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Hippos-Susita: an Unfolding Adventure

The experience of Hippos-Susita can be described under four main headings. An introduction shall involve a bit of historical background. This will include both the history of the occupation of the city of Hippos itself, and the history of the excavations that have taken place there in the past. The third item will be a description of the current season of excavation at Hippos. Fourth and finally will be a personal reflection on the Hippos experience for the 2004 season. These four things should provide a sufficient survey of the excavation experience overall.

The ancient city of Hippos is located on a hill about 300 meters above sea level and approximately 500 meters above nearby Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee). It lays about 2 kilometers from the lake's eastern border. It approaches the lake from the heights of the Golan, to which it belongs. The particular height upon which Hippos rests protrudes out toward the lake in a noticeable fashion.

The site was founded in the Hellenistic period. After death of Alexander the Great, the land of and around Palestine was divided in possession between the Ptolemaic Empire and the Seleucid Empire. These two great powers fought for control of Palestine during the third century. However, the Seleucids were the ones to create the first beginnings of normal settled life in Hippos during the middle of the third century B.C.E. (Tzaferis).

In the second century B.C.E., the boundary walls of the city were extended, and the city was given the name "Antiocha," although the old name "Hippos" is the one that endured throughout the years (Tzaferis). In 100-76 B.C.E., Hippos was conquered by

Alexander Jannaeus, who forced everyone to accept Judaism (Epstein 1). In the prosperous 100s and 200s B.C.E., there were improvements to the city, including a Graeco-Roman street layout and buildings of the Graeco-Roman style as well. In vast the Decumanus street in the middle of the city that runs east-west can still be seen today (Tzaferis).

After this time came the Roman period of Palestine, at the beginning of which the Roman general Pompey conquered the area (63 B.C.E.). He took it from the Jews, who had occupied the region up until that time (Epstein 1). After Herod's death in 4 B.C.E., it became part of the Province of Syria. Subsequent to the Roman conquest, Hippos became one of the cities of the Decapolis (Tzaferis). The Decapolis was a group of approximately ten cities in Palestine that maintained a very Greek culture. The inscriptions in the city are just one of many testimonies to the Greek nature of their culture. The vast majority of the inscriptions in Hippos and other Decapolis cities are in Greek. According to Parker, Greek predominated in official administration and Latin basically disappeared by the late fourth century (Parker 140).

The precise population of hippos is unknown, but, according Broshi, Western Palestine in the Roman and Byzantine periods (antiquity through 600 C.E.) was no more than one million (7). One may then naturally and safely assume that the population of the city was a mere fraction of this figure. According to parker, the epigraphy and archaeological evidence seems to support the view that Jews, Christians, and perhaps pagans were living in mixed communities together at some point in the city of Hippos (Parker 141, 170). Epstein states that there were at least some Jewish villages east of the lake were included in what was considered "Hippos territory" (Epstein 1). During the

First Jewish Revolt against Rome in 66-70 C.E., the Jews (probably the ones from these villages) attacked Hippos (Epstein 1). To give a sense for the size of the territory, the territory regarded as “Hippos” extended all the way down to the Sea of Galilee around the time of this revolt (66 CE - 74 CE) (Epstein 1).

During the prosperous 2nd and 3rd centuries, the city consisted mostly of various civic institutions: a nymphaeum (central fountain), a bouleuterion (city hall), a bathhouse, some temples, and more (Tzaferis 4). Regarding religious life, Tzaferis says that Zeus, Hera, and Tyche were all probably worshipped there during this prosperous time (Tzaferis 4). Of course, there were practical means of survival in and around the city, and at this time common means of income included grain production, fishing, and trading were the main driving forces for the economy of Hippos (Tzaferis). The city had some trouble with water availability, but they eventually solved this with the installation of an aqueduct (Tzaferis 4). Some other features of the city such as the remains of ancient synagogues have been found within the territory of Hippos. These probably originated from this or an earlier time (Epstein 1). Overall, like many other towns in this period, it probably enjoyed great prosperity, and many churches and public buildings were built there (Epstein 1).

