

## Pella

Pella is of special interest because, according to Eusebius (ca. 263-339 AD), Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, was a historian of the early Christian church. Eusebius, Jerusalem's Christians took refuge here during the first Jewish revolt against Rome (66-70 AD). It was at that time a major city, a member of the Decapolis, a league of cities under Roman auspices, organized after the conquest by Pompey in 63 BC. Sometimes ten are mentioned, sometimes more. They included Damascus (an honorary member), Hippos, Gadera, Gerasa (Jerash), Pella, Scythopolis (the only one west of the Jordan) and Philadelphia (Amman of today). The Decapolis, but its story goes farther back. The first signs of settlement date from the Neolithic Era, 9500 &ndash; 4000 BC, during which humans went from hunting and gathering to agriculture, began to domesticate animals, and invented pottery. Occupation continued with little interruption until the great earthquake of 749 AD, which toppled cities along the Jordan Valley and the Lake of Galilee.

The reasons for the lengthy habitation of the site are several. First, there is a perennial spring in the valley at the base of the city's main mound. ("Pella, rich in its waters," wrote Pliny the Elder in his Natural History, 5.16.70.) Second, this hill was defensible—that is, small enough so that the population supplied by the spring could produce enough soldiers to defend its perimeter. Third, there is fertile land in the plains below. Fourth, there was the factor of position:

Pella lay near a ford of the Jordan. (Fords were crucial, because in Assyria bridges are mentioned from the 11th century BC. (The Egyptians used ferries.) Yet the First Testament lacks a word for bridge, and no remains of any have been found in the land for its period. Except when miracles occur, the Israelites are always portrayed as fording. The location of fords in this land was a major factor in determining the location of cities and roads. It was the Romans who first made bridges general, building them wherever they conquered (there were no bridges in the land before the Roman period). The ford near Pella was especially important because it provided access to the Jezreel Valley, which allowed rare ease of passage to the Great Trunk Road on the west. To the east, the ancient traveler could ascend to points on the King's Highway. Thus Pella occupied a crucial position on the land's easiest and safest link road joining the international highways. Its situation corresponded to that of Rehov and Beth Shean just west of the Jordan. The positional factor that made them important made Pella important too. The map below represents its position in the Roman period, but the basic topographical facts were the same in earlier history as well.

Under the name of Pehel or Pihil, the city appears in the Egyptian Execration Texts from the 19th century BC, the Middle Bronze (MB) Period. Robert Houston Smith, "Trade in the Life of Pella of the Decapolis," Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, Vol. III, Department of Antiquities, Amman, Jordan, 1987 points out that name means "equid" (of the horse family) in several Semitic languages. He writes, "If the name is as old as the Early Bronze Age, which I think is extremely likely, the equid to which the city's name alluded would have been the onager, which had been at home in Transjordan for thousands of years and was in demand in Egypt and Cisjordan as a beast of burden" (p. 54). He thinks that the Pehelites may have been onager merchants, buying them from Beduin who trapped them in the grasslands of the eastern plateau. From a document of the Late Bronze Age (Papyrus Anastasi IV 17:3), we know that Pehel and its western neighbor Rehov supplied Egypt with wood for the spokes of chariot wheels (the wood would have come from forests that then existed just east of Pehel); this industrial branch, says Smith, could have developed from the trade in equids.

In the following centuries, the city flourished like many in the land. The major tells got their characteristic shape from the building of massive fortifications. Pehel received a mud-brick wall that still stands in places to a height of 21 feet. One MB tomb on Tell Husn, the hill across the valley, has yielded 2000 artifacts, ranging from gold earrings and copper bracelets to vessels of alabaster (Source). This peak in the city's development coincided with a period when the usual tables were turned: instead of dominating Canaan, Egypt was ruled by Canaanites called In the 18th and 17th centuries BC, Canaanites settled massively in the eastern Nile delta, eventually seizing dominion over lower Egypt. The Egyptians

called them "Hyksos" ("foreign rulers") and managed to throw them out after a century. The ceramic remains, scarabs and weapons at the Hyksos capital of Avaris (biblical Zoan) are very similar to those found in contemporary Canaanite sites. In the century before this Canaanite conquest of lower Egypt, the major cities in Canaan received massive systems of fortification, including huge earthen ramparts, which gave many of the tells the shape they hold to the present day. Hyksos in Egyptian. During this time, around 1600 BC, Pehel featured a huge fortress-temple with towers (a migdol temple), 32 by 24 meters, exposed by archaeologists from the University of Sydney.

