Archaeology of Galilee and the historical context of Jesus

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the cultural ethos of Galilee. Much of the current discussion is still dominated by essentialist (theological) terms, and an effort is made to promote the use of historical and archaeological evidence and concepts. Both ‘hellenised’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ are inappropriate descriptions for the major centres of Galilee. Far from suggesting cultural continuity, the evidence for the time of Jesus indicates sustained tension and even overt conflict between cities and the Galilean peasantry.

1 INTRODUCTION
Much of the recent debate about the historical Jesus hinges on assessment of the cultural ethos of Galilee. As recently as 1980—prior both to recent archaeological explorations and to the application of comparative sociological analysis to ancient Palestine—Sean Freyne could still paint a picture of Galilee reminiscent of the Galilean idyll of Ernest Renan. Freyne concluded that the social world of Galilee consisted primarily of peasant villages, with cities lying on the perimeter.

Their life style and occupation did not bring them into any kind of meaningful contact with the real agents for social change.... Horizons were limited because the rhythm of life was determined by the seasons, and so there was no sense of unrest of frustration (Freyne 1980:195).

Even after reviewing the intervening archaeological explorations in Galilee, he reaffirmed basically the same sketch of ‘an essentially rural Galilee’ (1988:145).

Almost simultaneously in understandable excitement over recent archaeological explorations at Sepphoris, other interpreters sketched an opposing picture. Lower Galilee, at least, was highly urbanised, as much so as anywhere else in the Roman empire (Overman 1988; Edwards 1988)! Scholars eager for evidence to support their interpretation of Jesus as a sage, even a Cynic or Cynic-like sage, quickly appropriated the newly discovered Galilee (Mack 1988; Crossan 1991). Ironically, what had been almost a passing comment by archaeologist Eric Meyers a decade previously, that ‘the great urban centers’ had mediated a ‘cosmopolitan atmosphere’ to the villages of Lower
Galilee (1979:697-98), became the basis for positing a highly Hellenised culture, even Cynic philosophy, as the context in which Jesus taught an unconventional wisdom. The timing of the discovery of a cosmopolitan Galilee as a context for Jesus the sage could not have been better. Jesus scholars had only recently determined that the supposedly 'eschatological' or 'apocalyptic' Jesus of modern scholarly construction was a secondary stratum in the Jesus-tradition (Borg 1986; Kloppenborg 1987; Mack 1988). Suddenly the previous historical basis for understanding Jesus, the Israelite (biblical) tradition which he appeared to presuppose, was viewed as a secondary layer of interpretation to the Cynic-like sage who spoke in sapiential aphorisms.

In contrast to previous treatments of Jesus, at least these recent studies were taking note of archaeological reports. Few studies in the 1980’s had yet done so. Sanders (1985) made no use of archaeology; even the issue of social conflict had not led researchers into archaeology (such as Horsley 1987; Oakman 1986, on the other hand, draws more substantively on archaeology). The dialogue, however, has barely begun. And some ironies are immediately evident, such as textual scholars borrowing archaeological reports which are, in turn, based primarily on previous textual studies. For example, Crossan makes the link crucial to his case between pan-Mediterranean culture and Jesus by means of a reconstruction of the social world of Galilee derived from recent archaeological reports. The key points in the latter, however, are in turn taken by ‘archaeologists’ from texts or scholarly analysis of texts. Most of the information about Sepphoris taken to indicate that it had courts, a fortress, a palace, two markets, archives, a royal bank, and an arsenal were taken from Josephus or late rabbinic literature (Overman 1986:164). Crossan’s final step, implicitly linking Jesus with the cosmopolitan cultural currents supposedly dominant in Sepphoris, derives ultimately from an argument by Goodman based on inferences from literary sources (see Edwards 1988). The argument might be susceptible to the charge of circularity except that, to double the irony, Goodman’s inferences from literary sources pertain to Jewish Aramaic culture two centuries later!

While the dialogue has barely begun, both archaeologists and text-oriented scholars may benefit from common problems and adjustments that will be necessary in adjusting to new evidence and new questions. For example, both are struggling with conceptual categories heavily influenced by theology. Understandably, given the standard conceptual apparatus of scholarly training, archaeologists’ interpretation of material remains is dominated by the same dichotomies of essentialist categories (e.g., 'Jewish' vs 'Hellenistic') that often still dominate interpretations of texts. Archaeologists as well as textual scholars, moreover, are recognising that the significance attributed to a particular text-fragment or material artifact depends upon the
interpreter's picture of the social world of ancient Palestine. Both may therefore have an interest in critical approaches to the reconstruction of the social world that constituted the historical context of both texts and material culture. Given the general paucity of evidence for Roman Galilee, comparative material and comparative sociological and anthropological studies may be of considerable mutual interest for further historical inquiry into life in ancient Galilee (Horsley 1989; 1995).

2 ESSENTIALIST CONCEPTS VERSUS ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY EVIDENCE

Both the 'cosmopolitan/Hellenistic' Galilee and the 'Jewish' Galilee may be more the product of the essentialist habits of the modern scholarly mind than of archaeological (and literary) evidence. On the basis of synthetic modern constructs, given artifacts are identified as 'Hellenistic' or 'Jewish.' Then on the basis of a few such artifacts, a site is declared to have a certain cultural identity or character. A critical examination of recent archaeological reports will indicate how inadequate and inappropriate the standard essentialist categories are to the material and literary evidence.

