

# Sepphoris: The City and Its Hinterland in Roman Times

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In the heart of Lower Galilee, 5 km west of Nazareth, lie the remains of Sepphoris, capital of Galilee for long periods in antiquity. The city was originally built on a hill rising 289 m above sea level and overlooking the entire area. North of the hill lies the fertile Bet Netofa Valley, and to its south flows Naḥal Zippori. Excavations conducted in the city over the last three decades, mainly by the Hebrew University team, suggest that Sepphoris in the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE and CE stretched across its hill and slopes, when the city had a rural appearance lacking most of the typical Roman-style public buildings.<sup>1</sup>

The reshaping of Sepphoris and its newly acquired status as a Roman polis, replete with civic institutions, changed the face of this Galilean city after the Great Revolt against Rome and in subsequent eras. Owing to its newfound wealth and prosperous economy, Sepphoris grew significantly and its population reached a peak of 15 to 20 thousand inhabitants. Excavations conducted on the plateau east of the hill indicate that by the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> or early 2<sup>nd</sup> century the city had expanded eastward, boasting an impressive street network arranged in a grid, with a colonnaded *cardo* and *decumanus* intersecting at its center.<sup>2</sup> Designed according to Roman guidelines, public buildings and private dwellings sprung up throughout the city, including a temple, forum, bathhouses, a theater, a library or archive, and another building possibly to be identified as a basilica.

Salvage excavations and surveys in the areas outside the perimeters of the city yield important information about its hinterland, however the entire corpus of data has yet to be studied together with the rich material pertaining to Roman Sepphoris. This paper will piece together the data coming from both the city and the regions beyond its borders, and will offer some preliminary thoughts regarding Sepphoris's urban infrastructure and the relationship between the two.

## Sepphoris urban infrastructure and the interurban roads

Located on a hilltop and overlooking the entire area, three main intercity roads, marked by inscribed milestones along their routes, brought traffic to and from Sepphoris. One road, running from Ptolemais (or Akko) to Sepphoris from the northwest, was apparently constructed during the Great Revolt; a second, built in 120 CE, ran from Legio (or Megiddo), the site of the Roman camp of Legio VI Ferrata, toward Sepphoris; and the third ran westward, from Tiberias to Sepphoris.<sup>3</sup> Only a few segments of these roads have been detected, but at some distance from Sepphoris itself, making it impossible to know where exactly these roads entered the city limits or how they converged with the main arteries passing through the densely built-up areas leading to



may be associated with the main road mentioned in Rabbinic sources that ran from Tiberias through Sepphoris's fertile fields and eastern necropolis, and into the city.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the 180 meter-long *cardo* exposed to date ran from south to north, and may well have connected with the road coming from Legio via Naḥal Zippori in the south, into Sepphoris' center.<sup>7</sup> The *cardo*, like the *decumanus*, did not extend much beyond the main intersection in the lower city. The northernmost section, beyond the forum, was covered with several plaster layers and not stone pavers, as elsewhere on the *cardo*, however the pottery collected in the course of our excavations suggests that this section of the street was most probably added in the Byzantine period. Furthermore, even if it could be argued that the later section was an earlier route, topographically the natural slope beyond this point descends sharply northward, so the *cardo* by no means could have run in this direction.

The streets running parallel and perpendicular to the *cardo* and *decumanus* have no colonnades or sidewalks. The street south of the *decumanus* seems to have crossed the breadth of the city, from east to west – in other words, from the fields beyond the saddle and past the dwellings on the southern edge of the hill. The two streets running east of and parallel to the *cardo* and from south to north up to the *decumanus* do not continue northward beyond this point.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, the street running west of and parallel to the *cardo* appears to have spanned the length of the city from south to north. Its southern section has not yet been excavated but seems to have continued into the valley south of the city, and its northern section, from the civic center to the synagogue, continued its path over a mild slope beyond the city limits.<sup>9</sup> Vestiges of this route can be seen in aerial photographs of the site that seem to continue northward in a straight line, beyond the synagogue and toward the ancient road in the Bet Netofa Valley. It is quite possible that a 50-meter section of a Roman road, ca. 1 kilometer north of the city, at the bottom of the hill and on the western edge of modern-day Hoshaya, is yet another branch of this route.<sup>10</sup> This road, or at least part of it, continued to be used by the villagers long after the decline of Sepphoris and probably until the village was abandoned in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as attested by the stone walls and cacti lining both sides of the street leading to the synagogue.

