

Capricorno Alae VII Phrygum ...

(i) Interim report on the fort near Tel Shalem

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A multi-disciplinary research project has been begun in the fields next to the site of Tel Shalem (fig. 1), the locus of important discoveries since the 1970s (primarily the bronze statue of Hadrian). Recent geophysical prospections have detected the clear layout of a Roman fort and possibly even two successive forts. Two short excavation seasons carried out in 2017 and 2019, with a focus on the *principia*, resulted in finds that shed new light on the nature, history and identity of the site.

Tel Shalem lies in the plain of the Jordan Rift Valley *c.*2 km west of the river and close to the territories of two Decapolis cities (it is *c.*10 km southwest of Pella and *c.*12 km south-southeast of Nysa-Scythopolis). It controls a major junction of the road network. The highway which connects to the *Via Maris* running along the coast passes through the Jezreel, Bet She'an and Jordan valleys and, after crossing the Jordan river, continues either northwards to Syria or eastwards to the Trans-Jordan highlands. This road intersects other routes, one of which runs southwards along the Rift Valley past the Sea of Galilee through Scythopolis to Jerusalem by way of Jericho, the other of which runs from Neapolis (Nablus) in Samaria to Pella through Nahal Bezek (Wadi Shubash). Tel Shalem's location close to the Jordan facilitated firm control and monitoring of river crossings.¹ The Roman fort itself lies southwest of Tel Shalem on a low flat



Fig. 1. Map of the Roman province of *Judaea / Syria Palaestina* (M. Heinzelmann; archive AI UoC).

1 The significance of the river crossings near Tel Shalem is attested since Biblical times: the people of Jabesh Gilead may have passed the river while on their way to rescue the condemned bodies of King Saul and his sons from the walls of Bet She'an (1 Samuel 31:11-13); Judah Maccabeus may have passed here in 163 B.C. on his way back to Jerusalem from his military campaign on the other side of the river (1 Macc 5:52); Pompey the Great crossed the river here with his army in 64/63 B.C. while on his way towards Jerusalem (Jos., *Ant.* 14.49; *BJ* 1.133); and on his journey to the East in A.D. 129/130 Hadrian probably entered Judaea at this point, where he was welcomed by the governor Tineus Rufus before visiting Nysa-Scythopolis (K. G. Holum, "Hadrian and Caesarea: an episode in the Romanization of Palestine," *AncW* 23 (1992) 51-61; G. Mazor and A. Najjar, *Bet She'an Archaeological Project 1986-2002. Bet She'an 1: Nysa-Scythopolis. The Caesareum and the Odeum* (IAA Reports 33; Jerusalem 2007). The river crossing near Tel Shalem (Salem) is portrayed on the Madaba Map.