This temple, in its Middle Bronze form, was similar in design to a contemporaneous tower-temple at Shechem. (More about the Pella temple.)

The Egyptians drove out the Hyksos ca. 1550, and in 1468, under Thutmosis III, they broke through the pass at Megiddo, overcoming the mountain barrier and securing the rest of the land. Two of the 14th-century In 1887 a peasant woman at el-Amarna in Egypt discovered 379 clay tablets in the ruins of the Pharaoh Ikhnaton's palace. These included letters in Akkadian from princes of city-states in the land of the Bible, such as Megiddo and Jerusalem, as well as some from Babylonia and Assyria. Written in the 14th century BC, they convey an impression of unstable conditions in the land at that time Amarna letters are from Pihil's king, Mutbaal ("man of Baal"). In Letter 255 he attempts to assure the Pharaoh, Ikhnaton, that he is not interfering with caravans (as well he could, sitting as he did on the vital link road). Around Mutbaal's time the tower-temple was rebuilt in a narrower form. We next hear about Pehel in a stele of Pharaoh Seti I, which was found on Beth Shean and dates from ca. 1300: Pehel had ganged up with Rehov and Hammat Gader to attack Beth Shean, where the Egyptian administration was based, and Seti subdued the revolt.

In the Great Upheaval, as empires collapsed throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt was forced to retreat into its heartland. The year was ca. 1150 BC. Almost all major cities north of Egypt fell to hungry hordes on the move. In the Holy Land, notably, Hazor and Megiddo were destroyed by fire around 1150 BC. Pehel may have suffered a similar fate: thick layers of ash attest that the temple of 1350 was burned in 1150. It was rebuilt around 900 BC, during the Iron Age, to merely a third of the original tower-temple's size, but some twenty additional rooms were discovered next door. These included "complete vessels for holding liquids such as oil or wine and others with baskets still containing the remains of that Middle-eastern favourite chick-peas along with rooms devoted to cloth weaving" (Source). The city was thriving, apparently. To judge from designs on ceramic stands for burning incense, Iron Age Pehel resisted the pressures of the Israelites and remained faithful to the old Canaanite gods, especially Astarte.

Pehel is nowhere mentioned in the Bible. Nearby Jabesh had an important role in the story of Saul, much of which takes place between Jabesh and Beth Shean, but of Pehel between them we hear nothing.

Perhaps by "judiciously paying tribute to any larger political entities that might otherwise have had an excuse to overwhelm it," Pehel "enjoyed considerable political and cultural independence, preserving Canaanite ways after they had disappeared at many other places" (Robert Houston Smith, "Trade in the Life of Pella of the Decapolis," *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, Vol. III, Department of Antiquities, Amman, Jordan, 1987, p. 55.)

## Hellenistic Pella

Pella remained outside the historical record for half a millennium. In 332 BC the region was conquered, along with much else, by short-lived Alexander of Macedon. Making a variation on the old Semitic name Pehel, his successors called the place Pella after the great world-conqueror's birthplace. Like the rest of Cis- and Transjordan, it came under the sway of the Ptolemy was a general of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death, he and his successors controlled Egypt, from which their rule extended to both sides of the Jordan. They lost this extension to the successors of Seleucus, another general of Alexander, around 200 BC. The Seleucus, another of Alexander's generals, held a huge territory including Mesopotamia and Syria. His successors were pushed out of Mesopotamia by the superior cavalries of the Parthians. Wanting to make up for the loss, the Seleucids cast their eyes to the south and took both sides of the Jordan from the Ptolemies. Seleucids took it from them in the late 3d century BC, followed by the rest of Trans- and Cisjordan. From this period at last there are signs of revival. The finds indicate a thriving city. With the whole region under Seleucid rule, Pella was able to exploit its position on the link road:

The availability of coinage meant that, for the first time in their history, the people of Pella did not necessarily have to pay for imports by barter, and hence could extend the range of their trading more easily than previously. With the Greek language to facilitate international trade, by the latter part of the 2nd century BC one-third to one-half of all the ceramic vessels used in the city may have been imported, some from distant places. Wine was shipped in characteristic amphorae from Rhodes and other Greek islands, fine red-slip plates perhaps came from western Asia Minor, black-glaze fish plates were brought from Greece, garum was imported in distinctive bottles from Egypt or perhaps as far away as Italy and Spain, and glass vessels and fictile bowls of Megarian type found their way to Pella from the coastal Levant. Robert Houston Smith, "Trade in the Life of Pella of the Decapolis," Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, Vol. III, Department of Antiquities, Amman, Jordan, 1987, p. 55.