Claims of an urbanised and cosmopolitan Galilee seem to derive from Meyers' characterisation of the 'great urban centers' of Lower Galilee in contrast to the 'regionalism' of the villages of Upper Galilee. Sepphoris and Tiberias (and even Tarichaeae/Magdala) are identified as Hellenistic cities primarily on the basis of Josephus' reports about them (or other towns!) that one or another had a boule, an ekklesia, a stadiun, or a hippodrome, typical institutions of a Hellenistic polis. Tcherikover demonstrated some time ago, however, that we cannot conclude that Jerusalem was a Hellenistic polis on the basis of the terminology used by Josephus, who, in communicating with this readers, is casting in typical Hellenistic terms what were still very different and distinctive Jerusalem institutions. It is unwarranted, therefore, to conclude that Sepphoris, as rebuilt by Antipas after 4 BCE, or Tiberias, the new city founded by Antipas less than two decades later, were typical Hellenistic poleis, with all the attendant Hellenistic or Roman-Hellenistic cultural elements.

1 'Settlement' archaeologists, some of whom were mentioned appreciatively by Strange (1982:85), increasingly emphasised that political-economic structures and political changes shape social and settlement patterns (Trigger 1989:284). More recently, archaeologists such as Renfrew stress the importance of social organisation and power relations, while pointing out that for literate societies (such as ancient Roman Palestine) literary sources can answer many of the social questions (Renfrew & Bahn 1991:153, 162).
A highly influential insertion at least into the American discussion has been the grand estimates of the population of these cities: 30,000 for Sepphoris, nearly as high for Tiberias and Tarichaeae, and even 12,000 to 15,000 for Capernaum (e.g., Meyers and Strange 1981). These appear to be grossly inflated figures. In estimating population in the late Roman-Byzantine period, the time of maximum density, Broshi (1979) indicates that Diocesarea/Sepphoris and Tiberias were medium-sized cities of 60 and 40 hectares respectively (compared with Caesarea at 95 or Aelia Capitolina at 120). If the density of the Galilean cities was comparable to that of Pompeii at 125-156 per hectare rather than the unusually high density of Ostia at 435 (Reed 1992), then the population of each would have been below 10,000 in late antiquity, and correspondingly much less at the time of their initial (re-)building under Antipas. Recent estimates for Capernaum have returned to the more sober earlier figure of somewhat over a thousand (cf Reed 1992). There are thus no firmer bases for the claims of the scope of 'urbanisation' in Galilee at the time of Jesus than there are for its characterisation as Hellenistic and cosmopolitan.

However, if the recent portrayals of the Galilean cities as Hellenistic poleis are not credible, would the standard conceptual obverse of a heavily 'Jewish' cultural ethos be any more credible? Meyers's more recent portrayals of Sepphoris 'in the light of new archaeological evidence and recent research' appear almost to refute his earlier picture of the 'great urban centers' of Lower Galilee and their 'cosmopolitan atmosphere'. While continuing to rely on essentialist categories, he now claims that 'there can be little doubt that the overwhelming majority or virtually all of the inhabitants of Sepphoris in the first century CE were Jewish' (Meyers 1992:324; Meyers, Netzer & Meyers 1992:12). Meyers attempts to demonstrate that 'the archaeological record thus far revealed supports the picture of Sepphoris presented by Josephus and some of the rabbinic literature, i.e., that Sepphoris from the first century CE onwards was a city inhabited by many well-to-do, aristocratic Jews of a priestly background' (Meyers 1992:322; Meyers, Netzer & Meyers 1992:10). However, Josephus presents no such picture of Sepphoris in the first century CE, and Meyers can produce little archaeological evidence for his claim prior to the Middle and Late Roman periods. Other archaeologists are finding that generally speaking 'ethnicity is difficult to recognize from the archaeological record' (Renfrew & Bahn 1991:169). A critical review of the limited literary evidence previously adduced on this question suggests, in fact, that there is little or no evidence to warrant such an essentialist claim for Sepphoris in the first century (the time of Jesus).

The claim that 'Sepphoris was apparently the home town of many priests, some of whom even served as high priests in the Jerusalem Temple' (Meyers,
Netzer & Meyers 1992:10) rests almost completely on late rabbinic evidence. Earlier scholars proceeded in a rather trusting and synthetic manner. Two examples are specially relevant to the question of priestly presence in Sepphoris. (1) Relying first on the lists of the twenty-four priestly courses (and their locations in Galilee) in mediaeval liturgical poems known as piyyutim, then taking somewhat at face value the late version of a tradition in the eighth century Kohelet Rabbah (the earlier parallel in y. Kilayim 9, 32b lacks the crucial 'sons of Yedayah'), earlier reconstructions assumed early dates for the presence of the Jedaiah priestly clan in Sepphoris. (2) It is even claimed, on the basis of t. Yoma 1.4; y. Yoma 1, 38d; b. Yoma 12b; and Josephus (AJ 17.166), that one priestly family in Sepphoris was so prominent that shortly before his death Herod had bestowed the high priesthood on two of its members.2

