

Much is hidden in the city on the hill

A season of archaeology at Hippos of the Decapolis

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The shadowy wadis fill with yellow light as the sun climbs above the plateau of the Golan to the east. Long shadows become more distinct beneath every fallen column and carved rock. Far below, the Sea of Galilee turns a sparkling blue in the morning light. It is sunrise at Hippos, a Greco-Roman ruin also known by its Aramaic name, Sussita, to the Israelis who live in the surrounding area. For the archaeological teams on the hill, it is the start of another day of digging through the remains of the city's thousand years of habitation. For five weeks in September and October of 2004, I was a part of one of those teams. With my team from Concordia University in St. Paul, I helped to excavate a long-buried church in this ancient city.

Hippos lies on a hill, 2 kilometers east and 350 meters above the Sea of Galilee. A saddle of land connects it to the plateau called the Golan which rise above it to the east. From above, the hill very vaguely resembles the head of a horse, which is why the early Greek inhabitants named it after their word for horse, Hippos. The Hebrew and Aramaic name Sussita also means horse, as does the Arabic name, Qal'at el-Husn, "Fortress of the Horse" (Bagatti 59).

Founded by Hellenistic Greek colonists and built up by Romans, Hippos was a thriving city of the Decapolis region at the time of Christ, and it was very likely the "city on a hill" he refers to in Matthew 5:14. The University of Haifa in Israel has been excavating the site since 2000. In this article I will introduce you to the history of this abandoned city; I will describe the important finds of past excavations; and I will relate the finds that my team and I uncovered during the recent season of digging.

The city's history

Hellenistic Period

It is possible that Mount Sussita was occupied before Hellenistic times, but the city itself was built by Greek colonists, most likely in the mid-200s BC. The Hellenistic era refers to the period of Greek dominance in the Middle East following the conquests of Alexander the Great. After his death in 331 BC, his empire was divided among his generals. Ptolemy and his descendents ruled Egypt, and Seleucus took Syria and lands further east. Palestine was a battleground for the Ptolemies and the Seleucids. It is likely that Hippos, on a very defensible site in the north part of Palestine, was founded as a border fortress of the Seleucids (Tzaferis).

As the Seleucids took possession of all of Palestine, Hippos grew into a full-fledged polis, a Greek city-state with control of a region surrounding countryside. It was called Antiochia Hippos and was improved with all the makings of a Greek polis: a temple, a central market area, and many public buildings. Water was the limiting factor in the size of the city. Since the people relied on wells and rain-collecting cisterns for all their water, the population during Hellenistic times remained small (Epstein 1).

The Maccabean revolt resulted in an independent Jewish kingdom under the Hasmonean family in 142 BC. In c. 83-80 BC, a Alexander Jannaeus led a Hasmonean campaign to conquer Hippos (Epstein 1) and rename it Sussita. According to Josephus, Jannaeus forced the entire city to convert to Judaism and be circumcised (Tzaferis).

Roman Period

Sussita was under Hasmonean rule until the Roman general Pompey conquered Palestine in 63 BC. Pompey proceeded to grant self-government to ten Greek cities on the eastern frontier of Palestine, called the Decapolis. Hippos was one of the Decapolis, according to the Roman historian Pliny (Epstein 1). The people of Hippos and the other Decapolis cities welcomed

Pompey as a liberator (Chancey and Porter 164). In fact, for centuries the cities based their calendars on this conquest and used 63 BC as their base year. As part of the Decapolis, Hippos enjoyed a degree of autonomy, even minting its own coins, which were stamped with a horse in recognition of the city's name (Epstein 1).

Hippos was given to Herod the Great in 37 BC and the Province of Syria in 4 BC. According to Josephus, during this time Hippos, a pagan city, was the "sworn enemy" of the new Jewish city across the lake, Tiberias (Epstein 1). However, Hippos must have had some Jewish residents. Josephus also reports that during the First Jewish Revolt of AD 66-70, Hippos persecuted its Jewish residents (Tzaferis). Other Jews from Sussita participated in attacks on Magdala and elsewhere (Epstein 1). The city fell under attack by the rebels at one point (Epstein 1).

