

From Roman temple to Byzantine church: a preliminary report on Sepphoris in transition

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Extensive excavations at several sites throughout Israel in the last quarter-century, some of which continue today, have illuminated many aspects of the Roman city in ancient Palestine — its urban plan, its physical appearance, its monumental construction and the effect of later architectural developments — including those that mark the transition from the Roman to Early Byzantine period. The architecture, art and artifacts found at Sepphoris, the capital of the Galilee for much of antiquity, shed light on the daily life and activities of the inhabitants, as they have in Scythopolis, Caesarea Maritima and Neapolis.

Sepphoris in the period of the Second Temple, constructed on a hill and slope, was a settlement characterized by simple buildings entirely lacking in monumentality.¹ Only years later, after the suppression of the Great Revolt against Rome, was the city, owing to its pro-Roman stance, transformed from a Galilean town into a prominent Roman *polis*. Excavations conducted on the plateau east of the hill indicate that by the end of the 1st or early 2nd c. the city had expanded in this direction, boasting an impressive grid of streets, with a colonnaded *cardo* and *decumanus* intersecting at its centre (fig. 1). Some of the new streets in the eastern district were probably extensions of previously existing routes that continued to run beyond the city limits, connecting Sepphoris with its agricultural hinterland and with major inter-urban roads. Public buildings and private dwellings were erected throughout the Roman city, the former including a forum, bathhouses, a theatre and a monumental building identified as a library or an archive.² The rebuilding of Sepphoris as a Roman *polis* at the end of the 1st or beginning of the 2nd c. attests to the contemporary changes taking place elsewhere in the Galilee vis-à-vis Rome and its culture, changes that transformed Sepphoris into a city no different from others that flourished in Palestine in the same period.

Before the Great Revolt, Sepphoris, like the rest of the Galilee, was inhabited by Jews,³ though it is possible that the site had a gentile population as well, the size of which is difficult to determine at this stage of the research.⁴ Rabbi Yossi ben Halafta, a prominent

* All dates are A.D.

1 Z. Weiss, "Josephus and archaeology on the cities of the Galilee," in Z. Rodgers (ed.), *Making history: Josephus and historical method* (Journal for the Study of Judaism Suppl. 110, 2007) 387-414.

2 See E. Netzer and Z. Weiss, *Zippori* (Jerusalem 1994); Z. Weiss and E. Netzer, "The Hebrew University excavations at Sepphoris," *Qadmoniot* 113 (1997) 2-21 [Hebrew]; R. M. Nagy *et al.* (edd.), *Sepphoris in Galilee: crosscurrents of culture* (Raleigh, NC 1996); *id.*, "Architectural development of Sepphoris during the Roman and Byzantine periods," in D. R. Edwards and C. T. McCollough (edd.), *Archaeology and the Galilee: texts and contexts in the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 143, 1997) 117-30. On the relationship between private and public building in ancient Sepphoris, see Z. Weiss, "Private architecture in the public sphere: urban dwellings in Roman and Byzantine Sepphoris," in K. Galor and T. Waliszewski (edd.), *From Antioch to Alexandria: recent studies in domestic architecture* (Warsaw 2007) 125-36.

3 Jos., *Bell* 3.35-39.

4 E. M. Meyers, "Jesus and his Galilean context," in Edwards and McCollough (supra n.2) 63-64. On the gentile population in the cities of the Galilee, see S. Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the gospels* (Dublin 1988) 167-75. R. A. Horsley maintains, albeit unconvincingly, that on the eve of the