

**2006 Sepphoris Expedition Sponsored by the Hebrew University,
DOAR Litigation Consulting, and the Kaufthal Family**

in Loving Memory of Noam Shudofsky

July 2–14, August 15–29

An Archaeological Report

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The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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The 2006 excavation season at Sepphoris was sponsored by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, DOAR Litigation Consulting, and the Kaufthal Family in loving memory of Noam Shudofsky, with the help of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The excavation season that began on July 2 was scheduled to run throughout the month of July but was interrupted two weeks later by the war that erupted in the northern part of the country. Work was resumed a month later for another two weeks, from August 15 to 29. Under the direction of Prof. Zeev Weiss (Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), excavation was conducted in different parts of Sepphoris's Lower City. Four areas were excavated during the first two weeks, while the efforts in the second term were concentrated in only two areas due to low number of participants. Nevertheless, it would be correct to summarize our four-week excavation as another successful season in which we gathered new data that will allow us to modify some of our previous assumptions about the city in late antiquity.

About 55 people took part in the first session of the dig, including Hebrew University students participating in an academic program, a group of high school students from Hoshaya, local volunteers, and hired workers; only 26 hired workers participated in the second term. The following staff members participated in the project: Rona Evyasaf, Avner Ecker, Ben Gordon, and Shulamit Miller (area supervisors, HU graduate students), Anna Iamim (surveying and drafting), Vladimir Neikhin (photographer), Dr. Barbara Johnson (pottery), Michal Freisen (find registrar), and Mansur Subhi (administrator). The expedition enjoyed the ongoing support and help of Mr. Binny Shalev and the assistance of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

The *Decumanus* (Area 68.1)

Located in the center of the Lower City, 60 meters east of the colonnaded street's intersection, another segment of the *decumanus* (approx. 27 meters long) in use

during the Roman and Byzantine periods was unearthed and almost entirely preserved. The width of the stone paved street between the sidewalks is 6 m (fig. 1).

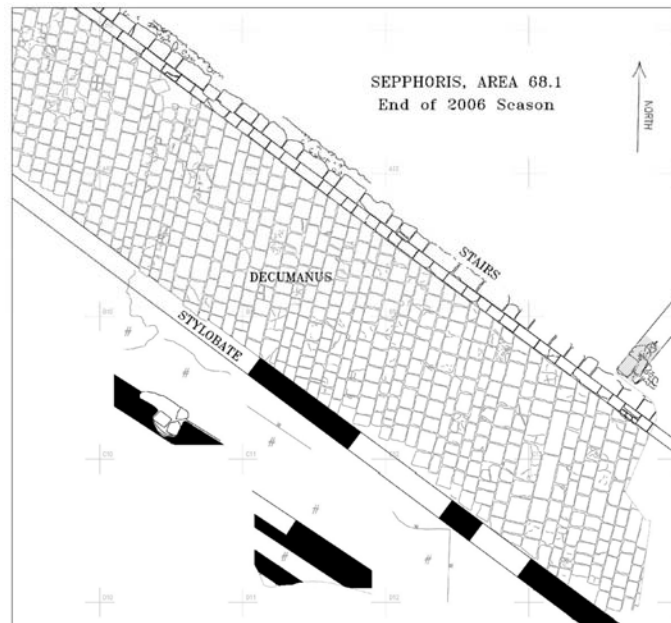


Figure 1: Plan of the *decumans*.

Excavation of the northern side of the street exposed the continuation of the steps running parallel and adjacent to the ancient thoroughfare. Two steps and possibly a third lead to the northern sidewalk, which appears to have been higher than street and hypothetically followed the line of the thoroughfare (fig. 2); no traces of the actual sidewalk have been found thus far in the squares excavated north of this line (see below, Area 78.2). In some places south of the street we could detect the line of the southern sidewalk at foundation level, whereas, except for one stone, the stylobate lining the street was almost completely robbed. Continued work in this area next season will enable us to expose the sidewalk completely as well as determine



Figure 2: The *decumanus*, looking westward. Blue arrow indicates the steps on the northern side.

its boundaries in relation to the street and adjacent buildings.

A series of several plaster layers was found on top of the stretch of this main thoroughfare. In most cases, their number and composition resemble those above the section of the *decumanus* unearthed last year, except for the easternmost squares, where there were more layers than in the rest of the area. Between each layer was a shallow debris accumulation that varied in composition. The existence of several layers on top of the *decumanus* pavement clearly indicates that the same route, though on a higher level, was still being used in the early Islamic period.

Two round structures, each with a diameter of 90 centimeters, were constructed at an average height of 75 centimeters above the *decumanus*. Positioned 2.5 meters apart, the two structures were constructed of four courses of fitted fieldstones held together with gray mortar. Stratigraphically speaking, these structures were used with the uppermost floor (fig. 3), however in constructing them the builders cut through the series of plaster layers and placed their foundations on the lowest one, about 25 centimeters above street level (fig. 4). Other such structures are known in the vicinity: One is located in close proximity to their north, and the other some 20 meters to their east. The purpose of the four round structures is ambiguous at the moment, however, considering the method of their construction and their relationship to the uppermost plaster layer, they should be regarded as foundations for some unidentified feature that stood in the vicinity at some stage.



