

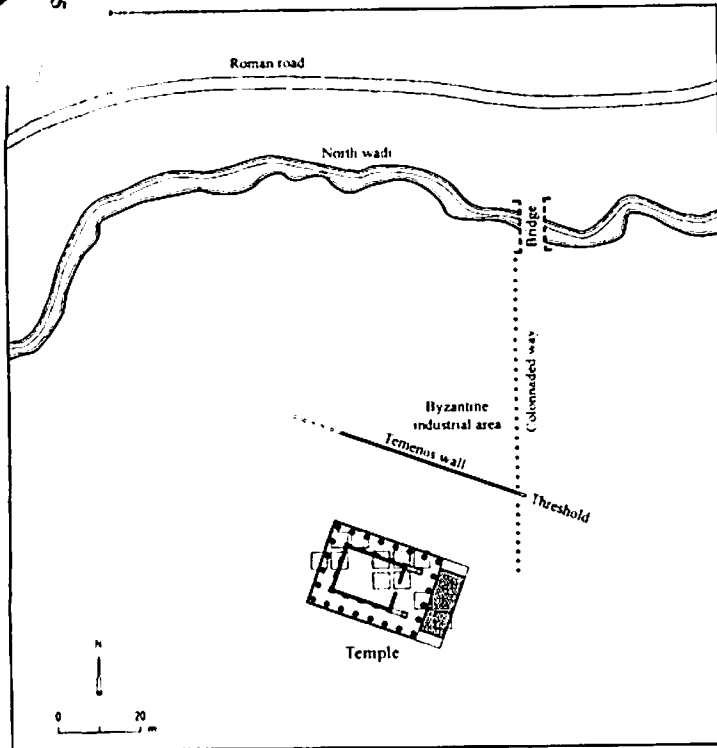
## OMRIT, ḤORVAT

### INTRODUCTION

Ḥorvat Omrit is located in the foothills of the Hermon Range, 4 km southwest of Banias and east of the modern city of Qiryat Shemona. It stood near the crossroads of the ancient Tyre-Damascus and Scythopolis-Damascus routes, and on the border of Galilee and Iturea. Topographically, it is situated on the eastern side of the Hula Valley, where the terrain rises toward the Hermon, several kilometers southwest of the Damascus Pass. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Omrit was part of the disputed and somewhat unruly region of Iturea (Strabo *Geog.* 16.2, 18). The temple at Omrit may have marked the entrance into Iturea or the related region

of Banias. This rugged, mountainous area changed hands several times during the first century BCE. After the Battle of Actium, Augustus handed it over to Herod, who was charged with restoring order to it. With his characteristic brutal hand and equally audacious building program, Herod brought the region under his and Augustus' control (Josephus, *Antiq.* XV, 344).

Archaeological excavations began at Ḥorvat Omrit in 1999, under the direction of J. A. Overman, with the support of Macalester College of St. Paul, Minnesota. A preliminary probe of the area had been conducted in 1974 by a team headed by G. Foerster of the Hebrew University of