After the Roman domination came the Byzantine period. The presence of Byzantine culture in Palestine influenced the region as a whole, including Hippos. There was plenty of interplay of politics and culture of the Byzantine Empire. There was also a movement from diversity to uniformity, and one means of trying to establish unity throughout the empire came with the rise of imperial Christianity.

Christianity didn't come to the city until the fourth century, but shortly after that—in the fifth century--Hippos had become a bishopric (Epstein 1). In fact, the only literary source for the Christian life at Hippos comes from knowledge concerning the bishops, as they are mentioned in the attendance records at the council of Seleucia in 359 C.E. and that of Antioch in 363 C.E. (Bagatti 59). By the sixth century, the entire city was Christian, and it contained five churches (Tzaferis).

Muslim invasions began in Palestine in 629 C.E. By 641 C.E., when Caesarea fell to Muslims, a new historical era had begun (Parker 137). Arabs conquered Hippos in 637 C.E. It soon thereafter fell out of political, cultural, and economic independence, and it lost its status as a cultural center of the Graeco-Roman world (Tzaferis). Its characteristics as one of the famed Decapolis cities began to fade. According to Epstein, the city was abandoned after (and presumably because of) the Arab conquest at the beginning of the seventh century (1), although another (and perhaps more likely) cause for the abandonment is the earthquake in 748 C.E. (Tzaferis).

Indeed, there is some debate concerning whether the fall of Hippos was chiefly due to the Muslim occupation or the earthquake of 748 C.E. Tzaferis mentions a significant earthquake that occurred sometime between 747 and 749 C.E., after which the inhabitants promptly abandoned the city (Tzaferis). According to Kenneth Russell, one of the most extensive and disastrous earthquakes during the Roman/Byzantine time period in Palestine struck in 748 (Russell 48-49). Russell claims that this earthquake affected many areas along the Jordan and appears to have been the critical terminating moment in the life of the city of Hippos (Russell 48). In addition, though no definite dates have been identified as to the abandonment of the city, the dateable items in the city seem to

indicate use no later than the 700s C.E., but quite possibly in use up until that time (Russell 48).

In regard to Muslim occupation, the Islamic Period of Palestine lasted from 661 C.E. to 1918 (the end of the Ottoman Empire). By the time the earthquake hit in 748, the first dynasty (Umayyad) was just coming to a close (Rast 193). Some have suggested that the city of Susita, along with its many Christians, was abandoned due to this discouraging presence of Muslims in the area (Epstein 1). There is somewhat of a history of Muslim powers attempting to prescribe the social, economic, and political ways of the Qur'an, and some of the Caliphs were corrupt, and there may have been some instances of harassment at times, but for the most part, religious pluralism was tolerated under Islamic rule (Rast 205). Therefore, the reason for the abandonment of the city appears to be more related to the earthquake than Muslim persecution or devastation.

There are also a number of facts about this period that relate to the Northeast church of Hippos as a religious building. Though the churches in Hippos may seem like relatively late churches, it's important to keep in mind that Christianity as a whole and groups of Christians in particular weren't wealthy or numerous enough to leave behind any significant archaeological entities until the third century (Rast 178). With this in mind, remains dating from even the 500s C.E. may seem relatively early. According to Rast, Jewish buildings didn't even show up until the third century either (Rast 185). Thomas Parker says that the two main types of buildings during the fifth and sixth centuries in Palestine were the rectangular, longitudinally-oriented church and the octagonal, centrally-planned churches, which were rarer (152). Therefore, as Rast states, there are many churches of Byzantine style east of the Jordan (Rast 179), and the

northeast church at Hippos is one of them. Oftentimes, Byzantine-style churches had baptismal fonts, as Shivta in the Negev (Rast 181). One of the many idiosyncrasies of the Northeast church is that it doesn't appear to have one of these.