Stuart Miller, however, has recently pioneered a more critical examination of these and other rabbinic traditions regarding priestly presence in Sepphoris. On (1) he demonstrates that only the tradition in y. Ta'anit 4, 68d can be used to locate the mishmar of Yedayah in Sepphoris, sometime in the fourth century, which fits with the dating of the fragmentary inscription of the priestly courses found at Caesarea (Miller 1984:120-127).3 On (2) he finds no evidence in the rabbinic traditions that Joseph ben Elim had any special social or political standing among the priestly aristocracy (Miller 1984:62-88). If we follow Miller’s critical assessment of rabbinic traditions, then there is no rabbinic memory of priestly presence in Sepphoris until the latter half of the second century. As to the first century CE or earlier, we can only speculate that the Hasmoneans might have stationed some priests in Sepphoris in the role of ‘magistrates’ in ‘civil’ and administrative affairs. But what would have happened to those priestly families under Herod and particularly in the Josephus-reported destruction and enslavement of 4 BCE? It seems unlikely that Antipas would have had much of an interest in bringing priests to Sepphoris and probably he had no authority to do so. The late rabbinic evidence available suggests that Judean priests probably settled in Sepphoris only after the destruction of the Temple, even more likely after the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

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2 E.g., Menahem Stern (1974:272 n. 2). Stern and others, trusting these rabbinic traditions as good evidence for the prominence of the Sepphorean Joseph ben Ellem (who served as high priest for an hour!) at the time of Herod, then draw the conclusion that, because Josephus (in AJ 17.166) describes Joseph as his ‘relative,’ the high priest Matthias was also from Galilee. Sean Freyne (1980:165, 285) takes the implications a logical step further, citing Joseph ben Ellem as an example of ‘priestly aristocratic landowners in Sepphoris,’ a step which Meyers appears to follow.

3 It is puzzling that Meyers (1992:326 n 27) does not follow this study that he calls ‘the definitive treatment.’ On the fragmentary inscription, see Avi-Yonah 1964:46-57.
They apparently had achieved some prominence in the city by the third and fourth centuries.

Further clarification of the archaeological evidence and perhaps some reconceptualisation of our categories of interpretation, however, may be necessary in order to assess the implications of recent archaeological findings at Sepphoris. Meyers asserts that 'the considerable first-century remains that have been uncovered...point to a Torah-true population, judging by the number of ritual baths (miqva'ot) in houses and by the strict practice of burial outside the city precincts' (1992:325). This places a great deal of weight on both (a small number of) ritual baths and burial customs. Was burial outside a city distinctive to Judean customs or, more particularly, distinctive to the Torah? Moreover, one wonders just how a chamber with a stepped entrance is deemed a miqveh or is determined to be a distinctively Jewish/Judean bath. An earlier assessment was less certain: 'Although the identity of these pools as ritual baths seems likely, the identity of their users is far more speculative' (Meyers, Netzer & Meyers 1986:18). Were both the miqvahot and the burial customs particular marks of Torah-observance in the first century?

As Meyers himself points out, most of the archaeological evidence found at Sepphoris comes from the Middle and Late Roman strata. By the end of the second century numbers of Judeans had moved to Sepphoris, Tiberias, and smaller Galilean towns. In addition to priestly families, many rabbis who had gone to Yavneh after the destruction of Jerusalem relocated in Galilee and established academies at Usha, Beth Shearim, Sepphoris, and (eventually) Tiberias. The activity of Judah the Prince, including the redaction of the Mishnah, took place in the midst of a thriving multicultural urban centre around 200 CE. The mixture of pagan and Jewish culture that Meyers (1992:329) describes in middle-late Roman times had clearly emerged by that time. It is unclear, therefore, how a concept such as 'Torah-true' is appropriate to the supposedly Jewish residents of the Western residential area of Sepphoris, given the artifacts unearthed there. Meyers assumes that the introduction of ritual baths in nearly every complex where early Roman houses were further developed means the residents were Jewish. Yet 'the several bronze figurines [and] hundreds of second-third century decorated disc lamps, many with presumably pagan symbols, found in this same area suggest a high degree of Hellenization among the Jewish residents...[and an] upper class lifestyle' (Meyers 1992:329). Is it possible that upper class Jewish families of third century Sepphoris may have been, at least in their own minds, simultaneously 'Torah-true' (or 'Mishnah-true', i.e., in their rites of purity) and 'Hellenized' in the decor and implements of their houses?