A few years after the Romans put down the revolt, they created the province of Palestina in the early 100s and Hippos was part of it (Parker 137). This is the beginning of the period of Hippos' greatest prosperity as a Roman Decapolis city. The Romans built a street grid centered on a long *decumanus* street running east-west through the city. The main streets were lined with hundreds of monolithic columns of red Egyptian granite. The great expense required to ship the columns to Palestine and haul them up Mount Sussita is proof of the city's wealth. Roman Hippos also built a shrine to the Emperor, new city walls, a theater (Chancey and Porter 191), and possibly other urban improvements. The most significant improvement, however, was the aqueduct, built to bring water to the city from springs in the Golan. The aqueduct is a stone pipeline that stretches 20 miles over the plateau. The water was collected in a large, vaulted underground cistern (Epstein 2). This increased water supply enabled a large population to live

there. Although Pliny was somewhat reserved in his praise for the city, calling it simply “a pleasant town” (Tzaferis), Roman Hippos was a prosperous and wealthy city.

Byzantine Period

The Byzantine Period in Palestine is considered to begin with the Emperor Diocletian’s restructuring of the Empire in 284-305, and with Emperor Constantine’s official toleration of Christianity after 324. With Diocletian’s restructuring, Hippos was put into the province of Palestina Secunda, encompassing the Golan and Galilee. With Christianity’s new position as the Imperial religion, Palestine became the Holy Land, a focal province of the Roman Empire. The population of Palestine reached its maximum capacity without modern irrigation, approximately one million in the western half alone (Broshi 7), the most people in the region until the twentieth century (Broshi 1). A tourist industry developed to accommodate the throngs of Christian pilgrims. Many churches and monasteries were built with Imperial funds. Industry and trade expanded, making luxury goods like glassware and finely glazed pottery available to commoners (Parker 169). Furthermore, the region of Hippos enjoyed relative tranquility with little civil strife, evidenced by the lack of Roman military installations in the interior of Palestine (Parker 169). The area remained diverse, with Christians, pagans, Jews, and Samaritans; however, Christianity gradually replaced paganism as the dominant religion.

In Hippos, Christianity came slowly. The city had long been pagan with a few Jewish villages in the city’s territory (Epstein 1), and there is no evidence of any Christian presence before the fourth century. A tomb to a man named Hermes has been found outside the city walls. The tomb’s inscription is definitely pagan, attesting to the practice of paganism at least into this period (Bagatti 63).

Gradually the city became Christianized. By 359 Hippos was already the seat of a bishop, one named Peter listed in the accounts of church councils in 359 and 362. Bishops Conon and Theodorus are listed as having attended councils in Jerusalem in 518 and 536, respectively (Bagatti 59). During the Byzantine period, Hippos became a Christian center. The pagan temples were replaced by four Christian churches. The city was under the administration of the metropolitan of Scythopolis, another Decapolis city.

Byzantine Palestine declined in the 500s; there was a violent Samaritan revolt in 529, increasing trouble with outside enemies to the east, and plagues and earthquakes that made life more difficult for the people of the region (Parker 136). The entire area was overrun by Sassanid Persian armies in 614. The Sassanids, who were zealous Zoroastrians, persecuted Christians all over Palestine, and Hippos would not have been exempt. The Byzantine Empire re-conquered Palestine in 627, but soon afterward the Arab Umayyad Caliphate invaded and conquered Palestine, culminating with the fall of Caesarea in 641.

Umayyad (Arab) period

The Arabs allowed Christianity and Roman culture to continue in their conquered lands, but Hippos still experienced economic decline and a loss of population (Tzaferis). The final stroke came in January of 747 or 748, when an earthquake collapsed the city (Russell 49). This earthquake affected cities from northern Egypt to northern Syria and Mesopotamia and was much documented by contemporary writers (Russell 49). Many remnants of Byzantine culture were destroyed. Hippos was abandoned permanently. The only people to live there for eight hundred years were occasional shepherds and herdsmen.

Previous excavations

Early exploration

The first modern study of Sussita/Hippos was Gottlieb Schumacher's survey of Palestine, published in 1885 (Bagatti 64). Schumacher identified the ruins, known by their Arabic name of Qal'at el-Husn, as a different Sea of Galilee site, Gamala (Bagatti 59). He made a rough plan of the city, sketching out the *decumanus maximus* (the main east-west road), the remains of the cathedral and baptistery, one other church with an apse, the city gates, and the tombs on the saddle of land east of the city.

