

The Sacred Grove of Scythopolis (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War* II 466–471)

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IN his account of the numerous massacres of Jews which occurred in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war against Rome, Josephus includes in his *Jewish War* (II 466–471) a curious passage concerning the city of Scythopolis:

So far the Jews had been attacking foreigners, but when they raided Scythopolis they found the Jews there opposed to them; for they lined up with the Scythopolitans, ... So they ordered them, if they wished to prove their loyalty and demonstrate their fidelity to their foreign neighbours, to go with their families into the Grove. The Jews carried out the order, suspecting nothing, and for two days the Scythopolitans made no move, thus deceiving them into thinking themselves safe; but on the third night they watched their opportunity when some were off their guard and others asleep, slaughtered them all — more than 13,000 of them — and looted the property of the whole colony.

This was one of the most prominent Hellenic enclaves in Palestine, and during the Maccabean revolt it was considered to be a gentile city (2 *Macc.* 12, 29–31). From the time of Alexander the Great onwards it was known by the Greek name of Scythopolis.¹ Although this name alternated with the ancient Biblical name of Beth Shean and with the name Nysa in Graeco-Roman times, at least in the second century B.C.E. the term habitually used in Hellenised circles was Scythopolis. After coming under Jewish control in the Maccabean period it became an independent territory within the Decapolis under Pompey. The rule of the Maccabees greatly increased the Jewish population, so much so that the second largest Jewish community in Coelestria, after Caesarea, was settled in this city.² There was apparently considerable integration between Jews and gentiles, a fact that would explain the events recounted by Josephus.

When the rebels attacked the territory of this city in 66 C.E., the Jewish community of Scythopolis sided with the pagan population against their

1 A discussion, with bibliography, of the names of this city and their origins can be found in M. Avi-Yonah: Scythopolis, *IEJ* 12 (1962), pp. 123–134, and in B. Lifshitz: Scythopolis. L'histoire, les institutions et les cultes de la ville à l'époque hellénistique et impériale, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.8 (1977), pp. 262–294.

2 Josephus, *War* II 468, gives the figure of 13,000 Jews; in *Life* 26, he simply refers to 'many thousand'.

compatriots. The gentiles, however, afraid to trust the loyalty of the Jews, took them to the sacred grove and there killed them. The parallel account in Josephus's *Life* (26) leaves out the detail of the sacred grove, but not the fact that the gentiles massacred the Jews. Although this is not the place for detailed discussion of the different views of the same events given in Josephus's two works, it is worth noting that his *Life* was intended for a Jewish public, while *Jewish War* was aimed at a pagan audience, which was totally familiar with the concept of a sacred grove and with its religious, mythical and social significance. To move on from this point, what is of importance here is the specific question of the sacred grove and the fact that the massacre took place in it.

Identification of this grove is no simple matter, in view of the heterogeneity of the population and thus of the cults overlapping one another in Scythopolis. The Greek gods who were worshipped in the city are quite well known, and earlier local rituals appear to have survived as well. Zeus, with his Olympian titles, and above all as Zeus *Akraios* and Zeus *Soter*, appears as the principal god of the city. Alongside him, the pantheon of Scythopolis is completed by Tyche and Dionysus, so that here too one finds the trinity seen in other enclaves in southern Levant of Syria in imperial times.³ In fact, Zeus represents the storm god, Tyche the nature goddess and Dionysus a child god.

Both Zeus and Dionysus are candidates to be the gods of the sacred grove of Scythopolis, since both had groves dedicated to them throughout the whole Greek world. For instance, Pausanias mentions the ἄλσος of Dionysus in Lerna (II 37,1).⁴ In Smyrna there is a record of a sacred grove dedicated to Zeus of the Heights, exactly the same title found in the city of Scythopolis.⁵ Although dedication of this ἄλσος to Zeus *Akraios* cannot be completely ruled out, Dionysus better fits what is known about this sacred grove and this city.⁶ Even the name of the city has connections with this god. Scythopolis was also called Nysa,⁷ the name of the nymph to whom Zeus handed Dionysus over, to be reared in the grove of that same

3 H. Seyrig: Note sur les cultes de Scythopolis à l'époque romaine, *Syria* 39 (1962), pp. 207-211, esp. p. 211.

4 G. Casadio: *Storia del culto di Dioniso in Aegolide*, Rome, 1994, pp. 223-325.

5 *Corpus Inscriptionum Graecorum* II, 3146.