Interpretation of the archaeological findings depends at least partly on how we pose questions to the data. In the case of the western residential area
of Sepphoris in the third century it seems inappropriate to perpetuate the standard essentialist concepts 'Jewish' and 'pagan' on the basis of a particular privileged set of literary remains (Torah or Mishnah) and then proceed to apply those concepts to material remains? The same principle, however, would apply to late second temple times, when there is even less evidence, literary or material, for the residents of Sepphoris and their cultural ethos. Given its role as an urban administrative centre or capital usually for regimes based elsewhere, it would appear far more important to trace the shifting political history of Sepphoris than to categorise evidence according to essentialist categories. For the regime using Sepphoris as its administrative base in Galilee would surely have determined the cultural ethos of the city.4

3 THE SHIFTING POLITICAL HISTORY OF SEPPHORIS

As symbolised and embodied in its prominent fortress, which persisted in some form virtually into modern times, Sepphoris had long functioned as a militarily fortified administrative base for whatever regime dominated Galilee. In approaching this question, therefore, it is important to consider the broader historical background of shifts in imperial control of Galilee, from the Persian, through the Ptolemaic and Seleucid, to the Roman empire, with a brief interlude of Hasmonean rule in the early first century BCE. Presumably each successive regime that used Sepphoris as an administrative base would have influenced the ethos of the town in some way, if only through the principal administrative officers it stationed there during its period of domination.

Settled already during 7th-6th centuries and the Persian period, Sepphoris had almost certainly become a fortified administrative town under the Ptolemies and Seleucids (Meyers, Netzer & Meyers 1992:10). The Hasmoneans probably inherited it as an already defensible fortress, as indicated in Josephus' report of Ptolemy Lathyrus' unsuccessful attack shortly after Alexander Janneus became king-high priest (AJ 13.388). One would presume that, during the centuries of Jerusalem's reconstitution as the capital of the Judean temple-state, Sepphoris had been a Persian and then a Greek-speaking Hellenistic town prior to the Hasmonean take-over in 104 BCE.

The Hasmonean regime controlled Sepphoris for only two generations before the Romans took control of Palestine and then installed Herod as

4 With regard to Sepphoris and other sites in Galilee in particular, recent rigorous attention to strata in archaeological digs should be matched by more rigorous attention to historical changes, particularly changes of rulers, who apparently had such an important role in shaping the urban ethos as well as in sponsoring major buildings.
their client ruler. The Hasmoneans clearly kept a garrison in Sepphoris as well as in certain other strongholds in Galilee, presumably to maintain order and assure the payment of taxes \((AJ\ 14.413-14; BJ\ 1.303)\). That meant, presumably, that at the very least they installed trusted Judeans as the officers or aristocracy at the head of the administrative apparatus there. Since the Hasmoneans were involved for much of this time with further expansion of their rule and/or virtual civil war with their subjects or rival factions, however, they seem unlikely to have devoted much energy to the thorough implantation of Judean culture in a recently secured district administrative town such as Sepphoris. In this connection one wants to know more about the ‘Greek words in Hebrew letters in Sepphoris as early as the Hasmonean period’ which apparently ‘refer to titles or data that may be associated with officials or official functions of the city’ \((Meyers\ 1992:330)\). The Hasmonean regime was otherwise characterised by increasing Hellenistic influence, particularly under Alexander Jannaeus. These Greek words for administrative officers and functions in Hebrew letters suggest that while Hebrew became the official administrative language of the city, Greek terms and culture continued to thrive in the town.

Herod not only replaced the Hasmonean garrison at Sepphoris but would have systematically rooted out the remaining Hasmonean officers in Sepphoris just as he eliminated Hasmonean family and high officers in the rest of the realm. Given his practices elsewhere of sponsoring Hellenistic-style building projects and administration, it seems unlikely that he would have fostered a distinctively Judean administration and culture \(\text{(religion)}\) in Sepphoris.\(^5\) Josephus’ sole reference suggests only the military and political-economic administrative presence entailed in ‘the royal \(\text{(fortress-palace)}\)’ along with the arms and goods stored there, in connection with the popular insurrection after the death of Herod \((AJ\ 17.271; BJ\ 2.56)\). Given the circumstances of the Hasmoneans during their brief control of Sepphoris and the characteristic Hellenistic-Roman orientation of Herod, it seems unlikely that a \(\text{(distinctively) Judean culture would have become well-established during the hundred years of Jerusalem’s control of the town. It would be most significant as well as surprising, therefore, were some clear indications of Judean culture to be found in further excavations at Sepphoris.}\

It is unclear precisely why the Romans would have ‘burned the city and enslaved its inhabitants’ in 4 BCE \((BJ\ 2.68; AJ\ 17.289)\), was it simply in punitive retaliation for the revolt in the area? or were Judas and his forces still in

\(^5\) Since it is not at all clear that a ‘synagogue’ was found at Masada, one can hardly argue that Herod may have ‘supported synagogue Judaism privately,’ \((\text{vs Meyers and Strange} 1981:24)\).
Then, when Antipas took over his tetrarchy as Roman client ruler, says Josephus, he ‘fortified Sepphoris to be the ornament (proschema) of all Galilee and called it Autokratoris’ (‘Imperial/Capital [City]’, AJ 18.27). The standard historical interpretation that Antipas thus ‘rebuilt’ the city as his capital appears to be confirmed by the findings of the University of South Florida investigations. In excavations of building after building, they discovered the founding on bedrock in the early Roman period (Strange 1992a). Meyers et al, however, claim to have found ‘no trace of violent destruction in the Herodian period’ and emphasise the continuity of structures and culture (Meyers 1992:323; Meyers, Netzer & Meyers 1992:11). The respective dating of the theatre illustrates the different interpretations given to the rebuilding of the city by Antipas, with Strange et al opting for the time of Antipas, while Meyers et al prefer a later date.

