

Excavating Jesus

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Who was the historical Jesus?

Scholars usually answer this question either by re-reading more closely the gospels or by reconstructing more precisely his context from ancient literary texts. But I think those interested in the historical Jesus should appeal to stones as well as texts, to ground and gospel, material remains and scribal remains, and use the work of the archaeologist and the work of the exegete. Words talk. Stones talk, too. To find out who Jesus was, archaeologists who dig down amidst the stones must be consulted to reconstruct his world, just as much as biblical scholars who dig down exegetically amidst the texts to reconstruct his sayings and deeds. Only so can Jesus be located in his world, his vision and his program put in its time and place.

Archaeologists have long ago abandoned the quest for that single artifact that will prove the gospels true, and archaeology's role is not as arbiter of their historicity. I doubt any archaeologist working in Galilee today still asks the pilgrims' question of where Jesus walked. But many look at the vast array of sites and a mass of mundane artifacts—potsherds, coins, walls, floors, and bones—to examine the patterns in the material culture with which Jesus' world must be reconstructed. This, of course, helps answer the more important question of how Jesus walked.

Let's look at one aspect of that vast body of archaeological evidence and examine Kingdom Building in the Jewish Homelands right before and after the turn of the Common Era. Look down this hierarchy from top to bottom: from the Roman Empire of Caesar Augustus, through the Jewish kingdom of Herod the Great, to the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee at the time of Jesus. In reverse, from bottom to top: Antipas to Herod to Augustus. The former are not greater than Rome in anything, but they are miniatures of Rome in everything. Archaeologists from across the Mediterranean tell us that Romanization meant urbanization meant commercialization.

After solidifying his rule in Palestine under Roman sponsorship, Herod the Great (40-4 BCE) set about constructing his kingdom architecturally as energetically as he had set about conquering it militarily. As one of antiquity's most prolific builders, his projects dominated his kingdom's landscape, and whose ruins left a lasting mark in the archaeological record. He built a monumental and colossal kingdom. His architectural feats tell the story of his rule, and their style betrays his persona and character as a king. His

crown jewel, the city of Caesarea and its port, was a most ambitious and daring project. On the surface and from ancient literary texts, we know that its very name paid tribute to the ultimate source of Herod's power, Caesar Augustus. Under the surface and thanks to archaeological excavations, we know that the port-city's construction was about more than nominal tribute to Caesar and Rome—taxes funneled through it from Herod's entire Kingdom to Rome, with ample riches staying in the city.

1st Century Caesarea



Agricultural produce flowed into the city from the countryside, and alongside grain, wine, and olive oil, currency also made its way to the city as Herod monetized the economy. The wealth flowing into Herod's treasury and the coffers of his ruling elite funded the construction of a lavish urbanism at Caesarea, and the initial investment of the port paid dividends by realigning trade routes from the East through his kingdom and by tapping into the lucrative Mediterranean sea routes. Herod transformed the Jewish homeland into a commercial kingdom.

The structures, artifacts, and mass of finds from Caesarea's lowest stratum reveal how expensively and expansively Herod built his kingdom's marquee city. Opening to the west and Rome, his newly constructed city and harbor communicated in their arrangement, style, and materials three interconnected messages in the aesthetic-architectural dialect of the day. First, Caesarea Maritima announced the imposition of order by Herod on his kingdom, an order that conveyed a sense of his controlling power and was imposed both on nature and society. The artificial harbor and the aqueduct imposed his will on nature, but similarly the city's orthogonal grid and control of traffic imposed an order onto society. Second, the city displayed a predilection for facades, which displayed Herod's urban wealth and at the same time delineated the social order. It was a walled city, a city of mosaics and roof tiles, frescoes and marble. And third, its structures reinforced the social hierarchy of his kingdom. The Temple housing the goddess Roma as Hera Argos and the Emperor Augustus as Zeus Olympios placed Rome atop the social hierarchy, Herod's promontory palace made him a close second, and the city's strict delineation of social class was reinforced daily in such structures as the theater with its tiered hierarchical seating. The imposition of order and the erection of

facades, coupled with specific public structures, announced and reinforced atop the social pyramid first Rome, then Herod, and finally his ruling elite. Those three interrelated areas furnish Herod's blueprint for how to build a kingdom.