In 1899, Fr. J. Germer-Durand, an epigraphist, came to Hippos looking for inscriptions among the tombs. He found the very important dedication to the young man Hermes, revealing the pagan culture that still existed in the city in the 300s (Bagatti 63).

Another survey was carried out in the years following 1937 by the members of the newly founded Kibbutz Ein Gev. These surveys produced a more detailed city plan (Epstein 1).

The Epstein excavations

The first excavations were conducted in 1951-1955 under Claire Epstein, with other teams led by M. Avi-Yonah, A. Schulman, and E. Anati (Epstein 2). These were rescue operations, intended to see what was lying under the ground that was about to be used for Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) military structures. Sussita was then the border between Israel and Syria and was again to be used as a fortress. Epstein identified four churches in the city but only excavated the cathedral and baptistery.

The cathedral is a conventional Byzantine basilica with three apses facing east. Its two aisles are defined by columns. Many of the columns are the red granite ones from the colonnaded streets. All of the columns are lying parallel, fallen in the same direction. This means they were probably toppled in an earthquake, most definitely the one in 747/8. An inscription says that the cathedral was built in the time of a Procopius the Presbyter (Epstein 2).

Outside the church's customary three entrances is a colonnaded atrium with a cistern.

Throughout the cathedral there is evidence of both pagan and Christian materials in secondary use (Bagatti 62).

The baptistery adjoins the basilica to the north. The baptistery is the reason for identifying the other structure as a "cathedral." It is unusually built in the form of a tiny basilica, with three apses and two aisles and a mosaic floor (Epstein 2). In the central apse is the cross-shaped font where converts stood to have water poured over them. The most interesting things about the baptistery are the many inscriptions. The two side apses are inscribed with crosses made of the intersecting Greek words for "Light" and "Life" (Tzaferis). An inscription in the floor dedicates the structure to Saints Cosmas and Daiman, two Syrian brothers of the fourth century who offered their medical services for free until their martyrdom. They were remembered in various healing rituals in Byzantine times. The mosaic also contains a "Chi-Rho" monogram for Christ and the name of Procopius the Presbyter. The floor also gives a date for the building: 654 in the Pompeyan calendar used in the Decapolis. This corresponds to a date of AD 591 for the construction of the baptistery and the cathedral.

The Segal excavations

Excavators returned to Sussita in 2000 with the start of an ongoing project of the University of Haifa under the direction of Professor Arthur Segal. A team from Poland under Jolanta Mlynarczyk and Mariusz Burdajewicz was with them. The American team led by Mark Schuler, the team I joined this past season, began working during the 2002 season.

The excavations since 2000 have focused on six excavation areas: the city's forum, the monumental Kalybe temple near the forum, the Hellenistic temple compound, the Northwest

Church, the East Gate of the city, and finally the site I helped to excavate this season, the Northeast Church.

The Forum

Excavation in the forum began in the second season at Hippos, in 2001. The forum is a tritostoon, a rectangular plaza with colonnades on all four sides (Segal and Eisenberg 2003). The stones are mainly basalt and are engraved with masons' marks. Some of the stones are in secondary use (Segal 2001). The most significant find in the forum has been a large podium in the center that once supported a statue, probably of a prominent citizen. A statue like this required the consent of a city council, so this further proves that Hippos was a real polis, or city-state.

The Kalybe

On the south end of the forum is a structure of high-quality, finely dressed basalt stones with a semicircular niche on one side. This had first been identified as a nymphaeum, or public fountain (Segal 2000). However, no water pipes were found around the structure, and a staircase on the western end showed that this structure had a very specific and different use. It strongly resembles a Kalybe, a small temple for the worship of the Roman Emperor found only in a few sites in Syria and Palestine (Segal 2001). After the second season this structure was solidly identified as a Kalybe, and excavation on it has not continued.

The Hellenistic Compound

Work on the Hellenistic temple compound began in the second season at Hippos. Excavators found a long wall, expertly constructed of basalt stone, not in the Roman style. It was identified as the edge of a platform for a Hellenistic temple (Segal 2001). In front of the wall is a large paved compound, the temenos for the temple. This is where the people gathered

to worship while the priests made sacrifices inside the temple building. The platform above the temenos was also used for a Roman temple and finally the Northwest Church; as the city became Christian, it built its church on the same site as its pagan temple. This temple is a very important find, since very few signs of Hellenistic occupation have been found in the Decapolis region (Segal and Eisenberg 2002).