Antipas is often described in New Testament studies as a ‘Jewish king,’ his anticonic coins often being cited as evidence. It seems doubtful that Judeans would have viewed him so. Certainly the priestly aristocrat Josephus and/or the Jerusalem priestly (provisional) government at the beginning of the great Revolt in 66 did not view him as particularly loyal to ‘the laws of the Judeans’ (to use Josephus’ standard phrase). In building his second capital, Tiberias, he had both desecrated a cemetery and decorated his royal palace in violation of the law and ancestral tradition of the Judeans (AJ 18.38; Vita 64-65).

It would seem rather that Antipas would have established Roman (Hellenistic) style capitals at both Sepphoris and Tiberias, befitting the background and position of a Roman client ruler in the East, who had been raised in Rome (AJ 17.20) and both socialised and competed with other such Roman client rulers. ‘Herod Antipas’ reconstruction of Sepphoris marked its transition from a Greek city to a Roman one,’ as Longstaff put it (1990:12). After deposing Antipas in 39 CE, moreover, the Romans took direct control of Sepphoris as their administrative capital in (western) Galilee. The theatre at Sepphoris, the founding of which Strange and Longstaff attribute to Antipas himself, exemplifies the Roman political-cultural style that would have come to dominance in Sepphoris under Antipas and the Romans, if not already under Herod the Great. The Latin names of the ‘Herodian’ officers who still comprised the ‘principal men’ in Tiberias in 66 also fit such a picture, and it is easy to imagine a similar set of names among the elite in Sepphoris as well, descendants of those brought in by Antipas to staff his royal administration.

6 It is unclear why Meyers (1992:323) says that Judas’ attack on the royal palace/fortress ‘failed’.
including bank and archives (Vita 38). Finally, Sepphoris' staunchly pro-Roman stance throughout the revolt in 66-67 and refusal to aid the Judeans' cause in any way (Vita 30, 38, 104, 124, 232, 346-348, 373, 394-395) fits the 'Roman' reading of the rebuilt Sepphoris, while insufficiently explained as mere 'political' disagreements with supposedly 'fellow-Jews.'

Strange has recently suggested the concept of 'Roman urban overlay' for the way in which Antipas rebuilt the city of Sepphoris. Once the Romans had conquered Palestine, Roman client rulers 'imposed a distinctive urban overlay' upon a base of local Jewish culture' (1992b:32). 'This “urban overlay”...bore the major institutions, ideas, and symbols of Roman culture in Judea. The local Jewish culture, on the other hand, bore its own institutions, ideas, and symbols' (without significant disruption by the overlay, 1992b:32). This overlay was a 'successful graft onto the local culture' because 'as a matter of fact, the Jewish culture was already rural and urban and to some extent Hellenised, and therefore prepared for Roman dominance' (1992b:32). The symbols of specifically Roman culture, sometimes on a co-opted Hellenistic base, included baths, hippodromes, theatres, amphitheatres or circuses, odeons, nymphaea, figured wall paintings, statues, triumphal movements, temples, etc..' (1992b:33). 'Symbols of the Jewish foundation include the Second Temple, synagogues or places of assembly, art forms with Jewish symbols (menorah, ethrog, lulab), and tombs.' (1992b:33) The excavations at Sepphoris should provide a test case 'for distinguishing local institutions and symbols from their Roman counterparts in the archaeological record' (1992b:35).

The rebuilt Sepphoris would likely have symbolised Roman dominance as the fortified capital of the client ruler Antipas and/or of the later Roman administration. Strange's development of this scheme, however, requires serious qualification, particularly in connection with how the dominant 'overlay' stood in relation to the dominated society and its culture. To say that the relation of particular Jewish cultural symbols would have varied independently (Strange 1992b:38) simply takes them out of the overall context of cultural subordination. To say that Jewish culture was already urban as well as rural and therefore prepared for Roman domination (1992b:32) appears to be untrue of pre-Herodian Galilee in particular and does not appear to take into account the repeated and widespread resistance to Roman domination in 'early Roman' Palestine in general (in 40-37 and 4 BCE and

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7 If Sepphoris was burned and its inhabitants enslaved in 4 BCE, as Josephus reports, then there would have been some discontinuity of inhabitants between the Judeans established there under the Hasmoneans (and Herod?) and the new Sepphorites brought in by Antipas.
66-70 CE, to mention only the major instances). To say that the idea 'city'
was not a foreign idea, but ‘expressed what the locals had in mind’ and that
‘the citizens of the city... gave expression to their idea of a city by planning
the city, building it, and living in it’ (1992b:34) does not appear to take into
account the degree to which rulers such as Antipas determined the building
projects such as Sepphoris and Tiberias.