6 On the Dionysiac cult, see L.R. Farnell: *The Cults of the Greek States*, V, New York, 1909 (repr. 1977), pp. 85-344.

7 This form can be found in Stephen of Byzantium, s.v. Σκυθόπολις, Παλαιστίνης πόλις, ἡ Νύσσης κοίλης Συρίας, or on some coins from the imperial period. Cf. Lifshitz (above, n. 1), p. 263. According to this scholar, there is not much truth in the opinion of A.H.M. Jones (*The Cities of Eastern Roman Provinces*, Oxford, 1971, p. 250) that the name Nysa had been given to the city by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in honour of his niece. K.J. Rigsby (Seleucid Notes, *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 110 [1980], pp. 233-254) also upholds this view of the origin of the name Nysa for Scythopolis. Rigsby believes that Nysa is a dynastic name and doubts that the name of the city was changed on the strength of some discovery of a local connection with Dionysus's nurse.

name.⁸ Nevertheless, many places, hills and towns in Asia, Africa and even Greece itself claimed to be the site of Nysa, and in all the worship of Dionysus held pride of place, always in relation to the area in which the god was brought up.⁹ The epithet 'Nysaeon' is often used for Bacchus or Dionysus, in memory of his birth and early days.¹⁰ Nysa, etymologically linked with the nymphs, originally belonged to the realm of mythical and fabulous geography, but later, attempts were made to identify it with specific places keen to gain for themselves the hosting of Dionysian cults. In this paper, evidence that this place was situated in Syrian or Palestinian territory will be considered.¹¹ Pliny's *Natural History* (V 18, 74) confirms this tradition of the Dionysian myth: *Scythopolim, antea Nysam, a Libero Patre sepulta nutrice ibi Scythis deductis* ('Scythopolis, formerly Nysa, after Father Liber's nurse, whom he buried there, where a colony of Scythians are settled'). A coin of the time of Gordian III¹² bears the Dionysian scene in which Zeus hands Dionysus over to the nymph Nysa, among other coins showing this god, together with Zeus himself and Astarte.

This same text of Pliny adds another etymological link between Scythopolis and the Greek god, since the name of the city is derived from the Scythians taken there by Dionysus to protect the tomb of the god's wet-nurse, Nysa.¹³ Despite the importance of this deity in the city of Scythopolis, there is only a single clear inscription in his name, a short dedication on the altar of the theatre, dating from the end of the second or beginning of the third century C.E.:¹⁴

[Θ]εῶ Διό-
νυσῶ
Γερμανός

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- 8 Diodorus Siculus, I 15, 6, explains the name Dionysus as coming from the name of his father, Zeus, and his birthplace, Nysa. The same etymology is attested by the grammarian Herodian (ed. Lentz, II 492): Διόνυσος... ἀπὸ τοῦ Διὸς καὶ τῆς Νύσσης τοῦ ὄρους ὀνομάσθαι, ἐπεὶ ἐν τούτῳ ἐγενήθη, ὡς Πίνδαρος, καὶ ἀνετράφη ('Dionysus is named from Zeus and the hill of Nysa, in which he was born, according to Pindar, and reared').
- 9 A. Herrmann: Nysa, *PWRE* 17.2 (1937), Cols. 1628-1661. Like at Scythopolis, we have in these places evidence of sacred groves dedicated to Dionysus, see D.E. Birge: *Sacred Groves in the Ancient Greek World*, Berkeley, 1982, pp. 503-506.
- 10 Diodorus Siculus I 27, 3.
- 11 Xenophon, *Cynegeticus* XI 1, places Nysa in Syria.
- 12 G.F. Hill: *British Museum. Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine (Galilee, Samaria, and Judaea)*, London, 1914, p. 77, No. 11, mentioned, among other numismatic items, by Seyrig (above, n. 3), p. 210. See also T. Ganschow: Nysa II-Skythopolis, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, VIII. 1, Supplementum, Zurich — Düsseldorf, 1997, pp. 906-907.
- 13 Syncellus, I, 405, explains the name by the settling of Scythians in this city during their invasion of Palestine in the eighth century B.C.E.
- 14 B. Lifshitz: Notes d'épigraphie grecque. 3. Autel de Dionysos au théâtre de Skythopolis (Beisan) en Palestine, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 6 (1970), p. 62.