Hippos has a long history of surveys and excavations, beginning as early as the 1930s. Epstein offers the following history. In the 1930s, the nearby inhabitants of kibbutz of Ein Gev, the first explorers of the site of Hippos, began to survey the site. Formal excavations were carried out at Hippos first by Claire Epstein in 1950-1955. Her primary work was in the cathedral on the south side of the Decumanus street. This is one of four churches discovered so far at Hippos and the largest church in the city. M. Avi Yonah did a significant amount of survey work in 1951. He described the cathedral and the layout of the area of the city, noting other potential excavation sites in Hippos. The work of A. Shulman (1951) and E. Anati (1952), on behalf of the Israel Department of Antiquities, revealed more buildings dating to the Byzantine period (Epstein 2).

Currently, the Zinman Institute of Archaeology at the University of Haifa is overseeing an excavation project at Hippos, for which the director, Prof. Arthur Segal, has a permit from the Israel Antiquities Authority to excavate through 2009. They've had five seasons of digging so far—the fifth having just been completed in October of 2004. During the first year, the Haifa team began their work on the Roman center of the city with the public buildings and temples that surround it, along with wall and gate structures. The east and the north fronts of the nymphaeum were fully exposed. They also did work on the Northwest Church, uncovering some column drums and mosaic floor.

The second year, the Polish team of 15 students from the Department of Archaeology at the University of Warsaw, led by Dr. Jolanta Mlynarczyk and Dr. Mariusz Burdajewicz, joined the dig. The Poles did the primary portion of their work on the Northwest Church that (and all of the following) years. Their work focused on uncovering the northern aisle (to its full length), the western wall, the mosaic floor (which was in a fairly good state of preservation, with just small gaps), whole and partial pieces of chancel screen, the northern sacristy, northern hall, southern aisle, and an olive and wine press building. The Haifa team continued with the areas from the previous year, but added the northern building complex, which extends adjacent to and then north of the nymphaeum and the forum complex, which lies east of the nymphaeum.

During the third year, four main areas were excavated. The Haifa team continued work on the Hellenistic compound and began excavating the area of and around the east gate of the city. The Polish team continued their work in the Northwest church—including the olive and wine press. The American team, led by Dr. Mark Schuler, began their first year of work on the Northeast church. They uncovered the east portion of the apse and located a sarcophagus inside the church.

In the fourth year, 2003, Haifa's work again continued in the Hellenistic compound, where of the central part of the open court (the temenos) of the compound was exposed. The main objective for clearing the debris around the gate was completed, and the tower and part of the wall of the city were exposed. The excavation of the Northwest church's main hall and southern wing was completed, and the Martyrion (south of the main apse of the church) was uncovered also. The Northeast Church's chancel area and southern aisle

was cleared out. The first sarcophagus was opened and a second one was discovered in the chancel area.

The current (2004) season's work at Hippos has just been completed, and it consisted of much activity and many discoveries. A rough, brief, chronological review of the work done and discoveries made over the past season might be helpful. First, the team cleared out some of the fill dirt from the previous year—uncovering the second sarcophagus once again, and opening it up for exhumation (a procedure that would last the next few weeks). The team also cleared out squares C1, C2, and D2 (the entire nave of the church) in which we recovered plenty of tesserae and discovered mosaic floor—both of which we would encounter throughout the rest of the excavation. In the north aisle (C1), the team discovered quite a few (reused) corbels and some doorjambs. We also found a coin in D2 during this phase. After the nave of the church was cleared out, some members of the team would spend the rest of the time of the excavation working to clean and preserve the mosaic floor.

I myself began to record the work we did and discoveries that we made. I used a level to measure the relative heights of all the significant finds and ground levels that we encountered on the site. This work is important because it is necessary to know the relative levels of various items in the church. Relative levels can help an archaeologist determine which flooring came earlier, and which one came later. The positioning of fallen pieces (such as corbels) can be used to understand more about both how the building was constructed and how it was destroyed; these positions couldn't be researched beyond their initial discovery if elevation levels were not recorded. It is especially useful for comparing relative elevations of objects that are significant distances

from each other. Without a precise measuring tool, the archaeologist would be left with little resources for comparing the level of, for instance, a floor in one room to a floor in another.