The Northwest Church

The Northwest church was built on the site of the Hellenistic and Roman temples. It originally had one eastward-facing apse, with a second added on the northern side later (Segal 2000). Both aisles have beautifully preserved mosaic floor with a fan pattern. The mosaics were added later, after an entrance was blocked. The 2002 Polish team found two inscriptions in the mosaic. They remembered two people named Petros and Heliadora as the donors responsible for the mosaic. Beneath the mosaic there is evidence of an earlier mosaic floor with some fire damage (Segal 2001). A whole section of chancel screen was found intact, and many broken but large fragments of the screen were also found.

North of the main basilica was found a room filled with storage jars. South of the basilica were several adjoining rooms. One was a martyrium, a reliquary-filled room for the veneration of martyrs (Segal and Eisenberg 2002). Another was a diakonon, a storage room filled with items for monks. Many pieces of fully intact pottery were found there, along with a metal decanter from the Umayyad period of the 700s. This shows that the church remained in use into the Arab period, possibly right up to its destruction in the earthquake of 748/749.

Also south of the church is an industrial complex connected with the church. A winepress and an olive press were found, but the area was not extensively excavated until this past season.

The East City Gate

The eastern gate overlooks the main road into Hippos that comes over the saddle of land between Mount Sussita and the Golan plateau. Excavation of the gate began in the third season, 2002. The gate is asymmetrical, with one square tower and one round one. But the gate was expertly built with high-quality Roman construction. It has suffered extensive damage during the IDF's use of Sussita in the 1950s (Segal and Eisenberg 2003).

The Northeast Church

The first American team began work on the Northeast Church in 2002. That year they found a stone sarcophagus resting on the floor in the corner of the basilica's chancel. The following year the team opened the tomb and found the bones of an elderly woman. It is very unusual to find a female burial in such a prominent place in a Byzantine church (Segal and Eisenberg 2003). In addition, the team found another tomb, this one beneath the floor in the center of the chancel. A lead pipe for anointing the deceased stuck up above the floor. It was in an even more prominent place than the elderly woman's tomb, but the tomb was not opened until the season when I worked there.

By the end of the 2003 season the chancel and the south aisle of the church were excavated. The chancel has a floor of stone tiles and contains spaces for several missing reliquaries. The two rows of columns that define the aisles do not match one another. The spacing between columns is different on either side, and the north stylobate seems to have a gap between two columns. A cistern was found in the northwestern corner of the basilica; it is very unusual for a cistern to be inside the church rather than out in the atrium. There was much work to do when I joined the team in 2004.

The 2004 Season

Goals for the season

Our team had three primary goals for the 2004 season at the Northeast Church. We wanted to open the cist tomb (The floor in the center of the chancel beneath the floor level) and exhume the bones we found in it. Second, we wanted to completely excavate the north aisle and nave of the church, clearing all the soil out from the inside of the basilica and seeing what, if any, of the mosaic floor survived the earthquake and the intervening centuries. Finally, we wanted to excavate the area north of the church to explore what lay beyond the basilica's interior.

Overview of the season

The bones of three people were found in the cist tomb. They were exhumed and sent to an anthropologist for analysis. In addition, we excavated the area inside the tomb but outside the sarcophagus. The major find in this locus was a large amount of nails, possibly indicating a wooden coffin in the tomb prior to the stone sarcophagus containing the three burials. We also dug a probe into the church's foundation to the north of the cist tomb.

All the soil was removed from the interior of the church, revealing several sections of partially preserved mosaic in the nave and the north aisle. Two distinct layers of mosaic were found in the nave. Much of the work of the season consisted of preserving the mosaic by reinforcing the edges of the intact sections with lime. A small section of the mosaic in the north aisle was washed to reveal crosses along with the more typical geometric patterns. The church's main entrance in the center of the western wall was found to be blocked. The cistern in the north aisle was also partially explored.

One room was excavated to the north of the church, revealing evidence of domestic use during or after the use of the church. Stones that are probably the first three steps of a staircase were also found.

Finally, the nearest edge of the church's atrium was excavated outside the church's western wall. The atrium has a typical colonnade about four meters from the church's wall. There was evidence of domestic use in the atrium as well; a large grindstone was found at the northern end.