Pella at first weathered the successful Maccabean revolt against the Seleucids in 167 BC, perhaps by paying tribute. In 82 BC, however, it was conquered by the Hasmonean Alexander Jannaeus, who destroyed it, writes Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing The Jewish War, The Antiquities of the Jews and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus because its inhabitants refused to convert to Judaism. Thick layers of ash attest to the razing, both on the main hill and on Tell Husn across the valley.

After the widow of Jannaeus died, two of her sons competed for the kingship. They went before Pompey of Rome, who was in Syria at the time, having just subdued Asia Minor. When Pompey decided in favor of one son, the High Priest Hyrcanus II, the forces of the other son, Aristobolus II, refused to accept the verdict. Pompey entered the land in 63 BC to enforce his decision. This amounted to the first Roman conquest. For Hellenistic cities like Gadara and Gerasa, Pompey's sweep meant liberation from the Hasmonean yoke. Some decades later, Pella revived—no doubt, once more, because of its commercial position near the ford to Scythopolis and the Jezreel Valley. The city was incorporated into the Decapolis.

### A safe haven for Jerusalem's Jewish Christians

To Roman Pella came the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, seeking refuge just before or during the first great Jewish revolt. We have two sources. Eusebius (History of the Church 3:5) reports their arrival:

The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella.

Epiphanius 4th-century Bishop of Salamis and Metropolitan of Cyprus, who wrote the Panarion against heresies, as well as the treatise On Measures and Weights from which the excerpt below is taken|Epiphanius reports this as well as their return to Jerusalem after the revolt was quelled and the city destroyed:

So Aquila [an envoy of Hadrian], while he was in Jerusalem, also saw the disciples of the disciples of the apostles flourishing in the faith and working great signs, healings, and other miracles. For they were such as had come back from the city of Pella to Jerusalem and were living there and teaching. For when the city was about to be taken and destroyed by the Romans, it was revealed in advance to all the disciples by an angel of God that they should remove from the city, as it was going to be completely destroyed. They sojourned as emigrants in Pella, the city above mentioned, in Transjordan. And this city is said to be of the Decapolis. But after the destruction of Jerusalem, when they had returned to Jerusalem, as I have said, they wrought great signs, as I have already said (Source).

Epiphanius' report is important to us, because if the Jewish Christians did indeed return soon, they would more likely have remembered the locations of sites in Jerusalem associated with Jesus, such as Gethsemane, Golgotha and the tomb. A quick return, in other words, would bolster our confidence in the authenticity of traditions that led to the placement of churches two or three centuries later, in the Byzantine period.

S.G.F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*, London : S.P.C.K., 1951|S.G.F. Brandon has questioned the authenticity of this flight to Pella on three grounds. First, if the members of the Jewish church survived the revolt, wouldn't that church's authority have survived as well? Yet there is no record of Jewish Christian influence in the wider church after the revolt. Second, Josephus reports that Pella was destroyed by the Jewish rebels in 66 AD, at the start of the revolt. If the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem were already in Pella, the rebels would have treated them as traitors; if they came later, the city's surviving Gentiles would have rejected them. Third, it would not have been easy to leave Jerusalem, which was guarded by the rebels. Brandon holds that Jerusalem's Christians would have suffered the fate of the city's other Jews: death, slavery or dispersion.

Ray Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988.|Ray Pritz has answered these points:

To the first: The authority of the Jerusalem church was based not chiefly on the reputation of the city but rather on the fact that its leaders—James above all—were personally connected to Jesus. As these died or left and were replaced by others who had not known Jesus, that church's authority declined. During the sojourn in Pella, the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem could still have been known as the Jerusalem Church. There are other examples for such a retention of name. In his *History of the Church IV*, Chs. 5-6|Eusebius presents an unbroken chain of fifteen Jerusalem bishops, all "bishops of the circumcision," starting with James (who died in 62) and ending with the Bar Kokhba Revolt in 135, when Hadrian banished all Jews from the city. The Jerusalem bishopric was then, for the first time, assumed by a Gentile.

