

# Archaeological evidence for the tsunami of January 18, A.D. 749: a chapter in the history of Early Islamic Qâysariyah (Caesarea Maritima)

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In a previous article in this journal, we reported on recently-discovered archaeological and geoarchaeological evidence for two tsunamis which struck the Levantine coast in A.D. 115 and 551, based on fieldwork conducted on the submerged coastal shelf in and around the Roman harbor of Caesarea Maritima; we went on to consider the possible effects of these natural cataclysms on the viability of the port and the fortunes of the city over the *longue durée*. We proposed that the tsunami of 551, in particular, may have had a prolonged and significant effect on Caesarea's ability to function as a premier deep-water anchorage and economic entrepôt, which may in turn have contributed to a broader pattern of economic and demographic decline in the city and region as a whole in the decades leading up to the Persian invasion and subsequent Arab conquest in the first half of the 7th c.<sup>1</sup> Here, we pick up on two points made in that article, expanding on them in light of further physical traces at Caesarea of yet another tsunami, this one associated with the devastating earthquake of January 18, A.D. 749, which left such lasting traces of destruction across the region — nowhere more visibly than in the monumental topography of urban centers such as Scythopolis, Madaba, Damascus, and Caesarea itself.<sup>2</sup>

A great deal of archaeological data recovered from the harbor and its environs, which puzzled past researchers and occasioned much debate about the functionality of the port facilities at various times and about the causes of the harbor's eventual decline, might be explained as the result of tsunamis;<sup>3</sup> indeed, many aspects of the history and topography of the site as interpreted over the course of several decades need to be re-assessed in light of the evidence we now have for recurring marine transgressions resulting from seismically-induced waves.

Life in Caesarea did not come to an end with the political and military upheavals of the early 7th c., as a growing corpus of data shows, though the city was smaller and poorer than it had been in its heyday between the 4th and mid-6th c.<sup>4</sup> One early sign of continuing

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1 Dey and Goodman-Tchernov 2010.

2 For the date, see Tsafirir and Foerster 1992, especially 234; on the location and magnitude of the event, see Marco *et al.* 2003. At Caesarea, the best evidence of destruction attributable to the 749 earthquake comes from Area TPS, on the S side of the Temple Platform, where a thick layer of débris marks the end of the Umayyad occupation of the Late Byzantine bath complex, which was subsequently infilled and built over in the later 8th c.: see Raban and Yankelevitz 2008, 81; Arnon 2008, 85. Another probable effect of the earthquake was the collapse of the octagonal church on the platform: see Stabler and Holum 2008, 30-31. For a closely-contemporary, apparently eyewitness account of the devastation wrought by this earthquake, see the newly-translated *Continuatio of the Samaritan Chronicle of Abû ʿI-Fath* = Levy-Rubin 2002, 56; on the origins and authorship of the text, *ibid.* 10-19.

3 Tsunamis now appear to be the prime force behind the submergence of the breakwaters of the outer harbor beginning in the early 2nd c., which earlier researchers found difficult to explain without invoking seismic slumping (for which there is little or no evidence); in addition to Dey and Goodman-Tchernov 2010, see also Reinhardt *et al.* 2006.

4 The archaeological and textual evidence for the condition of the city from the 7th c. onwards is