The 2004 Season, week by week

Now I will describe what we accomplished and found during the course of the 2004 season. I will begin by explaining the routines our team followed each week and what my specific duties were as a volunteer and student. Then I will recount what we did during each week of the excavation.

Daily Routines

Each day began shortly before sunrise as our team, the University of Haifa team, and the Polish team rode a charter bus from Kibbutz Ein Gev to the east side of Mount Sussita, at the lowest point of the saddle of land. We hiked up a path that was the remains of the Roman road and connected with the city's *decumanus maximus*. We went to the Northeast Church and worked until about 8:30. As a student I was assigned a specific area of which I was in charge. My job was the pottery registrar. Besides digging, I made sure all the pottery and mosaic tiles (tesserae) that the team found was put into specific buckets. Each locus in which we dug had its own bucket, properly labeled. Any glass, animal bones, or nails that were found had to be filed into bags or envelopes marked with the date and the locus.

At roughly 8:30 all of the teams met in one of the IDF buildings for breakfast. The food was driven up the hill along a very steep road on the west slope of the hill that the IDF had cut for its tanks. The meal was always the same—tomatoes and cucumbers, hard-boiled eggs, tea and coffee—but it always tasted wonderful after a morning of hard digging. After breakfast was

more digging. By noon the sun was at its hottest, and we were all quite tired, so the day's digging ended. We hiked back down to the bus and drove back to the kibbutz for lunch and a shower.

In the afternoon the team gathered to clean all the pottery and tesserae that we had found that morning. It was my job then to sort and catalogue the day's finds. I had to count the animal bones, roofing tiles, and fragments of marble that had turned up. I had to sort the pottery sherds by type and identify diagnostic pieces; these are sherds that contain useful information such as rims, handles, and pieces with decorative elements. I learned to identify cookware, fine-glazed pottery, amphora sherds, and so forth. I also learned to tell if a diagnostic sherd came from a pot, casserole dish, bowl, plate, oil lamp, jar, jug, or some other type of vessel. I sorted the glass fragments in a similar way.

These are the routines and tasks that the American team and I carried out each day of digging. I will now describe what we did and what we found during the course of the excavation, week by week.

Week 1

The dig began for me very early and very dark on 5 September. We had miscalculated the time of sunrise and arrived on Mount Sussita when it was still too dark to work. During the first week we established the routines of the dig, including when to arrive and how to keep track of the pottery and other finds. We gathered our equipment and learned to use it: picks, terreas, and all the necessary tools of the archaeologist.

The cist tomb had been re-filled with soil at the end of the 2003 season, so an early task was to remove all of this loose soil. This was accomplished quickly, and on 6 September the tomb was ready to be opened. Fortunately the sarcophagus was covered by several small stones

rather than a monolithic cover like the one that had housed the old woman. Dr. Schuler removed the stones as the other teams watched, and he revealed a jumble of bones. Glenn Borchers began the task of meticulously removing all the soil from around the bones so that a drawing could be made of the bones as they lay *in situ*, but uncovered by soil. Among the bones was found fragments of delicate blue-green glass. The elevation of the tomb was measured, and this revealed that the tomb was on the same level as the original floor. Previously the lead pipe's elevation had made us think that it had been built with a secondary phase of building. The construction of the cist tomb led Prof. Segal hypothesize that it was earlier than the entire church; its masonry looked Roman, not Byzantine.

Excavation began in the north aisle in Square C1. There was much debris from when the wall had collapsed in an earthquake. Interesting among the rocks were several corbels, stones cut into a curve for use in roofing. These corbels were covered with wall plaster because they had been in secondary use as part of the wall. Along the northern wall we uncovered a bench. It was longer than the corresponding bench against the south wall. It had also been placed on top of mosaic floor, so it was put in the church after the floor had been installed. One very interesting oil lamp sherd was found in the north aisle stamped with a cross.

During the first week we removed the top layers of soil from the nave of the church, down to roughly 5 cm above the floor. We saw the first traces of intact mosaic. Most importantly, two sections of the cancel screen were recovered. The rest had been taken from the church in the intervening centuries. The fragments we found were engraved with a pattern of spirals and three-pointed leaves.

The feast of Rosh Hashanah caused our work week to end early, so we used the time off to explore religious sites around the Sea of Galilee.