*Horvat Omrit. plan of the site.*

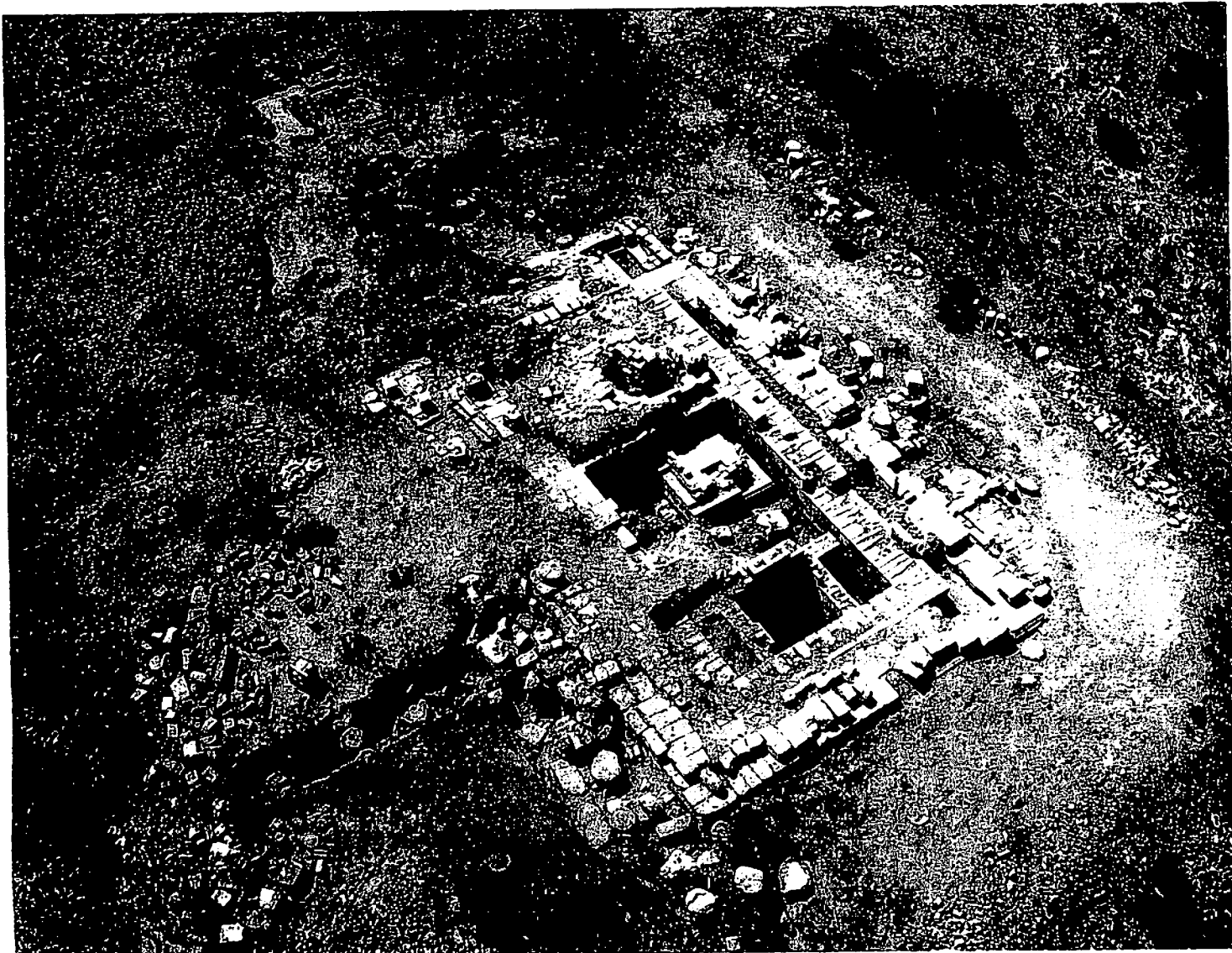
Jerusalem. Distinguishable on the site were substantial structures with numerous architectural features still standing, some in situ, as well as an extensive complex with multiple buildings, a colonnaded way, and an ornate, extremely well-preserved temple-like building. Five seasons of excavations have been completed so far, focusing primarily on the temple complex.

### EXCAVATION RESULTS

During the Early Roman period a road that was part of the Tyre-Damascus route ran just north of Omrit and apparently entered its civic compound by crossing a bridge over the northern wadi bordering the complex. A colonnaded way ran north-south through the compound, via the threshold leading to the entrance of the temple buildings, which faced east. Two distinct phases of the Roman period may be distinguished in the temple, the first (temple I) dating to the reign of Herod and the second (temple II) to the late first or early second century CE, very likely the reign of Trajan. Omrit was a dramatic imperial temple complex, representing a significant Roman imperial architectural presence in northern Galilee and the Hermon region. The complex parallels other significant imperial cult sites found elsewhere across the early empire.

Both temple podiums are nearly intact, with many of the original architectural features still present on the site, some in situ. A fill of 1.5 m separates the two. Numerous fragments of the architrave, cornices, Corinthian capitals and pilasters, and fresco and marble material were uncovered. The construction of two temples from two distinct, very well-preserved phases, one inside the other, is virtually unique across the early empire.