The foundation of Tiberias (within two decades of the rebuilding of Sep­
phoris, if Antipas was responsible) dramatically illustrates just how
unurbanised Galilee was at the beginning of the first century CE. That there
was a popular insurrection around Sepphoris parallel to those in Judea and
Perea after Herod’s death is a vivid reminder that Galilee, like those other
areas, was not exactly ‘prepared for Roman dominance.’ If the most promi­
nent inhabitants of the newly founded Tiberias or the reestablished Sepphoris
were Herodian officials from Sebaste or Caesarea, Strange would have a
point. If they were previous residents of Sepphoris or Jerusalemites, the new
‘Roman urban overlay’ would have been at least somewhat strange. In any
case, the building of Tiberias was sponsored by a Roman client ruler and
would have been designed by his men, with little attention to the concerns of
Jerusalem priestly circles or the Galilean villagers (Vita 64-65). If Josephus’
account of the building of Tiberias (AJ 18:36-38) is any indication, the vast
majority of the new residents would have had little to do with the planning,
let alone the conception of the city-building.

Strange seems to have two incompatible concepts of the relations between
the Roman overlay and indigenous ‘Jewish’ culture. He thinks of Antipas
making a synthesis of foreign innovation and local tradition, on the one hand
(1992b:35). Yet then he contends that ‘the local Jewish culture bore its own
institutions, ideas, and symbols’ without much disruption, on the other
(1992b:32). The latter does not appear to take into account striking examples
of how the very ‘Jewish symbols’ he mentions had already been dramatically
affected by the influences of Hellenistic-Roman culture and political domina­
tion. The most obvious example is the ‘Second Temple’ which had been mas­
ively reconstructed by Herod and in which there were prayers for Rome and
the emperor led by high priests who were now the creatures of the Rome’s
client king or governor (Strange 1979:650-655). There is little or no evidence
of synagogue buildings in first century Galilee (Flesher 1989; Foerster 1981),
unless we mean the proseuche in Tiberias, a city built as another example of
the ‘Roman urban overlay.’ As Strange (1992b:39) himself comments, ‘Jewish
architecture is difficult to pinpoint in the first century’. Perhaps that would
be rooted in the fact that it was the rulers who determined major building
projects, and they were pressing precisely the ‘Roman urban overlay.’

The major problem with Strange’s suggestion of a ‘Roman urban overlay’
in Sepphoris at the time of Antipas (and Jesus), however, is that the principal
'symbols' of the Roman overlay are yet to be found in Sepphoris itself. One can construct his picture of the Roman overlay only by combining evidence from several sites elsewhere in Herodian and subsequent Roman Palestine. Thus, although one could argue that the theatre in Sepphoris, supposedly built by Antipas, would provide an early example of Roman institutions imposed on Palestine, there is as yet no further evidence of a more complete Roman urban overlay in early first century Sepphoris. It seems highly likely that Sepphoris became ever more Romanised in the course of the late first and second centuries, with the establishment of direct Roman rule after the death of Agrippa 1 and the reconstitution of the city as Diocaesarea, as part of the general Roman policy of 'urbanisation' of Palestine under Hadrian and after (Avi-Yonah 1976). The fuller 'Romanisation' of Sepphoris and Tiberias in the course of the second and third centuries, however, should not be projected back into the time of Antipas and Jesus.

4 HOW 'HELLENISED' AND 'COSMOPOLITAN' WAS GALILEE AT THE TIME OF JESUS?

That Sepphoris may have maintained certain traits of Hellenistic culture from the Ptolemaic and Seleucid periods and had been somewhat 'Romanised' under Herod and/or Antipas does not mean that it was all that 'cosmopolitan' at the time of Jesus. Sepphoris may have been more cosmopolitan than Tiberias, for which the literary evidence is more plentiful. But Tiberias was apparently not all that cosmopolitan, judging from Josephus' accounts of both the founding of the city and the turmoil of 66-67. Antipas had built the city without scruples about violating the cemetery on the site and decorated his royal palace with features objectionable to the later provisional high priestly regime in Jerusalem (AJ 18:36; Vita 64-65). The principal public building, moreover, was the 'stadium.' Yet there was also a huge proseuche (synagogue-building) where a large public assembly could be held. Among the residents fifty years after the founding of the city were some 'Greeks.' Yet they were not a substantial enough group to hold their own in 66 against the resentful popular party led by Jesus son of Sapphias (Vita 66-67). The ten 'principal men' (many with Latin names) and the historian Justus (Josephus' rival) who dominated affairs politically and economically may have had some cosmopolitan pretensions. They resisted the instructions of the provisional high priestly government in Jerusalem to destroy the royal palace because of the objectional representations in its decor. Yet they were apparently officers of the Herodian toparchy administration (of Agrippa 2), and could barely hold their own against the 'riff-raff' who must have been descendants of the lowly people brought in by force at the city's founding, according to the aristocratic priest and historian Josephus. If those 'Greeks'
and Herodian officials cultivated a degree of cosmopolitan culture, then it was apparently a thin veneer.

Sepphoris may have been somewhat more 'cosmopolitan' than Tiberias. Yet its cultured elite would presumably have been a similarly small percentage of the inhabitants, and it was quickly displaced in prominence by the new capital Tiberias, losing the archives and the royal bank as well as the important patronage of Antipas. Given the lack of literary or archaeological evidence for Sepphoris, we can only speculate whether through or underneath its elite there were carriers of cosmopolitan culture in the city.