Week 2

Glenn continued his work in the cist tomb, removing soil from around the bones.

In the nave and north aisle, we finished removing the upper destruction layer of soil and proceeded to more carefully remove the lowest, oldest level, called Horizon C. We completely exposed the center doorway of the basilica; it had been intentionally blocked with stones. And surprisingly there was no northern door at all. Nearly all Byzantine churches were built with three doors facing west, but the Northeast Church only had two. This meant that the only door that had never been blocked was the southern door in the west wall. A coin and some ashes in Horizon C looked promising, but turned out to be nothing more than a stash of modern garbage that had been buried: we unearthed a tin can and a candy wrapper, among other things. On 14 September some members of our team began the work of preserving sections of the mosaic with lime.

During this week we began digging in the atrium outside the church's western wall. We began removing the destruction layer of soil in Square E2 and prepared E3 for excavation.

Still another new area of digging was begun this week: Square C0, outside the north wall of the church. This northern room is bounded on the inside by the wall of the basilica and on the outside by a thick, curved wall.

Yom Kippur shortened this work week as well, so our team went on a three-day tour of Roman and Byzantine archaeological sites in Jordan. We saw the city of Jerash, the magnificent ruins of Petra, the holy site of Mount Nebo, the beautiful mosaic map in Mahdaba, and the capital city, Amman.

Week 3

The bones were finally cleared of soil, and on 20 September the exhumation of the bones began. Each bone was carefully lifted from the tomb and photographed. They were taken back to our lab for preliminary analysis by Glenn and Dr. Schuler.

In the nave and north aisle, the preservation work continued on the mosaic floor. We encountered a calamity, however. Moles were tunneling under the mosaic, causing large portions of it to collapse. We would try various mole remedies over the following weeks, from chewed-up gum to open cans of soda, but nothing kept them away. The only solution was to preserve the mosaic sections with lime as fast as we could, to seal them against the underground menace.

Excavation continued in the atrium. Much of the destruction layer was removed. A stylobate and column bases were found a few meters away from the church's western wall, right where we expected to find the atrium's colonnade. Dr. Schuler speculated that the stylobate might have once been the edge of a Roman *cardo* (north-south running street). However, the columns we found were made of bases with drums stacked upon them. Roman street colonnades were made of monolithic pillars. Along the same line as the stylobate we found the remains of a rough stone wall. However, the wall was "floating" on a layer of soil. So it was built many years after the city had been abandoned, after soil had already gathered in the abandoned church. The wall probably belonged to an Arab shepherd or herdsman to make an animal pen. Also in the atrium we found the fallen lintel from the center doorway. Plaster was found from the lintel face down and in many pieces, so we worked to preserve the plaster in case it contained any valuable painted designs.

The area in which I was most involved was the northern room in C0. The room contained three small columns that looked like they framed a rectangular threshold. It seemed to

us that there was once a door to this area in the northern wall of the basilica. This would have been strong evidence that the building we were excavating had not been a church originally, because no Byzantine church was built with a side door. My pottery analysis revealed an abundance of animal bones and cookware. This implies that during or after the time the church was in use, C0 was a domestic area. We reached the floor of the square, a rough plaster on a bed of stones. It seems that there may be another floor beneath it.

Week 3 was a very interesting one for me personally. On 19 September I celebrated International Talk Like a Pirate Day, irritating my teammates to no end. 23 September was my twentieth birthday. Also during this week several members of our team, myself included, contracted traveler's diarrhea. We may have picked it up in Jordan. It affected my work for nearly a week.

Week 4

Work in the cist tomb revealed a startling find: there were a total of three skulls, indicating three different burials in the tomb. This was a fairly common practice in Byzantine tombs, where whole families would sometimes be put in the same grave. Once the exhumation was completed and the bones all were put into boxes, our team began digging a probe into the floor of the church just to the north of the cist tomb. We were trying to examine the foundation for clues into the relative ages of the tomb and the floor. Was the tomb built in Roman times and the church built later?

The mosaic preservation continued in the north aisle and nave, but problems with the lime supply began to replace the moles as our main concern.