Mention of Dionysus at such a site must, moreover, not be taken as exclusive, since it is a theatre, the customary place for all things Dionysian. Of more interest is an epigraphic record published in 1961,¹⁵ in which there is a dedication to Zeus *Bacchus*:

[Αγαθήι τύ]χηι ἔτους γ[.]
 []τωι Διὶ Βάκχ[ωι]
 []Αἴας Νικο[.].
 []λινου κατ' [εὐχ]
 [ἦν] ναὸν ἐκ τ[ῶν]
 [ιδίων] ἀνέθηκ[εν]

The identification of Zeus with Bacchus or with Dionysus is not frequent, but this is not the only case of which there is evidence. In the Orphic Fragments Nos. 236 and 239,¹⁶ the name Zeus-Dionysus or Zeus-Bacchus appears in an epigram¹⁷ and in one of the oracles of Claros.¹⁸ Dedication to a twin divinity, the result of a certain level of syncretism, is far from being an isolated occurrence in the Greek epigraphy of Palestine: an inscription found in Pella, doubtless originating on a column of the Bouleuterion, alludes to Zeus-Ares.¹⁹ In an epigram from Caesarea Panias, Zeus is identified with Pan, and the joint divinity is designated by the name of Diopan.²⁰ These designations point to the superimposition of the cult of Zeus upon other minor or local deities, in line with the striking social and political transformations in this area.²¹ The designation Bacchus applied to Zeus in Scythopolis might be interpreted in the same way. It is known that during the time of the Ptolemies the worship of Dionysus was encouraged, while later, with the arrival of the Seleucids, Zeus came to take pride of place in the religion of the enclave. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to assume the superimposition of a new cult upon an older, more traditional one. However, the inscription mentioned is controversial, and Seyrig

15 *Idem*, *Der Kult des Zeus Akraios und des Zeus Bakchos in Beisan (Skythopolis)*, *ZDPV* 77 (1961), p. 189; *idem*, in *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 20 (1964), No. 457.

16 Collected in O. Kern: *Ophicorum Fragmenta*, Dublin — Zurich, 1972.

17 G. Kaibel: *Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus conlecta*, Berlin, 1878 (repr. 1965), No. 22.

18 M. Fränkel: *Die Inschriften von Pergamon*, Berlin, 1959–1961, No. 324; J. Rodríguez Somolinos: *Los oráculos de Claros y Didima. Edición y comentario*, Madrid, 1991, No. 12.32.

19 *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 19 (1963), No. 908 and *ibid.* 41 (1991), No. 1566.

20 Kaibel (above, n. 17), No. 827.

21 As an example of the syncretism of Zeus with other divinities in the area, several inscriptions have been found in the Nabataean city of Oboda, which are dedicated to Zeus Oboda, an instance of worship of a local Zeus; the god of the city was identified with one or another of the Arab kings called Oboda, *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 28 (1978), Nos. 1370–1373.

believes that the designation Bacchus is not correctly associated with Zeus, but should rather be attached to the name of the dedicator.²² According to Tcherikover,²³ the Greek settlement which occupied Scythopolis under the Ptolemies put itself under the protection of Dionysus, who held in the Ptolemaic pantheon a place parallel to that of Zeus or Apollo in the Seleucid kingdom,²⁴ since Dionysus was seen as the divine ancestor of the Ptolemies and Apollo of the Seleucids.²⁵ In fact, the name of Nysa would have been traced rather to some learned myth fabricated in the third century B.C.E. under Ptolemaic rule. Excavations have brought to light the remains of a possible temple of Dionysus or Tyche at the foot of the tell, and also figurines of the god and of the nymphs in one of the necropolis areas.²⁶

The geography of sacred groves is very varied, and there are instances of them in the centre of a city, on the outskirts, in the countryside, next to a river, or on a hill,²⁷ as in the case of Scythopolis. It does not even have to be a grove in the strict sense of the word, but can be merely a natural space surrounding a temple. The origin and location of such natural spaces is not easy to determine in Scythopolis, and several groves might have existed in view of the heterogeneity of the cults in the city. The Greek term ἄλσος, used by Flavius Josephus, like *lucus* in Latin, covers a range of situations whose only common denominator is their relationship to a specific divinity. It is of interest to note that Philo of Alexandria mentions the absence of an ἄλσος in the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem.²⁸ In a passage attributed by Josephus to Hecateus of Abdera it is expressly stated that the temple had no sacred plant or shrub.²⁹ The ἄλσος thus acquired the status of an obvious symbol of paganism, which was to be avoided.³⁰ In fact, the cult object often