Comparison with other cities in Palestine may help place in perspective the limited degree to which Sepphoris and Tiberias ever became cosmopolitan Roman-Hellenistic cities, let alone had already become so in the early first century. In neither city apparently has there been found the imported marble columns which are ubiquitous in the cities of Caesarea and Scythopolis, just south of Galilee. Similarly, no examples of imperial art have been found in the Galilean cities, while numerous examples were unearthed at Caesarea and Scythopolis. Or, to return to the institutions characteristic of Hellenistic cities, to date excavations of Sepphoris (and Tiberias) have not found evidence of a gymnasium, a hippodrome, an odeon, or a nymphaeum.

5 URBAN-RURAL RELATIONS IN GALILEE

The case for a cosmopolitan Lower Galilee in which a Cynic(-like) Jesus would fit also depends on the assumption of continuity of culture between city and country/villages. Roman-Hellenistic cultural influence is supposed to have emanated from city to villages in such a way that villagers were acculturated (e.g., Meyers 1979:698). The assumption of cultural continuity in turn rests on the assumption of economic reciprocity between city and villages (or even villages’ dependency on city). ‘People from the surrounding area probably also flocked to Sepphoris on such occasions [as when the theatre was functioning], either to attend the theatre or to hawk their wares’ (Meyers 1992:333). Neither assumption, however, is warranted by archaeological or literary evidence.

Cultural interaction between Galilean villagers and Sepphoris was probably far less frequent than recently imagined (apparently on a modern urbanised industrialised social model). It seems rather unlikely that many peasants would have ‘attended the theatre’ in Sepphoris. Boatwright’s (1990) study of ‘Theatres in the Roman Empire’ finds that outside of Rome theatres were normally used only five to twenty-five times per year. Moreover, they were used predominantly for political-cultural affairs, what Varro, in the first century BCE, or Robert Bellah and Ernst Barker in the twentieth, would call ceremonies of ‘civil religion.’ The audience or participants would have been
primarily the residents of Sepphoris, many of whom were economically and politically dependent, directly or indirectly, on the administrative apparatus centered there. The seating capacity, moreover, would have accommodated only the adult population of Sepphoris. Villages, on the other hand, were semi-autonomous corporate communities with their own social forms and traditional customs. Since peasants generally do not leave written records of their culture, we have no direct information—unless of course archaeologists unearth some. Yet it is perhaps noteworthy that the Mishnah makes clear distinctions between the respective regional customs of Judea, Perea, and Galilee, and even occasionally notes particular local customs within Galilee. The synoptic Gospels indicate that there was a clear difference between the Galilean and the Jerusalem dialects linguistically (in Aramaic?), a point now confirmed by modern study of distinctive regional variations in ancient Hebrew (Rendsburg 1992). The fragmentary evidence available thus point to local-regional culture in towns and villages that would have been different from the nascent ‘Roman urban overlay’ in Sepphoris and Tiberias.

The recent emphasis on the urbanisation of Galilee in the first century (and after) assumes a high volume of ‘trade’ between villages and city and an economic dependency of villages on the city for markets and services and protection (e.g., Edwards 1992; Adan-Bayewitz & Perlman 1990). Arguments for an extensive urban-rural trading network are based almost exclusively on Adan-Bayewitz’s ground breaking demonstration, through electron-activation analysis, that pottery made in the village of Kefar Hananya, between Upper and Lower Galilee, is found at sites up to about 25 kilometres away, the quantities varying inversely with the distance from the site of manufacture (1993). There is no evidence, however, that Kefar Hananya pottery was ‘marketed’ by middlemen in ‘central market places’ in Sepphoris and Tiberias. Adan-Bayewitz’s own evidence virtually disproves such an imposition of an early-modern market model: (1) the appearance of the pottery varies inversely with distance from Kefar Hananya itself, not Sepphoris or Tiberias. (2) His rabbinic evidence suggests that the potters themselves delivered their wares on order or demand (1993:229-230). Even if there were considerable ‘trade’ in pottery, there are no grounds for extrapolating from trade in pottery to a generalised system of commercial (and cultural) interaction. Including trade in staple foods. Pottery production was unusual, dependent on a supply to clay, and its distribution apparently involved limited contact between producer and consumer-user. Archaeological evidence, primarily the distribution of pottery, cannot be claimed as evidence for an urban-rural trading network that supposedly provided the basis of cultural continuity between city and countryside. As Adan-Bayewitz points out himself at the outset of his presentation (1993:19), ‘manufacture and trade
in the Roman world were primarily local. Self-sufficiency in basic products was a fundamental principle of the ancient economy.'