The plaster from the lintel that we found in the atrium the previous week was found to contain no useful information. So excavation of the atrium continued. We had previously

hypothesized a connection between the “floating” wall in the atrium and the curved wall that was the outer boundary of the northern room in C0. Now that more of the floating wall was revealed, it was clearly unrelated to the thicker wall. We removed the lowest soil horizon in much of the atrium, revealing a pavement of very smooth, very thin stones. Under the pavement in one place was a mosaic made of very large tesserae, different from the mosaic inside. On the southern end of the atrium we partially uncovered a Corinthian capital; we still have no idea what it is doing there. Near the capital, however, is a groove and doorjamb showing where the south entrance to the atrium once stood. On the opposite side of the atrium, near northern end, we found a large grindstone, possibly indicating later domestic use of the area.

Having finished digging in C0 north of the church, we moved into the adjacent square, D0. We removed all the soil down to Horizon C. The most surprising find in D0 was the lower three steps of a staircase. It ascends up into C0. This explains much about the odd architecture of C0. The three small columns were there to support the staircase or whatever platform it once led to. The stone we had thought was a threshold was actually part of the supporting structure under the staircase. There is still no way to say what the stairs led to. It may have been a balcony that led inside the church, or it may have a tower outside the church.

Finally, during Week 4 we cleared some of the heavy stone debris to the south and east of the basilica so that these areas can be excavated in 2005.

Week 5

In the final week of digging more of the foundation near the cist tomb was exposed. One important find was an Ionic capital in the simplified Byzantine style. It was holding up the corner where the apse joins the rest of the eastern wall. This was an important find because it shows that the entire church was built after these Byzantine capitals appeared in architecture.

However, the date of the tomb itself is still unknown. Inside the cist tomb, Glenn removed soil from around the sarcophagus and unearthed many rusted nails. They surely must have held together something wooden beneath the sarcophagus. Probably the tomb housed a wooden coffin before the sarcophagus was put into it. This is just one more clue into this puzzling tomb.

By the end of the week, all of the mosaic in the north aisle and about half in the nave had been preserved. Supply problems had persisted until the very end. We finally washed part of the mosaic in the north aisle, and startlingly, it was colored in a cross pattern. Several Imperial edicts throughout the sixth century had banned crosses in the floors of churches. So assuming that this church followed the rules, the crosses in the mosaic imply an early Byzantine date for the Northeast church.

We excavated a large portion of the atrium. We found a point where the stylobate turns a corner, following the conventional design of a Byzantine atrium. We also discovered a space for a gate on the north end of the atrium, matching the gate on the south end. However, the south gate lined up exactly with the corner of the basilica, but this north gate lines up with the outer edge of those northern rooms in D0 and C0. This implies that these rooms were part of the original design of the church.

In D0 we reached the floor and two doors. We discovered why the basilica does not seem to have a door on the north side of the western wall. This northern room has a door into the atrium, and another door (now blocked) connects it with the basilica itself. This room was used as an entryway into the church.

Near the end of the excavation we briefly explored the cistern in the northwestern corner of the basilica. The very presence of the cistern inside the church is unusual. Byzantine churches often had a cistern outside, in the middle of the atrium; the Hippo cathedral is one

example of this. But a cistern inside the sanctuary is unusual. We removed the stone that defined the opening of the cistern, a squarish stone with a perfectly round hole. The stone was a section of an aqueduct in secondary use. However, the hole's diameter did not match that of the aqueducts at the east or west ends of the city, so we do not know where it came from. We did some looking inside the cistern, but real exploration will be done in 2005. The cistern seems to have another opening on the other side of the wall in D0, but it is not yet exposed.

As Week 5 wound to a close we took the necessary actions to cover up our church to protect it until the next archaeological season. After photographing the excavated church, we replaced the stone tiles in the chancel we had removed. We covered the chancel and atrium with soil and rolled felt over the delicate mosaic to protect it. We covered the felt with sand and soil and said goodbye to Hippos.

Important Finds by Other Teams in the 2004 Season

The forum was completely excavated, revealing the entire paved area.

Some important finds were made in the Hellenistic temple compound. A massive column drum, almost two meters in diameter, was unearthed. A column that thick would have been used in the portico of a temple roughly five stories high. The Hippos temple was grander than previously thought. In addition, a Nabataean inscription was found, and the architecture of the temple steps connects it with the Nabataean god Dushara. Religious syncretism was apparently another feature of Greco-Roman Hippos.