A wider examination of the street network known to date in Roman Sepphoris and its possible connection with the interurban roads running to and from the city suggests that access to the built-up areas was possible from all four directions, but that the bulk of traffic seems to have used the eastern and southern routes (fig. 1). The colonnaded streets most probably connected with the far end of these interurban roads, somewhere on the outskirts of the city – the *decumanus* on the east and the *cardo* on the south – yet traffic into the city on both these routes was possible only up to the civic center. Access from the north was via one route only, whereas the other streets flanking the *cardo* and *decumanus* were open to traffic from the east and south, and flowed into various parts of the lower city. Most of

these streets probably connected with local roads leading to the farms, villas, and nearby villages in the fields outside the city. It is these secondary streets, not the colonnaded ones that crossed the city from north to south and from east to west. What becomes evident from exposing these streets in the lower city is that most of them were directed either to the east or south, indicating the direction of traffic and the interregional connections in antiquity.

### Facilities and other structural elements beyond the city limits

In light of what is now known about the street network and its relationship to the hinterland and other connecting roads, mention should be made of other important finds that were found around Sepphoris within a radius of 1 or 2 km from the hilltop. Large-scale excavations were never conducted in the Sepphoris necropolis, however an analysis of the material available from salvage excavations, surveys, and random finds emerging from the site is ample for drawing some preliminary conclusions about the nature of the urban necropolis, its location, and relationship to the road infrastructure.

Clusters of several dozens of burial caves were found around the city, although only a few of them have been excavated and minimally published (fig. 2). Several caves and a mausoleum were discovered in the northwestern necropolis, however most of them were detected east, southeast, south, and southwest of the site.<sup>11</sup>

Burial in Sepphoris was carried out primarily in hewn caves containing either *loculi* or *arcosolia*, or both, and was less prevalent in mausolea.<sup>12</sup> Tombs with *loculi*, some of which were executed in very high quality, were found in several places around the site. *Arcosolia* hewn on two or three sides of a small room are recorded in the city's southeastern necropolis, but they take a variety of forms in a larger catacomb in the eastern necropolis, where the chambers appear to have been hewn in a row (fig. 3). The number of trough graves varies from place to place: some *arcosolia* are simple and contain only one trough grave, and other, expanded, *arcosolia* contain three to five such graves. *Kukhim* were added here as well, at times hewn beneath the *arcosolium* or into its back wall, behind the trough graves.

In most places, isolated tombs were either excavated or surveyed, so there is no way of knowing if they were part of a larger multi-chambered catacomb.<sup>13</sup> However, following the recent activity of antiquities robbers in the southwestern necropolis, the existence of larger catacombs has now come to light. Three burial chambers were detected around a square courtyard, and, by what we know today the entrance to the southern chamber had a doorframe with jambs and a decorated lintel (fig. 4).<sup>14</sup>

Burial in stone or clay sarcophagi is also evident in Sepphoris, as are ample remains of bones collected in stone or clay ossuaries after the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.<sup>15</sup> These were found inside several excavated tombs or scattered throughout the necropolis, and sometimes even embedded in the walls of the Crusader citadel.<sup>16</sup>

