

The Issue of Authenticity vs. Tourism: Two Cases of Tentative Archaeological World Heritage Sites in Israel: Caesarea, Bet She'an and Sussita

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The site of Caesarea and the Decapolis sites of Bet She'an/Scythopolis and Sussita/Hippus are two candidates on Israel's tentative list (updated 2011). These three large archaeological sites, all extensively excavated, demonstrate the heyday of the Roman and Byzantine periods in the Levant. All three are National Parks managed by the National Parks Authority (NPA).

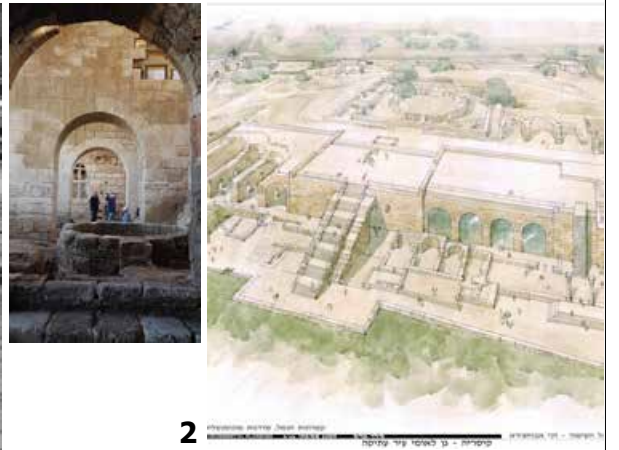
Whilst Caesarea, being attractively located on the northern coast of Israel and easily accessible, is one of the most visited heritage sites in Israel today, with over one million visitors annually (pre-Covid-19 era), the other two sites, located in the eastern regions of the country, are much less visited by both foreign and Israeli tourists alike.

Due to its attractiveness and location, as well as to the fact that a private company – the Rothschild Foundation – invests large sums in its development as a tourist destination, Caesarea witnessed over the years a series of interventions affecting its multi-layered heritage. A visit to Caesarea combines both heritage and leisure (beaches, restaurants, shopping), a combination that has influenced the treatment and the (re)use of the archaeological components of the site.

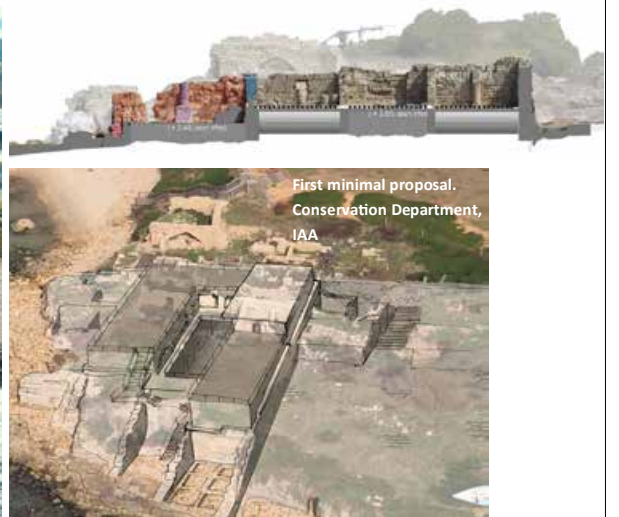
The sites of Bet She'an and Sussita, although both situated in beautiful landscapes, and both exhibiting authentic and impressive ruins, “suffer” from a small number of visitors (Sussita is still an open National Park without an entrance fee), and the NPA struggles to change this fact with different strategies.

Previous interventions at these sites, not all necessarily originating from tourist motivations, have affected their authenticity to some degree. The motivation to increase the number of tourists may affect the authenticity and integrity of these sites, but is this price worth paying in order to increase tourism, which in turn may increase investment in their conservation and maintenance?

This lecture will present the different levels of intervention at Caesarea, Bet She'an and Sussita, and their effect on authenticity. I will discuss the search for a balance between the necessity to increase income as a resource for protecting the heritage site, and the damage that large-scale intervention could inflict on the sites, fundamentally appreciated for their authenticity and their vulnerability.



Caesarea Maritima - the transformation of the ancient port vaults into modern visitor center (2016 - 2019) Architect: Daniel Abu Hazira. Images: courtesy of IAA



Caesarea Maritima - Proposal (A, B) for new touristic facility on and in the ancient port warehouses. Architects: Kimel Ashkolot. Images: courtesy of the IAA