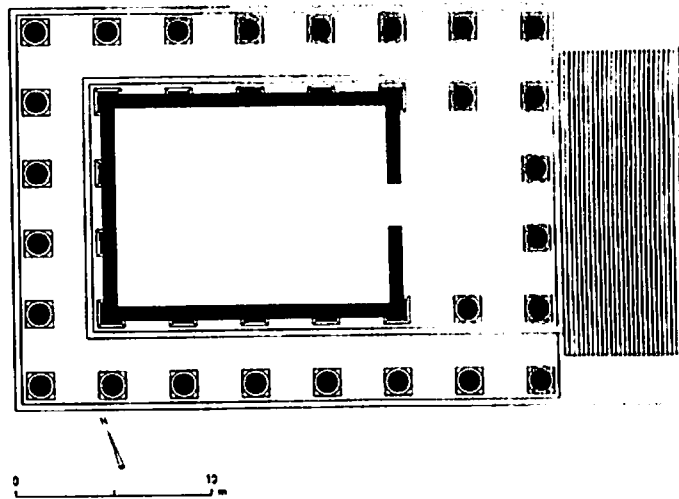
**THE EARLY SHRINE.** In the 2004 season an ornate shrine was uncovered, having been buried within the cella area of temple I. This shrine represents the earliest phase of occupation at Omrit. The shrine is frescoed around the exterior of the podium. Like the later two phases of the Omrit temple, it has a lower and upper course molding and contains two



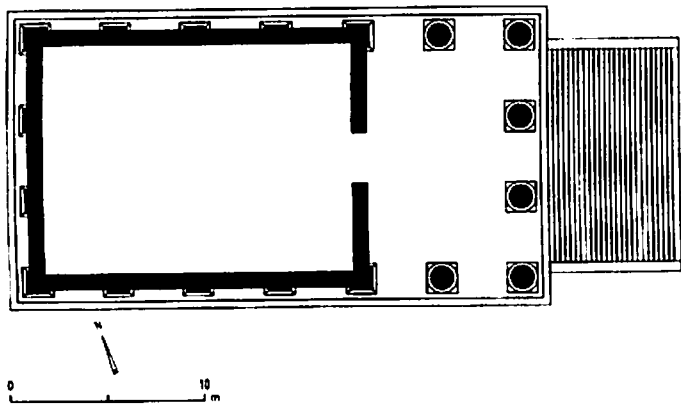
*View of the temple complex*

subterranean chambers. The presence of the smaller but very significant shrine may account for the establishment of the Omrit temple complex in the Early Roman period. Work will continue in the temple cells and early shrine areas.

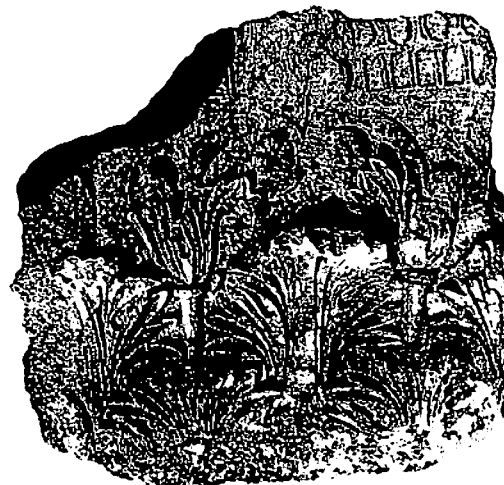
**TEMPLE I.** Temple I, measuring 25.22 by 13.16 m, is an Augusteum type of temple, prostyle-tetrastyle in plan. It was c. 22 m high from surface level to the top of the roof. The base of its podium, uncovered within the podium of temple II, is situated at a depth of 4 m. It is a dry construction of headers and stretchers with a rubble core, its ashlar precisely, if not perfectly, fitted. It had extremely well-preserved upper and lower course molding and a single entrance, and was highly ornate and decorative. This style of imperial cult building, notably very tall and narrow, developed from about 25 BCE onward and was adopted throughout the empire, especially in the East Greek settlements. Herod himself played a major role in promoting and establishing the form and architectural style, and Omrit is justifiably viewed as another of Herod's building projects devoted to the emperor. Others include the temples at Samaria-Sebaste and Caesarea Maritima. This style of imperial temple has also been recovered in Pula and Narona in ancient Istria, in southern Gaul, and in Asia Minor. With the imperial cult constituting one of the very few means for consolidating the vast Roman Empire, it is not surprising that an architectural form devoted solely to this ritual and ideology would develop.



Temple II, early second century CE.



Temple I, late first century BCE.



Corinthian capital.