We then started working outside of the main area of the church: just in front of the eastern side of the church (E2) and outside of the northern wall of the church (C0). In C0, some team members found three columns and a threshold to a room to the east. There were also some traces of what might have been ash and several sherds of cooking pottery.

Then, we started work outside of the southwest corner of the church (E3), where the team found a couple nails, a piece of an oil lamp, the first portion of the nice flat stone of an atrium, and a threshold for what we think might have been a doorway to the street. From then on, we continued to find stone floor, stylobate, and column bases just a couple meters from the outside of the church wall along the entire west side (the front of the church).

On Sept. 23 (day 13 of the dig), the team started digging outside of the northwest corner of the church (E0). In this corner, we eventually found another threshold--this time against the north wall. The team also started slightly to the east of that square in D0, where we eventually found what we believe to be a staircase leading up to some higher level.

On Sept. 26 (day 14), the team pushed forward into the remaining portion of the atrium that lies just outside of the church (E1) and started pulling up some of the material in the opus sectile of the chancel area. E1 contained some nice architectural stones with incised faces and beveled edges. There was also at least one significant piece of a door

jamb there. By the time that these things were completed, it was time for the team to cover up all of the delicate things in the church (including “re-burying” the second sarcophagus) with dirt, felt, and sand.

Upon the completion of the work at the Northeast Church, reflection on the completed task may be education and will be done here. To start, the on-site tasks for this dig were important because archaeology is important. Technically, archaeology is “The study of objects used by past cultures” (Currid 16), and on one level, one may say that the value of archaeology is that of an auxiliary science of history. In fact, Currid calls archaeology “the handmaid of history” (17), as it works right alongside of it. The rediscovery of remains left behind by past societies helps the archaeologist to reconstruct ancient lifestyles in order to learn how a society (or at least some aspect of society) functioned. Archaeology tends to provide some information that is not found in the documents of literary history. According to Currid, ancient writing was restricted to an elite class and frequently biased. Archaeology, however, shows no bias and provides a record of lifestyles of people of all social economic classes. The archaeologist himself or herself is a sort of historian. And even if they do not consider themselves full-fledged historians, then they at least provide historians with more data with which they might review and reevaluate the literary sources for the story of history.

On another level then, one might inquire about the purpose of history. That is, if the value of archaeology is bound up in the value of history, then the significance of the latter must be attested. Archaeology helps to bolster history’s data so that it may give more informed about the true status of historical situations and events. Historical knowledge of past cultures can help people understand the present more thoroughly. One’s ability to

understand the present situation rises whenever one's knowledge of history increases. To put it in Currid's words, one can understand "where we've come from and how we've developed" (16). We can therefrom learn more about our own nature and origins and heritage. Currid also states that, for reasons similar to those stated above, knowledge of the past serves as a barometer for the future and its events (16).

Therefore, as an archaeological work, the Northeast Church project at the Hippos Excavations is also important. The Northeast Church is a demonstration of one piece of the architectural heritage of Christianity. One of the reasons that it's important to know the heritage of Christian traditions of architecture is that the architecture oftentimes conveys some sort of theological meaning.

For instance, there is a certain kind of movement from the profane to the sacred as one progresses from one part of the church to another. The aisles are for the common ("profane") people, while the middle nave section is slightly more sacred, as it is the place where processions take place. The chancel screen marks the division of the previously mentioned areas to the altar area, which is slightly more sacred. Towards the very front of the church would be the synthronon, the seat of God's chosen priest. Finally, as one looks up from the seat of the priest, one would likely see a depiction of Jesus Christ himself—the most sacred of all.

If the archaeologist didn't do this work kind of work, one might not ever discover the extent of the occurrences of this pattern in churches, let alone the theological significance of the church layout. In addition, the fact that the structure and layout of basilicas closely mimics that of the Roman court (Schuler, 9/20/04) is another related piece of information that might not ever have been discovered without archaeology. This theological and

architectural understanding, along with many other discoveries that come from archaeology, gives yet one more piece of information about particular cultures and societies of long ago.