I need to stress that Galilee was passed over in the architectural blueprint of Herod the Great's kingdom. He built along the coast and in the far north, all across Judean and especially in Jerusalem. But he ignored Galilee. This, however, may have been good news for its population.

Herod's son Antipas (4 BCE – 39 CE) inherited Galilee, but Caesar Augustus refused to give Herod's title, King of the Jews, to Antipas, naming him instead a tetrarch, "ruler of a fourth." One suspects, however, that he always hoped to become King of the Jews by Roman appointment. Early in his reign, he rebuilt the city of Sepphoris as his Galilean capital, four miles from Nazareth. Then in 14 CE Augustus died and his son Tiberius, finally, took over the empire. Then, and only then, did Antipas make his move. He built a new capital and minted his first coins. Mimicking his father, he built Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee not far from Capernaum as a Graeco-Roman style city and harbor, named it after the new Roman Emperor, and thereby continued to urbanize his kingdom, link it up with the broader world, and vie for the title of king. That, after all, is how his father had built his kingdom.

The excavations at Sepphoris and Tiberias have shown that in the earliest strata from the time of Antipas, all evidence points to an aniconic Jewish population, and a cautious Antipas who heeded the religious sensibilities of his Jewish subjects. The first coins Herod Antipas struck at Sepphoris and Tiberias show the tightrope he walked between trying to build a Jewish kingdom in the Roman world: they eschewed his image while containing appropriately Jewish symbols such as reeds, palm branches, and palm trees, but which were not necessarily foreign to the wider Graeco-Roman world.

Since the cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris, unlike Caesarea, were inhabited primarily by Jews and were in an almost exclusively Jewish Galilee, Herod Antipas built them without many of the trappings of the classical pagan city such as statues or pagan temples. Nevertheless, Antipas put up a Graeco-Roman architectural veneer over Sepphoris and Tiberias, a complete novelty in Galilee, and in which traces of the same aesthetic-architectural themes found at Caesarea are apparent: the imposition of order, a predilection for facades, and a reinforcement of the social hierarchy.

At both Sepphoris and Tiberias, archaeologists have discovered considerable building activity from Antipas' reign, when the cities grew in population to 8,000-12,000. At the same time, a rigid orthogonal grid was imposed on the plain just east of the Sepphoris acropolis, bisected by two perpendicular streets, the north-south cardo and east-west decumanus, and at Tiberias, the main thoroughfare bent along the contours of the shore, each a similar but miniature version of Caesarea.

As for facades, Sepphoris and Tiberias distinguished themselves from Galilean villages by white-plastered walls, frescoes, mosaics, and red roof tiles, as well as arranging structures to accentuate shape, proportion, and vistas. At Tiberias, a monumental gate from the time of Antipas has been discovered on the southern edge of the city, a marker of in and out, rural peasants and urban citizens.

To date, no clear evidence for Antipas' palaces at either Sepphoris or Tiberias has been found, though Josephus describes how the lower classes stormed a palace at Tiberias in the first Jewish revolt, and certainly Antipas would have built in both his cities palatial structures that set his residence apart. However, an impressive structure that has been excavated in the lower market at Sepphoris is a basilica dating to the first-century. The basilica, or royal building, was a Roman architectural form used for official and administrative purposes. It had a mosaic floor, frescoed walls, and marble-lined pools. It served as an administrative building, possibly a market or even a court, an imprint of the ruling elite under royal Roman sponsorship.