Far from suggesting cultural continuity, the literary evidence for Galilee at the time of Jesus indicates sustained tension and even overt conflict between cities and the Galilean peasantry. Readers of Josephus' *Life* are familiar with his frequent description of extreme hostility between the Galileans and Sepphoris and (the elite) of Tiberias. Most striking, even allowing for exaggeration by Josephus, was the vehement hostility of 'the Galileans' to Sepphoris at the time of the revolt in 66-67. Despite the implication in Josephus' first comment about it (*Vita* 30), this conflict cannot be dismissed as due only to the pro-Roman stance of Sepphoris in 66. It was part of a general and long-standing resentment by the Galilean villagers of the cities from which they were ruled (e.g., *Vita* 373-375). Intense Galilean hostility to Sepphoris went back at least as far as Herod the Great. Judging from Josephus' accounts (*BJ* 2.56; *AJ* 17.271), the attack on the royal fortress led by Judas son of Ezekias after the death of Herod in 4 BCE was a popular insurrection, apparently by peasants in the surrounding area. Far from a cultural continuity between cities and villages, the available evidence suggests a considerable degree of hostility to the cities among the Galilean villagers.

6 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JESUS' MINISTRY

Critical review of recent reports on archaeological explorations in Galilee thus indicate that archaeological evidence, even when combined with literary evidence, cannot deliver either a solidly Jewish (Judean) Galilee or a cosmopolitan Hellenistic Galilee as a cultural context for the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, the archaeological evidence and the construction of a historical context for Jesus resist comprehension according to such standard essentialist scholarly categories. The survey of the political history and the urban-rural relations necessary to accommodate archaeological as well as literary evidence, however, points to a historical structural conflict between the cities established by the rulers of Galilee and the Galilean people, the vast majority of whom lived in village communities.

That conflict, in fact, was becoming more intense precisely during Jesus' lifetime. Although we do not (yet) know the extent to which a 'Roman urban overlay' was constructed by Antipas, it is clear that this Herodian whom the Romans placed over Galilee and Perea in 4 BCE engaged in major 'development' projects. Although there is some dispute about the date of the theatre, it is clear that major rebuilding took place in Sepphoris in the early first century. As Josephus says, the rebuilt fortress city was his 'ornament of all Galilee.' Although Tiberias has not been extensively excavated yet, it is clear that Antipas founded this city as a second capital for his realm, com-
plete with stadium and royal palace. Suddenly, within two decades, there were two ‘cities’ in Lower Galilee, one or both visible to many villagers and within a half-day’s walk. Such major ‘development’ projects take resources, they have a cost. In a traditional agrarian economy, that cost is borne by the peasant producers, either in taxed goods or in direct labour on the construction. Wages for the latter, of course, were funded from the former. Herod had apparently already taxed the goods and endurance of the people, numbers of whom revolted at news of the tyrant’s death. With the rebuilding of one city and the founding of a second, then, Antipas made a sudden new economic as well as cultural impact on the Galileans.

It is sociologically naive simply to assume that cultural influences flow from city to village. Any influence from Sepphoris or Tiberias to Galilean villagers would have been mediated through the structure of political-economic relations between rulers and ruled, urbanites and villagers. Far from villages having been ‘satellite’ or ‘dependent’ on the cities, however, the dependency worked the other way. Cities obtained their revenues from the villages, precisely because villages and towns were politically subject to regimes based in the cities.

Economically dependency was of city upon villages. As generally in antiquity, a city such as Sepphoris lived from the products taken from the villagers in the form of taxes, rents, or interest on loans by the rulers or landlords resident in the city (Finley 1985; Garnsey & Saller 1987). Under Antipas, as under Herod, the principal form of Sepphoris’ and Tiberias’ income would have been tax revenues. As Josephus writes quite bluntly, in bestowing a tetrarchy upon Antipas, Augustus was providing his client ruler with a yearly revenue of two hundred talents from Galilee and Perea (BJ 2.95; AJ 17.318). Influence of cities on the Galilean people would also have depended on how the people reacted. Here the available literary evidence, as noted above, indicates a decidedly hostile reaction. Although Galilean villagers may not have interacted frequently with the cities, they had clear images of what went on in the rulers’ quarters. The synoptic Gospels provide a window or two onto some of those images: ‘great banquets’ and rulers’ birthday celebrations, at which popular prophets could be beheaded for a royal whim (Luke/Q 14:15-24; Mark 6:17-28); ‘look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces’ (Luke/Q 7:25). According to numerous Gospel traditions, moreover, Jesus addresses precisely the kinds of conditions that would have resulted from the sudden impact of intensified ‘urbanisation’ of Galilee on a peasantry that in normal times was economically marginal at best: indebtedness, hunger, and disintegration of fundamental social forms of family and village community (Luke/Q 6:27-38; 11:2-4; 12:22-31).

If assessed according to the structure and historical dynamics of urban-rural, ruler-ruled conflict in late second temple Palestine—instead of in the old essentialist categories of ‘Jewish’ versus ‘Hellenistic’—recent archaeologi-
cal evidence may point to a context in which Jesus' ministry and the movement(s) formed in response can be understood. In recent years scholarship on Jesus has been more willing to take seriously the portrayals in both the Christian Gospels and Josephus' histories of the conflict been popular movements or leaders and the ruling institutions and officers in Jerusalem. Recent archaeological excavations in Galilee may now provide more windows onto the similar structural conflict between city and villages, rulers and ruled, as it intensified in the Galilean context precisely in the generation of Jesus and his followers.

WORKS CONSULTED


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