To the second point: Josephus indeed *The Jewish War 2:18:1* mentions Pella among the cities that the Jewish rebels "sacked" (the Greek word is *diemeristhentes*) in an outbreak of fury, following the massacre of Jews by Gentiles in Caesarea Maritima. Among the other sacked cities in the list are Gerasa and Scythopolis. About them he gives more information, saying that they continued to exist after the "sacking." In Gerasa, moreover, the Gentiles protected their Jewish fellow-citizens. The word for "sacked" does not, then, mean a total destruction. Indeed, no destruction layer has turned up in the archaeology of Pella for this time (such as we have for the earlier destruction by Alexander Jannaeus). And on the basis of what happened in Gerasa, we should not assume that Pella's Gentiles must have turned against Pella's Jews. Pritz adds that Pella may already have had a Christian community, probably Gentile

like the rest of the city, and such a presence could have led Jerusalem's Jewish Christians to believe that they would be welcomed and sheltered.

To the third point: According to the passage from Eusebius quoted above, the Jerusalem church had been warned by an oracle before the war. One of the events leading up to the war was the defeat of a Roman legion under Cestius Gallus. Many non-aligned Jews feared the consequences, and Josephus [The Jewish War 2:20:1](#) writes that many fled from Jerusalem "like swimmers from a sinking ship." It was only after this that the revolt got organized. Then, indeed, Josephus [War 4:6:1, 4:7:3](#) tells us, the rebels sealed off Jerusalem, but he also says that many people managed to escape.

## Roman Pella (continued)

Vespasian, the general who put down the Jewish revolt, became emperor in 69. His trusted officer Traianus paved a road from Palmyra to the Euphrates, enabling better commerce with Mesopotamia and India. Traianus' son Trajan, emperor from 98 until 117, continued this effort. After annexing the Nabataean kingdom in 106, he built the Via Nova Traiana from the Red Sea to Bostra. It was a different story, however, with the roads from the Jordan Valley eastward. These had to negotiate rough and steep terrain, not conducive to wheels. Here camel caravans proved the answer. [Robert Houston Smith, "Trade in the Life of Pella of the Decapolis," Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, Vol. III, Department of Antiquities, Amman, Jordan, 1987](#) Smith writes (p. 56):

Camels could not, however, be accommodated easily in the limited confines of the mound on which Pella stood. To relieve the crowded commercial facilities the authorities of Pella seem to have constructed a forum-like plaza in the Wadi Jirm, immediately south of the central mound, which would have provided space for caravans and associated activities.

Apart from patches of pavement and deposits of small finds, there is little to see at present of Roman Pella—just a small theater called an Odeon and part of a bathhouse. This may be due to the fact that the city was intensively built over in its next phase, the Byzantine. One coin, minted here in 183-84 AD, shows a massive colonnaded temple on top of the neighboring hill, Tell Husn. Below the temple appear buildings erected on terraces. In the valley between the hills, where the spring still flows, the coin shows a colonnaded street like those we know from other Roman cities. (A picture of the coin.) The same temple appears in coins from 217 AD. As of 2008, however, not one of its stones has been identified.

## Byzantine Pella

In the Byzantine era of the fifth and sixth centuries AD, Pella reached its height. The city expanded to cover nearby hills and valleys. Tell Husn ("mound of the fortress") now received the huge fort on its summit that apparently provided the hill with that name. Its first floor is preserved.

Pella became a bishopric. The remains of three Byzantine churches stand out. In the valley floor at the spring is the

largest, the Civic Complex Church. Its columns, which formed the atrium, have been restored to standing position. The church had three apses, decorated with mosaics and marble.

Above, on the hillside known as Jebel Abu El-Khas, are the remains of the East Church, a more intimate edifice also built in the 5th century. A third basilica, the West Church, is surrounded by the present-day village of Tabaqat Fahl.

## Muslim Fahl

In 635, at a battle in the nearby Jordan Valley, Muslim armies defeated the Byzantines. The victors renamed Pella "Fahl," in accordance with the old Semitic Pehel, and the battle is known by that name. The change of rulers likely brought a commercial decline, for the links to the West were disturbed. On the eastern part of the main hill, archaeologists have found, for this period, a large residential quarter, featuring narrow streets and two-story houses. Animals were kept on the ground floor, while the family slept above.

The faith of the Fahlites shifted to Islam. "The East church went out of use by 700 AD," writes Ben Churcher, "and the West church was converted to be used as stables. The main church at the head of the spring may have continued to function as a place of worship for Pella's small Christian community, although a portion of it was also used as a camel stable."

With the earthquake of 749—the same that destroyed Scythopolis, Tiberias, and much else in the Jordan Valley—Fahl collapsed. A small village may have arisen on the ancient site, but the town center moved north of the main hill. The persistence of the name "Fahl," along with the visible stones, enabled a German geographer named H. Kiepert in 1842 to suggest the identification with Pella.