A temple built by Herod closely resembling temple I at Omrit appears on a coin minted by Herod's son Philip, commemorating his establishment of a city in the region. He named it Caesarea Philippi, following the lead of his father. The coin represents a prostyle-tetrastyle temple on a podium, recalling Herod's support for and by Augustus. The temple is mentioned by Josephus (*Antiq.* XV, 363; *War* I, 404), who states that Herod consecrated a temple of white stone (he also uses the term marble) to Caesar in the region. Temple I dates to exactly the same period that such a temple would have been erected by Herod. Since it resembles the Augusteum temples established throughout the empire, corresponds to the form of the temple replicated on the coin, and is prominently situated along major trade routes in the region of Baniyas, the Omrit temple I is so far the best candidate for Herod's temple built in honor of Augustus in the Hermon or northern Hula region.

**TEMPLE II.** Temple II was a larger structure, peripteral in plan. Its podium includes upper and lower course molding; a walking surface of large, rectangular-cut limestone pavers; as well as highly ornate, coffered, cornice blocks with rosette inlays, egg-and-dart molding, and precisely fashioned volutes. The podium is 2.5 m high from the walking surface to the upper course molding. The temple dates to no later than 115 CE, on the basis of the style of the Corinthian capitals and of the pottery uncovered at its base, between the podiums at the bottom of the fill. Three fragments of tryglyphs were found in the fill of the temple cella and identified as belonging to the older, Doric order. A large quantity of very well-preserved fragments of frescoes, blocks, and whole sections of walls from the interior space of the temple were preserved. The earliest remains of frescoes date to 400–50 BCE, while a second style belongs to the so-called early Herodian phase, dating to approximately 20 BCE.

**INSCRIPTIONS AND ORNAMENT.** Several fragments of Greek inscriptions were uncovered at Omrit. One marble inscription reads "Aphro," almost certainly Aphrodite. Another reads "Autokra...ureliu.," which should probably be restored as "Autokrator" and "Aurelius." Among the marble reliefs found, one features a priest bearing a cornucopia standing between two fluted columns in the temple. A distinctive marble sculptured fragment from the frieze depicts a slain deer still within the grasp of its predator. Another striking marble piece appears to be a

sphinx or griffin, which adorned an entrance to part of the temple. Several large fragments of altars have been found and reconstructed. The frescoed rooms and large segments of frescoes appear in red-black, with yellow, beige, and faux marble. An unusual discovery was plaster painted in faux marble style on the outer wall of the podium of temple I, a large section of which was found intact along its southwestern corner.

**BYZANTINE STRUCTURES AND DECLINE.** In the Byzantine period an industrial area was located north of the Roman period temples. A building was also constructed where the temples had previously stood; it utilized Roman period building materials. This building may have been a chapel, as is indicated by the discovery of two Byzantine basalt crosses in relief, though not in situ. The Byzantine phase of the site appears to have been quite extensive, the scene of a vibrant trade and commercial life. Many coins, a number imperial, date from this period. The site collapsed as a result of at least two severe earthquakes. The reuse of rubble, the nature of the collapse, and the interval between collapses is instructive. The first earthquake, which doubtless contributed to the decline of the Roman temple complex, was probably the 363 CE earthquake that affected so much of the Galilee and Jordan River valley. A second earthquake in the middle of the eighth century CE appears to have brought about the final destruction of the site and its abandonment. A brief period of transient occupation occurred in the thirteenth century CE, the remains of which include several modest to crude homes, a shared courtyard space, some *tabuns*, and copious bone and charcoal material.

J. ANDREW OVERMAN

G. Foerster, *Archaeological Newsletter* 4 (1978), 65–66; M. L. Fischer, *Das Korinthische Kapitell am Heiligtum Israel in der hellenistischen und römischen Periode. Studien zur Geschichte der Baukunst am Nebo-Orten, Mainz am Rhein* 1990; *BAR* 29:1 (2003), 57; J. A. Overman (et al.), *ibid.* 29:1 (2003), 69–70; *ibid.*, *When Judaism and Christianity Began* (A. J. Saldarini, Fest., *Supplies to the Journal for the Study of Judaism* 85; eds. D. Harrington et al.), Leiden 2003; *id.*, *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Landesarchiv-Instituts für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes* 10 (2004), 192–194.