22 Seyrig (above, n. 3), p. 210.

23 V. Tcherikover: *Die hellenistischen Stadtgründungen*, Leipzig, 1927, p. 72.

24 Rigsby (above, n. 7), p. 239.

25 See, generally, J. Tondriau: Dionysos, dieu royal. Du Bacchos taumorphe primitif aux souverains hellénistiques, *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves* 12 (1952) (= *Mélanges H. Gregoire* IV), pp. 441-466; *idem*, La dynastie ptolémaïque et la religion dionysiaque, *Chronique d'Égypte* 50 (1950), pp. 283-316.

26 A. Rowe: *The Topography and History of Beth-Shean (Publications of the Palestine Section of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, I)*, Philadelphia, 1930, p. 44; F.-M. Abel: *Géographie de la Palestine*, II, Paris, 1938, pp. 280-281; and Lifshitz (above, n. 1), pp. 273-275; *NEAEHL* 1, pp. 214-235, esp. p. 227.

27 For example, the sanctuary and grove of Poseidon in Tricolonos (Pausanias VIII 35, 6).

28 *De Specialibus Legibus* I 74.

29 *Contra Apionem*, ed. B. Niese, Berlin, 1885, repr. 1955, I 199: ... ἄγαλμα δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲ ἀνάθημα τὸ παράπαν οὐδὲ φύτευμα παντελῶς οὐδὲν οὖον ἀλσῶδες ἢ τι τοιοῦτον ('There is no statue or any dedication at all, and absolutely no plant such as a grove or something of that sort').

30 It appears in this light in Josephus, *Ant.* IV 192, in the condemnation of the people of Canaan by Moses.

referred to as *ašerah*, a sacred pillar or artefact in arborial form,³¹ was the symbol of the Canaanite goddess of fertility and love (who, as explained above, is one of the divinities lying behind the worship of Tyche in a number of cities in Phoenician Syria), and the local cult of Dionysus has been traced to a pre-Greek origin in the Canaanite *Mekal*, both as vegetation gods.³²

Strabo's *Geography* points to the continued existence of sacred groves, dedicated to Greek deities, in a wide range of places, from North Africa to India, and covering both Ethiopia and Syria. In the area under consideration here, mention is made of the ἄλλος of Apollo and Artemis in Daphne, near Antioch (XVI 2, 6, 2) and of Aesculapius between Beirut and Sidon (XVI 2, 22, 6). Eusebius of Caesarea³³ describes the grove and temple of Aphrodite in Aphaca on the slopes of Mount Lebanon, well known because of the practice of prostitution as a sacred rite that took place there. It is certainly the cult of Dionysus which reached furthest in the development of sacred groves outside strictly Greek territory.³⁴ In Lucian there is a description of a grove in India with a fence, ivy, vines and abundant shade, where Dionysus was worshipped in an annual festival.³⁵

In Scythopolis the ἄλλος might be linked with the myth of the foundation of the sanctuary and the worship of Dionysus. The infancy of this god took place in natural surroundings under the guidance of a nymph. Greek mythology recounts how Zeus turned Dionysus into a young goat in order to prevent Hera from recognising him, and sent him, with the aid of Hermes, to a place called Nysa, to be reared by the nymphs. The latter were rewarded for this action by being turned into stars in the constellation of the Hyades, the names and number of which vary considerably from one mythological source to another.³⁶ Once grown up, Dionysus discovers the vine in this same place and begins his well-known journeys through Egypt, Syria and India. In this context, the sacred grove is usually a privileged location for the birth and for the infancy of gods and heroes.³⁷ The divinities related to plants or animals are generally a recurrent theme in connection with sacred

31 The Greek term ἄλλος at times assumes this sense of fence, of space marked off by stakes or posts, as a synonym of περίβολος. This is true for the boundary stones surrounding the sanctuary of Aesculapius in Epidaurus (Pausanias, II 27, 1) and for the stone wall running around the temple of Despoina in Arcadia (Pausanias, VIII 37, 10).

32 See discussion in H.O. Thompson: *Mekal the God of Beth-Shan*, Leiden, 1970.

33 *De vita Constantini* III 55.