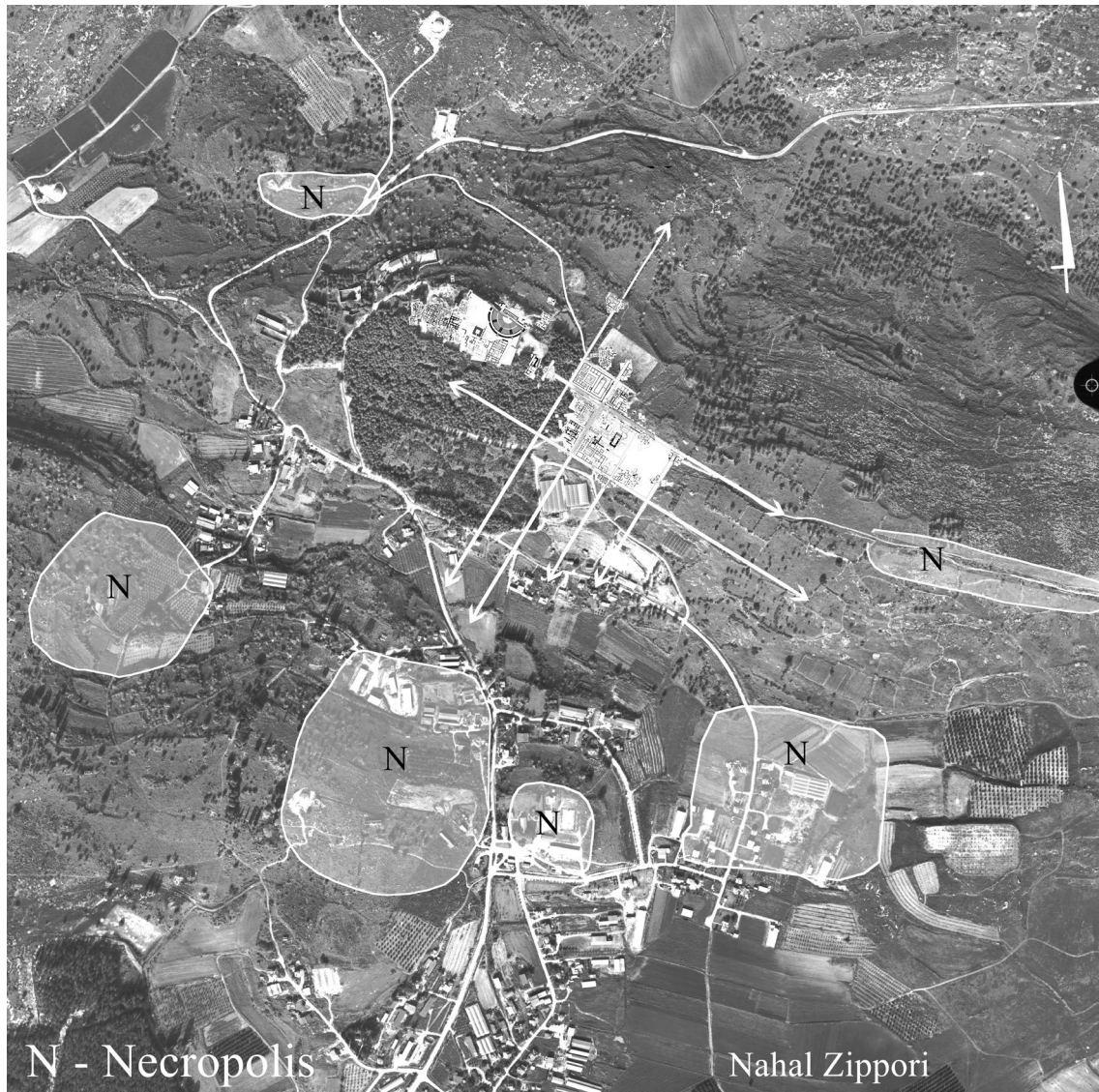


Fig. 2: Aerial photograph designating the cluster of tombs around Sepphoris and the connecting roads running to and from the city that passed through the necropoleis.