The Polish team excavated most of the atrium of the Northwest Church. In it they discovered an inscription honoring a deaconess named Antona. A large section of the chancel screen was reconstructed. On 20 September the team opened a pair of tombs in the rooms to the south of the basilica. These tombs were found to be empty. Excavation was carried out by the

Haifa team in the industrial complex connected with the church. They explored the wine and olive presses and found what seems to be a pottery factory.

The Importance of the Hippos Excavation

Historical significance

Hippos is one of the only Decapolis cities to show extensive Hellenistic occupation. Therefore, exploring Hippos' Hellenistic origins can reveal much about the process of Hellenization in the Middle East. Hippos was also significant as a Seleucid border fortress, a center of Roman culture on the Imperial frontier, and a bishopric, a Byzantine religious center. Hippos' grand buildings attest to a great amount of wealth, the sources of which we do not yet completely understand. Finding out more about this city can reveal some important information about a significant city.

Cultural significance

The Decapolis was a region of fascinating cultural interplay. Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Nabataean cultures collided and mixed in this frontier region. The temple to Dushara is a first glimpse at what could be a very unique culture in Hellenistic and Roman times. The city held onto its paganism into Byzantine times, but eventually Hippos became an important Christian center. It was the seat of a bishop and contained four known churches. The Northwest Church built directly over the pagan temple is highly symbolic and suggests that the Christians of Hippos wanted to completely erase the city's pagan past. Finally, the multiple burials and reliquaries in the Northeast Church suggest a very holy place.

Biblical significance

Hippos may have significance for Christians because of its role in the New Testament. It is possible that when Jesus teaches others to be like "a city set upon a hill" that "cannot be

hidden” (Matthew 5:14), he was referring to Hippos. If this is the case, then the five-story pagan temple, visible for miles, would be significant in understanding this command. Jesus would have been telling his followers to be as visible in their faith in God as the people of Hippos were in their pagan faith.

Two of Jesus’ miracles are told in the Gospels as having occurred in the vicinity of Sussita. Mark 5 and Luke 8 tell how Jesus dramatically drives a “legion” of demons out of a man into a herd of swine. The miracle takes place near a Gentile city on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee; Mark even says that it is in the Decapolis. This city can only be Hippos. Understanding the city and the tombs outside it (which are mentioned in both gospels) can lead to a greater understanding of the story. Mark 7 has Jesus heal a deaf-mute man in the Decapolis on the Sea of Galilee, which also must indicate Sussita.

The importance of our work in the Northeast Church

Many of our finds during this season are very significant in understanding the Northeast Church. The thorough exploration of the cist tomb may reveal it to be from the Roman period. Since pagan Romans did not bury their dead inside the city, a Roman-era tomb inside the city walls would probably indicate a very early Christian community. The nails found underneath the sarcophagus are very significant. If they do belong to a wooden coffin, that would corroborate the claim to an early date for the tomb and indicate a very early Christian burial. Pottery sherds were found *in situ* in the soil below the sarcophagus. They have not yet been analyzed for dating, but they will greatly help us estimate a date for the tomb’s construction.

The nave and north aisle continue to present an intricate puzzle for the archaeologists trying to establish a sequence for the construction of the church. There are two layers of mosaic, two clear chancel floors, and several blocked entrances. The north wall of the basilica seems to

be a thin interior wall, which backs up the hypothesis that the northern rooms are an original part of the church. But what was their function? What did the staircase lead to?

The chancel screen fragments that we found give us a good glimpse into what the church looked like while it was in use. So does the mosaic which has been washed. The cross pattern in the mosaic also suggests an early date for the church, assuming the congregation followed the Imperial edicts regarding crosses in the floor.

The finds during the 2004 season reveal much, but they lead to far more questions than answers. The 2005 American team has a difficult task ahead of them. They will find many more clues into the original structure of the church and how its various components relate to one another. And when the mysteries regarding this sacred church are solved, they will provide many insights into the religious life of this city of the Decapolis.

Conclusions

My mornings atop Mount Sussita were some of the most exciting times of my life. During my digging and pottery sorting, I was connected with so many new cultures. I lived and worked among archaeologists and students and volunteers from all over the world. I saw the remains of the culture of the Hellenistic and Roman frontier. I helped to unearth and discover glimpses into Byzantine Christianity. In a small way I helped add to our knowledge of the past. Hippos, the city on the hill, still has much to hide. But I am happy and proud to have worked on unearthing a part of it.

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