34 Birge (above, n. 9), pp. 36–37.

35 *Bacchus* 6.

36 Herodotus II 146; *Homeric Hymns* I fr.1; *Homeric Hymns* XXVI 5; Apollodorus II 4, 3; Diodorus II 59, 2; III 64, 5; III 65, 7; III 66, 3. Hyginus, *Astronomica* II 21, includes the nymphs of Nysa among the children of Oceanus.

37 Diodorus Siculus (IV 84, 2) includes the story of the birth of Daphnis, daughter of Hermes and a nymph, in a grove in Sicily, abundant in laurel trees.

groves.³⁸ The recent study by Birge supports this view, although there are some who would disagree.³⁹ The case of Scythopolis might be an example of this kind: the mythical presence of a kid and a nymph in the bringing up of the god Dionysus in natural surroundings and the direct relationship with features of the fertility, such as the trees.⁴⁰ The fifth-century B.C.E. historian and genealogist Pherecydes of Athens, in one of his texts about Dionysus, actually identifies the name Nysa with the word designating 'tree'. This is an important piece of evidence, since it implies a link between Dionysus, tree worship and the origin of the sacred grove in this city, called Nysa:⁴¹

εὐεργετεῖν φησι τὸν Διόνυσον καὶ * * δοῦναι ἀνθρώποις. δηλοῖ δὲ ὁ Φερεκύδης καὶ μετ' ἐκεῖνον Ἀντίοχος λέγοντες καὶ διὰ τοῦτο κεκλήσθαι Διόνυσον ὡς ἐκ Διὸς ἐς νύσας ῥέοντα. νύσας γάρ, φησιν, ἐκάλουν τὰ δένδρα.

'He says that Dionysus was a benefactor and ... gave to men. And Pherecydes declares and after him Antiochus, saying that Dionysus was named on account of this [fact] that he flowed from Zeus into *nysas*. For, he says, they call the trees *nysas*.

Perhaps Nysa means tree,⁴² or a specific kind of tree. Nonetheless, Greek mythology presents the vine and bunches of grapes as the most characteristic symbol of the god and situates the discovery and processing of this fruit in Nysa, whether this is the name of a city or that of a hill given to it because of the presence and activities of a nymph of the same name who protects it.⁴³

38 Pliny, *Natural History* XII 3-5, states that these were the dwelling place of such divinities prior to the construction of temples and sanctuaries. Quintus of Smyrna (II 588), for instance, mentions the beautiful nymphs' grove which surrounded the tomb of Memnon beside the river Aesepus.

39 Birge (above, n. 9). Cf. F. Graf: Bois sacrés et oracles en Asie Mineure, in *Les bois sacrés*, Naples, 1993, pp. 23-29.

40 On the connection of Dionysus with features of the fertility of plants and animals, see Farnell (above, n. 6), pp. 118-125; T. Mantero: *Radiografia di un dio. Dioniso, dio della vegetazione*, Geneva, 1975; and Birge (above, n. 9), pp. 36-37, with bibliography.

41 F. Jacoby: *Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, Leiden, 1957 (repr. 1968), IA, No. 3, fr. 178.

42 J. Brossé (*Mythologie des arbres*, Paris, 1989, p. 334, No. 38) attempts to solve the enigma of the myth by means of an etymological interpretation of the names of the nymphs of the place: Nysa means 'tree', and the other Hyades, Macris, Erato and Bacche also refer to the worship of trees. Macris, 'tall', he sees as an adjective typically applied to mountains and trees; Bromia, 'noisy', similar to the epithet Βρομιος applied to Dionysus and referring to the rustle of leaves; and Bacche, 'bacchant'.

43 Diodorus Siculus III 70, 7-8.

As stated above, the cult of Dionysus is not limited to Scythopolis, as there were a great number of places in Syria and Palestine where he was worshipped. In the region of Batanea and in other Hellenised Nabataean areas, the cult of Dionysus was greatly enhanced by the fact that the Greeks identified him with the Arab god Dusares.⁴⁴ It is also noteworthy that in the Galilean city of Sepphoris or Diocaesarea, Dionysian scenes were still being included in a number of mosaics in the third century C.E.⁴⁵