Sixteen burial inscriptions dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE mention the names of the interred in Sepphoris's ancient necropolis.<sup>17</sup> These inscriptions – either painted or carved on tomb walls and stone or marble plaques – are in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, and some are even bilingual. Each mentions the burial place of an individual or a group of family members, and several also provide personal information about the deceased. Other finds attest to how the Sepphoreans decorated their burial places. The small open courtyard surrounded by burial chambers in the eastern necropolis seems to have a mosaic floor decorated with floral designs.<sup>18</sup> Various



Fig. 3: Chamber with arcosolia containing several trough graves inside a larger catacomb in the eastern necropolis at Sepphoris.

elements executed in low relief adorn the interior of some tombs or decorate several sarcophagi, and two marble tombstones feature a Jewish symbol, either a palm tree or a menorah.<sup>19</sup>

Although the finds from the Sepphoris necropolis are sparse, they nevertheless suggest, as I have argued elsewhere, that this cemetery is no less impressive and monumental than the one at Bet She'arim, perhaps even surpassing it.<sup>20</sup> It is characterized by quarried burial tombs and a mausoleum, decorated sarcophagi, clay coffins, ossuaries, and funerary inscriptions denoting the name of the interred, his title, and occupation in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek or a combination thereof. The necropolis stretches over an area extending east, south, and southwest of the city, and it is probable that the above-mentioned roads running to and from Sepphoris passed through it (fig. 2). One may assume that some tombs, especially the more elaborate ones owned by the urban elite, were located close to these roads, as was customary elsewhere in Galilee and at other sites in the region.<sup>21</sup> This is the case, for example, in the eastern necropolis, where some tombs were discovered close to the road leading westward, toward the city.

Other facilities were found around the site, near the necropolis or beyond it. Limestone, the most common building material in Roman Sepphoris, was locally





Fig. 4: Large catacomb with three burial chambers around a square courtyard in Sephphoris's southwestern necropolis.

quarried. In fact, one quarry was detected in the excavations conducted west of the summit, but it seems that most of the quarries used in Roman times were located outside the built-up areas and close to the necropolis.<sup>22</sup> One such quarry lies east of the site and north of the road leading into the city, more or less opposite the subterranean reservoir, and two others were uncovered in the southern necropolis located in the center of Moshav Zippori.<sup>23</sup>

Sephphoris received its water supply from two aqueducts originating in the springs of the villages of er-Reina and Mash'had, some 10 km east of the city.<sup>24</sup> These aqueducts converged into a single conduit and, once close to the city, again diverged on the eastern side of the saddle – the northern one flowed toward the Arches Reservoirs and the pool, both located north of the road leading into the city, while the southern one ran southward, to the subterranean reservoir.

The spring of 'En Zippori, located 2.4 km south of the site, was another water source, but its low location in Naḥal Zippori prevented the city from getting a steady water supply. A vaulted pool and several walls diverted water to the nearby fields





Fig. 5: Overview of the eastern rooms of the farmhouse located east of the site and south of the road running westward into the Lower City.

along Nahal Zippori, some distance from the spring, and were indeed associated with the extensive agriculture that was once an important source of livelihood for the city.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to the agricultural activities conducted in Roman Sepphoris, there were two farmhouses on the outskirts of the city. One partially excavated unit, constructed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and destroyed in the fourth, is located 550 meters east of the site and south of the road running westward into the lower city.<sup>26</sup> It contains five rooms lying north and east of an open courtyard, as well as a nearby agricultural installation, most probably a wine press; various agricultural tools were also found in the debris of the farmhouse (fig. 5). The other unit, surveyed only a few years ago, lies approximately 1.5 km southwest of the site.<sup>27</sup> Traces of a white mosaic floor and some rock-cuttings are discernible beyond the wine press (fig. 6).