Figure 3: Western view of the two round structures (marked with arrows) that were used with the uppermost floor.

Figure 4: Southern view of the two round structures constructed on top of the *decumanus* after they were fully exposed.



The round structures unearthed this season, together with the assortment of walls found in previous years, belong to the later strata, postdating the late antique city. The walls and structures along the *decumanus* represent the various buildings that consequently narrowed the Roman-Byzantine road. This phenomenon is known

to have existed in other cities in the region where, by the end of the Byzantine or early Islamic period, private construction reduced the size of the earlier designated public areas.

The Monument and Other Buildings – Areas 77.1 and 67.3

The two areas excavated this summer under one supervisorship extend from the stylobate and the recess unearthed last year, south of the *decumanus* (Area 77.1), and the monumental structure exposed to their south (Area 67.3) more than ten years ago (fig. 5). Our aim this year was to investigate the hypothesis raised at the end of our last season, wherein we claimed that some of the features uncovered here actually belonged to a single large early Roman compound located south of the *decumanus*. To this end, we removed some baulks, continued our excavation of four squares started in previous seasons, and opened four new ones. Due to the precarious security situation in the Galilee at this time, we stopped the work in these areas after only two weeks; thus, the finds here are very limited and our results are incomplete.

Unfortunately, no evidence was gathered in the combined area this year to confirm our hypothesis, however we were able to obtain some more information regarding the later buildings known in the vicinity from past seasons. We were able to uncover the continuation of some previously excavated walls, and in a few places we reached floor level. Some walls connected with the shops constructed in later date, above the stylobate, were partly excavated in Area 77.1, adjacent to the *decumanus*. In Area 67.3 we uncovered another wall segment that belonged to the church we excavated in previous seasons south of the *decumanus*, above the monumental building. A platform constructed of

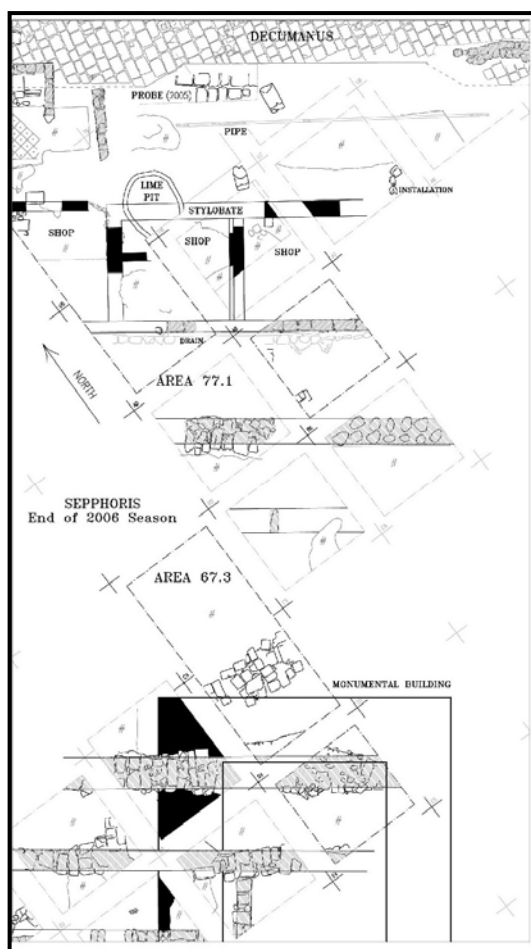


Figure 5: Plan of Areas 77.1 and 67.3.

cut stones in secondary use was found in one square (fig. 6), part of which lies on the projected northern wall of the monumental building. This structure extends in an east-west direction, diagonal to the walls of the postdated church, however its exact function cannot be ascertained at this stage.



Figure 6: Platform (in foreground); diagonal wall of the church (on left), partially excavated this season.

Area 78.2

Area 78.2 was opened for the first time this year in order to gain some information regarding the building that was constructed in antiquity northeast of the colonnaded street's intersection. Three construction phases were exposed in the four projected squares north of the *decumanus*, although many questions regarding the finds remained unanswered since work, as mentioned, was aborted mid season (fig. 7).