To conclude, it should be noted that the story told by Flavius Josephus is a fairly common theme in Greek literature. In a context of war, conquest and destruction, impiety and violence often appear in the form of the violation and burning of sanctuaries in general and of sacred groves in particular. Herodotus⁴⁶ describes how Cleomenes, during his invasion of Eleusis, cut down the grove of the gods and did not spare those who had taken refuge in their temple in Argos, but rather had their throats cut and their sacred grove burnt.⁴⁷ From early times the right of ἀσυλία (unviolability) had an important part to play in temples and their related groves. Throughout Greek and Roman history, there are famous sanctuaries which confer a certain asylum on those who take shelter in them when menaced by warfare.⁴⁸ Plutarch, writing of pirate activities during the Roman civil wars, lists a number of temples which had previously been considered inviolable places of asylum and which now had been sacked by these freebooters.⁴⁹ Among them were the temples of Hera in Lacinia, Aesculapius in Epidaurus, and of Apollo in Claros and Didyma.⁵⁰ The *lucus* of Diana Nemorensis in Rome was also well known as a

44 Herodotus III 8; Arrian, *Anabasis* VII 20 and Strabo XVI 1, 11. Antimachus the Colophonian, quoted by Diodorus Siculus (III 65, 7), locates the confrontation between Dionysus and King Lycurgus in an Arabian Nysa.

45 *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 38 (1988), No. 1585, with bibliography.

46 Herodotus VI 75.

47 Other incidents of this sort can be found in Herodotus VI 78, VII 8, 30, in Polybius XVI 1, 6 and in Dio Cassius LIV 24, 5.

48 P. Gauthier: *Symbola. Les étrangers et la justice dans les cités grecques*, Nancy, 1972, pp. 226–228; B. Jordan and J. Perlin: On the Protection of Sacred Groves, in K.J. Rigsby (ed.): *Studies Presented to Sterling Dow*, Durham, 1984, pp. 153–159. Comments on the regulation of the right of asylum in specific places and periods may be found in M. Ciccio: *Guerre, στάσεις e ἀσυλία nella Grecia del V secolo a.C.*, in M. Sordi: *I santuari e la guerra nel mondo classico*, Milan, 1984, pp. 132–141; A. Mastrocinque: *Città sacre e asyilia alla fine della guerra tra Roma e Antioco III*, *ibid.*, pp. 142–163; G.G. Belloni: *Asyilia e santuari greci dell'Asia Minore al tempo di Tiberio*, *ibid.*, pp. 164–180; and M. Sordi: *Il santuario di Olimpia e la guerra d'Elide*, *ibid.*, pp. 20–30.

49 *Pompeius* 24

50 Consider also the instance of the sacred grove of Hebe in Phlius, mentioned by Pausanias (II 13, 4), where freedom was granted to supplicants coming here and the pardoned criminals deposited their chains on the trees.

place of refuge and asylum.⁵¹ The Greek city of Scythopolis also had a grove with these functions: it was there that the Jews were taken for their protection, although in the end the sacred impunity of the place was overturned and we find the oft-repeated scene of the killing of people who had sought refuge in the grove. On this occasion, moreover, it should be borne in mind that the Jewish community in Scythopolis was a foreign minority group, despite the degree of integration with the dominant gentile population that had been achieved.

It seems appropriate at this point to recapitulate the conclusions of this work. In the first century C.E. the Hellenised city of Scythopolis had a grove sacred to Dionysus which was one of the most prominent cult sites for this god in Syrian and Palestinian territory. Its location in this city might be justified by the mythological origins of Dionysian worship, since Scythopolis, called also Nysa, was in myth the place where Dionysus was reared and initiated, and the fact that this is a ἄλλος confirms the connection between cult and myth. The natural surroundings, with trees, fertility and the nymphs as major elements, rendered this city and the hill of Nysa a privileged area in the geography of Dionysus ritual and myth outside truly Greek territory. Doubtless the site was originally related to the ancient worship of a Canaanite-Phoenician deity with whom a tradition of sacred groves was associated. The penetration of Hellenism into Syria and Palestine had the effect of transforming — and even ousting — the native cults to the extent of attaining one of the highest degrees of symbiosis reached by Greek religion in its expansion through the Orient.

51 D. van Berchem: *Trois cas d'asylie archaïque*, *Museum Helveticum* 17 (1960), pp. 21–23; and G. Freyburger: *Le droit d'asile à Rome*, *Les Études Classiques* 60 (1992), pp. 139–151.