1st Century Tiberias



At Tiberias, a small section of a theater as yet to be excavated has been discovered, and one of the most debated discoveries at Sepphoris is the theater on its northern slope overlooking the valley. Some scholars argue that this theater illustrates Antipas' Romanizing policies and the Hellenistic character of the city at the time of Jesus, and some have even suggested that Jesus might have visited the theater, and adopted the use of the term hypocrite, Greek for state actor, from visits to the theater. The ceramic evidence used to date the theater, however, is in dispute, and the theater may well date to the late first century CE, decades after Jesus and Antipas. I think that even if the theater was built in Herod Antipas' rule and during Jesus' life, its primary relevance would neither be as the source of the word hypocrite nor as the vehicle for classical Greek culture in Galilee. Rather than the conduit of haute culture, I believe the theater vividly symbolized the Roman Empire's rigid social stratification, a development under attack in the egalitarian teachings of Jesus.

Sepphoris was rebuilt, and Tiberias was brand new. New architectural styles, larger structures, and expensive materials were introduced into the Galilee by Herod Antipas, with two Caesareas in miniature just as that city itself was Rome in miniature. Both

Galilean cities differed markedly from the surrounding towns and villages in Galilee. Though Herod Antipas was cautious of being too novel, or too foreign, and avoided direct confrontations with Jewish sensibilities, we must ask: how did he fund and finance his kingdom? These cities and their buildings were built with wealth generated primarily from agriculture—Galilee was not on the international trade network. More productive agricultural methods, fewer fallow years, and more intensive labor was needed. Polycropping waned as monocropping increased. Estates grew and tenancy increased, more currency in the Galilean economy facilitated taxation, which funded Antipas' urbanization. The fledgling kingdom was being commercialized.

Herod the Great and Herod Antipas were two rulers with two kingdoms, each inaugurated by violence, and each marked by construction-projects. But, while the former succeeded in leaving a lasting imprint on the land, the latter was eventually exiled, leaving behind only second-rate architectural remains. The finds from the ruins of Caesarea in the kingdom built by Herod the Great astound their excavators each and every excavation season, while the layers of Antipas' Tiberias and Sepphoris are more elusive and less spectacular. Jesus' kingdom, by contrast, left behind no structures whatsoever, nor inscriptions, nor any material artifacts. Nevertheless, I am convinced that archaeology helps us understand his program by examining the context in which he proclaimed and lived the Kingdom of God. And even though he never set foot in the city of Caesarea, and the two Galilean cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias are never mentioned in the gospels, their character in the first century is crucial to historical Jesus research for two reasons.

One is that Sepphoris and Tiberias provide a point of comparison for the sites that are mentioned in the gospels, places like Nazareth and Capernaum. These Jewish villages didn't have architecture that imposed itself on topography of society. They didn't have facades of plaster, marble, fresco, or mosaic in the first century. And they didn't have buildings that announced a social hierarchy or reinforced the ruling elites' or Rome's position at the top.

Another, and even more important, reason is that the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias may provide an answer to why the Jesus movement occurred when and where it happened. Why did the Kingdom movement of Jesus happen in the territories of Herod Antipas in the late 20s, not beforehand and not afterward? Does the Romanization of Lower Galilee begun by Antipas with the reconstruction of Sepphoris in 4 BCE and climaxed with its replacement as his capital by Tiberias in 19 CE have anything to do with his popular movement in the following decade? Is it significant, for example, that Jesus and the Kingdom of God are associated not with either Sepphoris or Tiberias but with Capernaum and Nazareth? I think it is crucial.

But I'll leave it to the reader to decide, and ask you to reflect on the evidence in the gospels, whether or not Jesus' Kingdom of God was indifferent to the Roman-backed Kingdom of Herod and want-to-be Kingdom of Antipas. Ask of the gospels the questions arising from the architecture of Kingdom building: Was Jesus' kingdom

about imposing an order onto society? Putting up facades? Reinforcing the social hierarchy? That, archaeology cannot determine. But it does raise these questions after the evidence for kingdom building in the Jewish homeland before and during Jesus' life is examined.

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