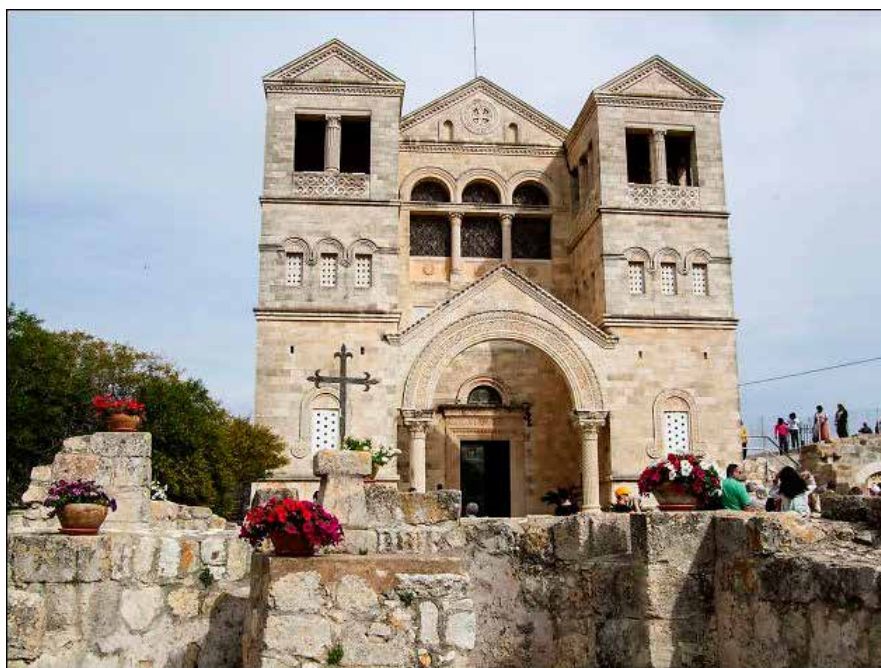


Fig.8: Church of the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor (Photo, Israeli Tourist Service).

Сл. 8 Црква Преображења, брдо Тавор Church of the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor
(фото: Туристички сервис Израела)

a hemispherical apse of 3m radius and 4m depth.⁴⁷ This is in line with Guérin's description of 'an ancient edifice, measuring twenty-two paces in length by ten in breadth, and built from west to east'.⁴⁸ In common with much of the settlement at the foot of Tabor, the church was built on a site which declines gently from north-east to south-west.⁴⁹ Thus, while the north wall still stands some 0.6-0.8m high, most of the south wall and half of the west wall have completely disappeared; the footings of the north-eastern part of the building are cut from the rock. The surviving masonry is of well-cut ashlar, 1.5m thick for the nave. One can add to this description by Pringle that this was, then, a church built with care and investment. Indeed, Father Virgilio Corbo, commenting on the Franciscans' excavation of part of the nave in 1930⁵⁰ and following the uncovering and planning of the remains as a whole in 1978, suggested that an outcrop of natural rock in the centre of the apse may have been accorded some special

⁴⁷ Denys Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. A Corpus. Volume I: A-K (excluding Acre and Jerusalem)* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), hereafter Pringle, 'Crusader Churches', 192-94.

⁴⁸ Guérin, as quoted by Palmer and Besant, 'Western Palestine', 384.

⁴⁹ The following description is taken from Pringle, 'Crusader Churches', 193.

⁵⁰ M. T. Petrozzi, *Il Monte Tabor e dintorni* (Jerusalem, Luoghi Santi della Palestina, 1976), 280, figs. 66-67.

biblical significance by the builders.⁵¹ Pringle visited the church in 1981 and advises caution, however: ‘It seems as likely... that it would have been conveniently covered by a raised sanctuary floor.’

As Pringle noted, the church had probably been abandoned for almost a century when the association of the building with the Transfiguration episode was first made in 1283. In that year Burchard of Mount Sion wrote: ‘At [Mount Tabor’s] western foot opposite Nazareth is a chapel built where the Lord, descending from the mountain, said to his disciples: “Tell the vision to no man till the Son of man be risen from the dead”.’⁵² Another visitor, James of Verona in 1335, repeated the tradition but noted that the church was in ruins.⁵³ Pringle continues, ‘Attempts to associate it with the nine Apostles who remained behind or with Christ’s curing of the demoniac also represent later explanations for the building’s construction. In the absence of any contemporary evidence for its dedication, it would seem more prudent to assume no more than that this was the parish church of the Latin settlers of the faubourg of *Buria*, built by the monks of Mount Tabor in the twelfth century.’ In 1101 Tancred, Prince of Galilee, granted to the abbey of Mount Tabor a number of villages said to be uninhabited as a result of the wars, including Dabbūriya known as *Buria*, together with ‘*Mons Thabor, in quo eadem sita est ecclesia*’.⁵⁴

It was Abel’s view that the bishop’s seat moved to Mount Tabor after the memory of its having been at Dabbūriya had been so forgotten in the impoverishment of Christian Palestine following the Muslim conquest that in lists of dioceses drawn up by Neilos Doxapatres, dated 1153, and the anonymous author of the thirteenth-century text, the *Tacticon*, it was, ‘embarrassingly’ for them, left to the last, after Sinai.⁵⁵

An alternative conclusion from this review may be that the bishop of a see established over a restricted territory, but with one of the most significant locales of the Christian narrative at its heart, might be expected from the beginning to have seen obvious and great benefit in building his episcopal church at the site of the miraculous episode, already established as a renowned destination for pilgrims. Perhaps Pococke was right *circa* 1740 and the cathedral of

⁵¹ V. Corbo, ‘Scavo della chiesa “Nemini Dixeritis” a Dabburiyya’, *Studii Biblici Franciscani liber annuus* 28 (1978), pp. 247-51, pls. 77-80, p. 248, reported in Pringle, ‘Crusader Churches’, 192.