Another example of something that archaeology might help modern people to understand is church growth. That is, uncovering the remains of churches of early Christians might help one to understand the pattern of growth and spread of Christianity during its first centuries. When one considers both the knowledge of the date, location, and number of churches and the textual records of interaction between individuals or groups of Christians, new knowledge on the outreach of the Church of antiquity may emerge. The study might provide more comprehensive information on what methods were used, including what worked well at that time and place (and therefore resulted in more churches), and what didn't work well.

One might discover new things about such relationships as that of Emperor Justinian and his subjects. A mosaic found with crosses in it may tell a story especially in light of Justinian's decree that crosses may no longer be included in mosaic floors. On the one hand, presuming that the decree was obeyed, crosses in the mosaic may simply help to date the church. On the other hand, if this assumption of obedience contradicts other sources of a date, perhaps one will learn something about the relationship between subjects and the ruler of the empire and perhaps Christians' attitude toward authority as a whole at that time. The possibilities are numerous; each find can put just one piece of the puzzle of the past into place, and understanding the past oftentimes consists of putting many pieces of information together to make a cohesive, whole picture.

On this particular dig at the Northeast Church at Hippos in 2004, there were a number of significant finds, some of which were mentioned above. Each of these finds potentially tells the archaeologist something about the church and the people who once used it. The foremost find to mention is the second sarcophagus. While this artifact was found last year, it was only this year through the process of exhumation that the team came to a deeper understanding of the possible meaning of the tomb. The team now knows that there are three bodies that were buried in the sarcophagus. This could indicate a number of things. It may help to explain the nature of the church, that is, whether its founding was in some way connected with the death (or martyrdom) of the individuals. It may also teach something about family relationships and how they were regarded in the church. There are several possibilities, but in order to make any further conclusions on this, more information (perhaps textual and osteological) is needed.

The double mosaic floor was also a significant find. Many Byzantine-style churches during the time of the Byzantine Empire had mosaic floor in them, and the mosaic floor can be used for dating, determining the occasion or financial source for the founding of the church, or other useful things. The double mosaic floor in the Northeast Church is especially important because it may offer information for at least two different significant dates: those of the two different construction phases to which the floors correspond.

The team also found some mosaic floor under the western wall of the church. Obviously, whatever wall is placed on top of any given floor is later than the floor itself. This is another way in which relative dates can be derived from floors, and it will assist the archaeologist in putting together a chronological sequence of at least architectural events of the church. The patterns of mosaics may also be important. Crosses were

found in the mosaic floor in the north aisle this year. The significance of the cross floor pattern of mosaic has already been discussed above.

The team also found more fragments of a chancel screen this year. Although none of these pieces were very definitive in offering revolutionary and new information about the church, the presence of the chancel screens as a whole contribute to its identity as a genuinely Byzantine church.

Another often-undervalued find on the site this year was pottery. Currid mentions that there has been a relative lack of recognition of the importance of pottery in past archaeological expeditions, but he also suggests that in recent years, recognition of the importance of pottery has increased (Currid 79-80). The pottery registrar on the dig attested to the importance of pottery as well. According to him, the vast amount of pottery that was collected from C0 contributed greatly to its identification as a domestic area.

The discovery of the atrium is also significant. First, it means that there is at least several more square meters of church complex to be uncovered. Second, it offers further information regarding the style and architectural pattern of this particular church, which again helps the archaeologist (and historian) to understand the culture just a little bit more.

Another significant find was the staircase in D0. This possible staircase offers one potential explanation for the absence of the expected column base in the northern row of columns in the nave. The staircase indicates that there may have been a balcony in the church at one point, and if there were a balcony, it would account for an irregularity in the spacing of the columns.

My own personal experience with the dig was unique both academically and culturally. Part of my academic experience consisted of my assigned “area of expertise” for the excavation: site coordinates. Using a survey level, measuring pole, and a tape measure, I recorded all of the significant coordinates at the site. I recorded x-y coordinates for certain architectural items that the team found, as well as the elevation readings for a great number of important ground levels or relative elevations of structural items. Aside from my learning how to do this particular task, I learned other general things via lectures, readings, and a couple archaeological field trips.