Other installations, including water pools, a columbarium, wine presses, a lime kiln, and rock-hewn ovens, were uncovered primarily south of the site, inside Moshav Zippori and along Nahal Zippori.<sup>28</sup> These were used by the city's inhabitants, but theoretically could point to the existence of additional farmhouses scattered around Sepphoris's hinterland in antiquity.





Fig. 6: A winepress in the farmhouse located southwest of Sepphoris.

### Conclusion

The finds presented above indicate a link between the road network running to and from Roman Sepphoris and the location of the city's necropoleis, pools, water systems, farmhouses, and other installations located east, south, and southwest of the city. The distribution of the roads and landmarks around the city is comparable to the evidence found in other cities and towns in Roman Palestine, where the roads leading to them passed through the necropoleis or ran close to quarries, reservoirs, and other installations. At Sepphoris, however, they seem to have been concentrated largely to the south and east.

It is difficult to know what dictated this reality. Did it begin with the early history of Sepphoris's settlement, and is it possible that some of the roads reflect routes in the region predating Roman times? Did it develop with the expansion of the city to the saddle east of the summit and the construction of the civic center there? Did the topographical differences between the north (having a slightly steep slope) and the south (having a moderate gradient) dictate the location of the access roads into the

city? Or did the type and quality of the rock in the area determine the location of the tombs and quarries? Alternatively, did the existence of fertile fields owned by the city's inhabitants dictate the location of the roads to and from the city? Whether one or more, or all, of these factors influenced the configuration of the city and its hinterland, Roman Sepphoris undoubtedly succeeded in maintaining its socio-religious, economic, and cultural ties with communities in its immediate vicinity, including those in the Bet Netofa Valley to its north such as Shihin. Judging by the city's street network, the conjectured roads running to and from it and the various facilities located in its vicinity, the interurban connections to and from Roman Sepphoris were directed primarily to the south and east. It is hoped that future excavations, surveys, and random finds will shed further light on Roman Sepphoris and its hinterland, and will either confirm, reject, or offer an alternative to our above analysis.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Weiss 2007b, 392–407.

<sup>2</sup> Weiss 2015 and Weiss 2017, with references to earlier publications regarding this site.

<sup>3</sup> Roll 2009, 12\*–13\*.

<sup>4</sup> Tsafirir – Foerster 1997, 93–95; Weiss 2002, 223–230. The connection between the interurban roads and the street network is well attested in other cities of the Roman east and beyond; see Macdonald 1986, 5–31.

<sup>5</sup> Weiss 2015, 61–62.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Leviticus Rabbah 16, 1 (Margulies 2003, 348). Traces of the road were detected in several places; see Shenhav 1984; Roll 1994, 39–40.

<sup>7</sup> Hecker 1961; Roll 2009, 12\*–13\*.

<sup>8</sup> Weiss 2007a, 225–229.

<sup>9</sup> Weiss 2005, 9–11.

<sup>10</sup> Covello-Paran – Tepper 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Aviam – Amitai 2014, 4–12; Weiss forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Weiss – Netzer 1996, 35–36.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Druks 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The cave was visited in July 2016 with Michal Peleg, inspector of the Israel Antiquities Authority.

<sup>15</sup> Gal et al. 2002, 147–149.

<sup>16</sup> Waterman 1937, 5 pl. III, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Naveh 2005; Aviam – Amitai 2014, 9–12.

<sup>18</sup> Tsuk 1995, 75–76.

<sup>19</sup> Weiss and Netzer 1996, 35 fig. 13; Waterman 1937, 5 pl. III; Sukenik 1945–1946; Naveh 2005, 113\*.

<sup>20</sup> Weiss unpublished.

<sup>21</sup> Weiss 1994, 237–240.

<sup>22</sup> Meyers – Meyers – Gordon 2018, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Porath 2010; Gur 2014; Raban – Shemesh 2016, site no. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Tsuk 2002; Tsuk 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Zidan 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Weiss 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Unpublished. The site was visited in July 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Porath 2009; Porath 2010; Tepper 2013; Zidan 2015.

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