⁵² John R. Bartlett (ed.), *Oxford Medieval Texts: Burchard of Mount Sion, Desc. O. P. Descriptio Terrae Sanctae* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019), VI. 9.

⁵³ R. Rohricht (ed.), ‘Le pèlerinage du moine augustin Jacques de Vérone (1335), *Revue de l’Orient Latin* 3, 155-302, p. 275.

⁵⁴ Delaville le Roulx, J. (ed.), *Cartulaire général de l’Ordre des Hospitaliers de S. Jean de Jérusalem (1100-1310), 2 (1201-1260)*, (Paris, Ernest Leroux, 1897), 897-98, ‘Chartes du Mont-Thabor’, n. 1.

⁵⁵ Able, ‘Geographie’, pp. 202-04. Nielos’ list is in Gustav Parthey, *Hieroclis Synecdemus et notitiae graecae episcopatum: Accedunt Nili Doxapatrui notitia patriarchatum...* (Berlin, Frideric Nicolai, 1866), 281. See also Heinrich Gelzer, ‘Ungedruckte und wenig bekannte Bistümerverzeichnisse der orientalischen Kirche’, *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 1.2 (1892), 245-82, p. 253, with Helenopolis at the end of the list in MS. Vatican. Gr. 1455, fol. 243r. The list of the *Tacticon* is in Grigorios Palamas, *Ἱεροσολυμίαις* (Athens, 1862), 378 ss.

the diocese of Helenopolis should be sought not at Dabbūriya after all, but on the summit of Mount Tabor, where the Piacenza Pilgrim saw three basilicas in 570.⁵⁶

The Franciscans' Church of the Transfiguration there was built between 1919 and 1924 over the ruins of a Byzantine church from the fifth or sixth century and a Crusader church from the twelfth (Fig.8). Incorporated into the Chapel of Moses under the north tower at the west end of the modern church is a mosaic thought to date from before 422. Its design includes crosses. In 422 the emperor Theodosius II prohibited the representation of crosses in mosaic pavements to avoid them being trodden on. The chapel is one of three grottos described by Jonas Korte in 1751 as 'three chapels, with a small altar. They are called tabernacles, and they are said to represent the three huts that Peter desired to build, one for his Master, the other two for Moses and Elias.'⁵⁷ The Grotto of Christ is in the eastern part of the church, with enclosing walls belonging to a Crusader church; that of Elias in the south tower at the west end opposite that of Moses.⁵⁸ In 1283 the three tabernacles were pointed out to Burchard, who also saw 'vast ruins of palaces, towers, and royal buildings, in which now lurk lions and other wild animals. Royal hunts are held there.'

In 553 the Second Council of Constantinople authorised the establishment of an Antiochan Patriarchate see at Mount Tabor. From 512 there were Melkite and Syriac claimants to the patriarchate. The Syriac church, non-Chalcedonian and using an Aramaic liturgy, might well have been in effective prior possession of the diocese of Helenopolis and the new see would have represented the Chalcedonian Melkite faction. Pilgrim accounts describe three churches on the mountain in the sixth century and four churches and a monastery in the eighth. It may well be significant that the earliest identified places of worship, the grottoes, were incorporated into a Catholic church and the present Orthodox church occupies a different site, though conditions during Crusader rule would have allowed a measure of *force majeure* by Catholic newcomers. The question remains open, but the possibility that the bishop of Helenopolis had his see on the mountain and not at Dabbūriya is reasonable, plausible, and deserving of further consideration.

⁵⁶ Pringle, 'Crusader Churches', 2, 63-85.

⁵⁷ Korte, Jonas (1751). *Reise nach dem weiland gelobten, nun aber seit siebenzehen hundert Jahren unter dem Fluche liegenden Lande, wie auch nach Egypten, dem Berg Libanon, Syrien und Mesopotamien* (3rd ed., Halle, Joh. Christian Grunert; after 1st ed. by Jonas Korte, Altona-Hamburg (1741).

⁵⁸ 'Church of the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor, One of the Crusader altars', University of Notre Dame, Hesburgh Libraries, on-line at <<https://curate.nd.edu/show/z603qv36z72>>, accessed January 20, 2023.

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ХЕЛЕНОПОЛИС ПАЛЕСТИНЕ СЕКУНДЕ: „ИЗГУБЉЕНИ ГРАД“ И ЊЕГОВА
ЕПИСКОПИЈА

У студији се разматра питање до сада неутврђене локације Хеленополиса, града и епископије позноримске провинције Палестина Секунда. Према Јевсевију, биографу у Нишу рођеног Константина Великог, епископу Цезареје палестинске, Хеленополис је био посвећен Константиновој мајци Јелени. Студија разматра две тврдње о местима у Галилеји, Дабирији и Кафр Кама. Поменути градови су на супротним странама брда Тавор, места за које је везано Христово Преображење. Кафр Кама се везује за откриће натписа у којем је поменут епископ, Дабирија се ослања на традицији Левита, као и на пророчицу Дебору из Старог Завета, а посебно за капелу везану за Христове ученике који су сведочили његовом Вознесењу (Петар, Јован и Јаков). По мишљењу аутора текста, иако Дабирија делује убедљиво, Хеленополис је ипак био на месту где је брдо Тавор, будући да је град био тесно везан и за место ходочашћа верника који су одавали поштовање не само месту посвећеном царици Јелени, већ и месту Христовог Преображења.