It was a great experience to do work “in the field” and get some hands-on experience with my college education. I have appreciated all of my previous classes at Concordia and value all of the things that I’ve learned in them. However, honestly, I must say that much of the things that I learned will not (and have not) stay with me for very long. The knowledge very quickly escapes my immediate recollection.

This experience, however, is different. The lectures, readings, and writing has resembled typical academic work in many ways. Yet, this education shall not leave my immediate recollection anytime soon. Physically seeing the material whose statistics I recorded, and moving the dirt from one end of the church to another provides for a certain intimacy with the academic work that cannot be equaled in a traditional classroom—at least within the subject of archaeology. This intimacy helps the information to take on a more realistic existence in my memory, which then helps me to retain the information.

Aside from the academics, the personal interaction that took place during the excavation was also significant. First, there were some great dynamics on the Northeast

Church team. The group had to work together on a number of things in order to make our efforts work, whether it was carrying a large stone, creating a “bucket brigade,” or sharing loads on the long treks to and from the shuttle bus. In any of these cases, team work in some degree is needed, and in this way the team cooperated quite well. There was a definite bond within the group, with an almost tangible recognition that “we’re all in this together.”

The bond that developed was not only a result of working on this particular project together, but also because we were in a foreign culture together. Our common culture and background gave us a certain “safe zone” as we lived in a different culture for five weeks. Any time that someone was feeling uncomfortable with their foreign surroundings, we could always turn to each other with any feelings of alienation or confusion.

There was also a certain kind of dynamic that developed on the team as a result of the diversity of jobs and specialization among the team members. Everyone had their own particular specialty. One tracked and recorded all of the pottery during the excavation. Another worked closely with the tomb and the exhumation. Another was responsible for a large portion of the photography, and yet another was responsible for recording audio clips and writing articles on the background and current theories involved in the excavation season. Yet another oversaw all of the tasks and duties as a whole throughout the excavation. As previously stated, I myself was responsible as the surveyor. Though each person performed a different task and function for the team, each person was quite essential to the ultimate completion of all of the tasks required for our excavation. This

sense of mutual dependence in the midst of diversity was a strong point of bonding for the team.

Some of these bonds took place in our relationships with the members of other teams, too. Though we work on different areas of the city, there is some sort of common bond in our overall purpose of uncovering and understanding progressively more about this long-past culture. The members of the three teams seemed to recognize that we all had at least this shared passion.

I had some conceptualizations of aspects of the excavation that I found out to be wrong after only a short while working at the site. First, I thought that the work would go slower than it did. I pictured it as being quite slow and tedious, and although some of it was slow and tedious, very much of it was simply hauling large amounts of dirt away from the site as fast as possible. Second, I didn't think that I would get as excited about little finds as I started to get. Even after digging for a couple days, one may find oneself getting excited over what didn't previously perceive to be significant. Some this is due to a growing understanding of the significance of even small items, and some of it is due to a desire to find something significant (especially after not finding anything significant for several hours).

Upon final reflection, the excavation at the Northeast Church at Hippos in 2004 was a successful one. In this town, the excavation team was able to uncover tokens of history from centuries of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine culture. This excavation was also able to build upon the work that was done by others. Some of these archaeologists did their work many decades ago—in the 1930s or 1950s. Some of these archaeologists did their work only a matter of months ago. The Northeast Church project in particular uncovered

a number of significant finds, which offered information that allowed for many new hypotheses, which have yet to be tested.

I myself had a wonderful academic experience, which coordinated both intellectual information and physical work. This is the kind of experience from which I will retain knowledge for a long time. In addition, there was cohesion among the members of the excavation project as a whole, and among the members of the Northeast Church team particularly. Part of our bond came from the mutual recognition of the importance of archaeological work that we were doing together: to rediscover the lifestyle and culture of long ago people who contributed to our own development in some manner or another and are therefore part of our own identity—even our identity in Christ.

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