No evidence was found for the sidewalk that presumably ran adjacent to the northern side of the *decumanus*, above the two (three?) steps, yet a robber trench identified in the two southern squares may hint at its existence. The earliest evidence dated to the Roman period was found in the northwestern square, where a well-preserved stone pavement of smooth rectangular slabs executed in high quality was found on its northern side

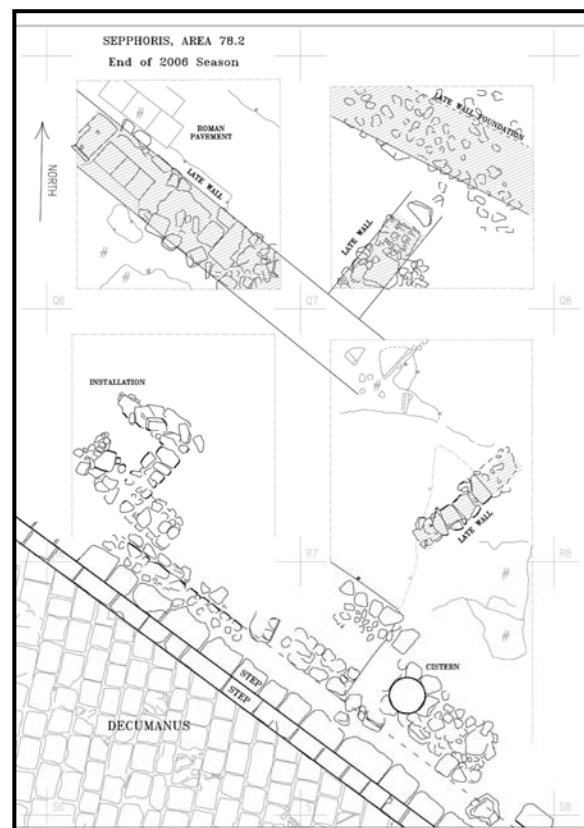


Figure 7: Plan of Area 78.2, to the north of the *decumanus*.

(fig. 8). The remains of the Roman building, which were demolished at some uncertain stage, are still buried in the four squares and in the adjacent area. The column drums, a Corinthian capital, and other architectural elements strewn over

these squares or incorporated in secondary use in the later walls from the second phase (see below) may testify to the extent and beauty of the Roman building. Large quantities of fresco fragments were found in the southeastern square, buried under the plaster layer belonging to the second phase. The fresco fragments may have decorated the Roman



Figure 8: Pavement of the Roman building (marked with an arrow) on the upper right side of the square; the east-west wall with architectural features (on left) belongs to a building constructed in the second phase.

building as well, further substantiating the splendor of this edifice.

Several walls and installations built with fieldstones, cut stones, and architectural elements in secondary use, as well as few plaster layers belonging to the second phase, were constructed at a later period on the ruins of the Roman building. Due to the limited scope of the excavations this season, we were unable to determine the architectural relationship between the various walls and plaster layers or their exact purpose. It is clear, however, that whoever constructed them made heavy use, as mentioned earlier, of the remains of the Roman building found in the vicinity. A water cistern and traces of a nearby floor most probably belong to the third and final phase identified in this area.

The Continuation of the *Decumanus* and the “Eastern *Cardo*” – Area 68.2

Several trenches were opened 143 meters east of the intersection of the main *cardo* and *decumanus* in the Lower City (Area 68.2) and 50 meters east of the easternmost section of the *decumanus* that was excavated this season. This new area was projected along the reconstructed eastward line of the *decumanus* in order to

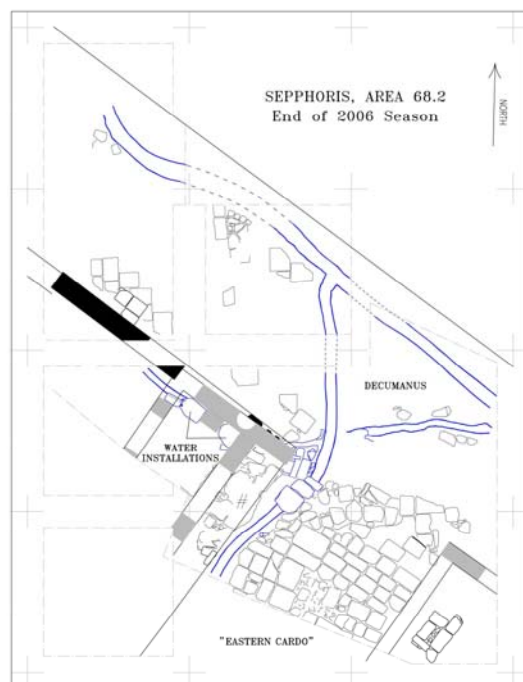


Figure 9: Plan of Area 68.2.

trace the route of the ancient thoroughfare in that direction and to ascertain whether it continued and how far it is preserved to the east. The excavations revealed not only a partially preserved segment of the *decumanus*, precisely on the line that had been reconstructed for it, but also what appears to be a street leading from the *decumanus* southward, perhaps an “eastern *cardo*” that runs parallel to the main *cardo* in Lower Sepphoris (fig. 9).

An over 15-meter-long segment of the *decumanus* was revealed in this area, indicating that the street was 5.96 meters wide at this spot. The street in this segment is partially preserved, although most of its pavers and flanking stylobates were robbed (fig. 10). The *decumanus* in this new section inclined from east

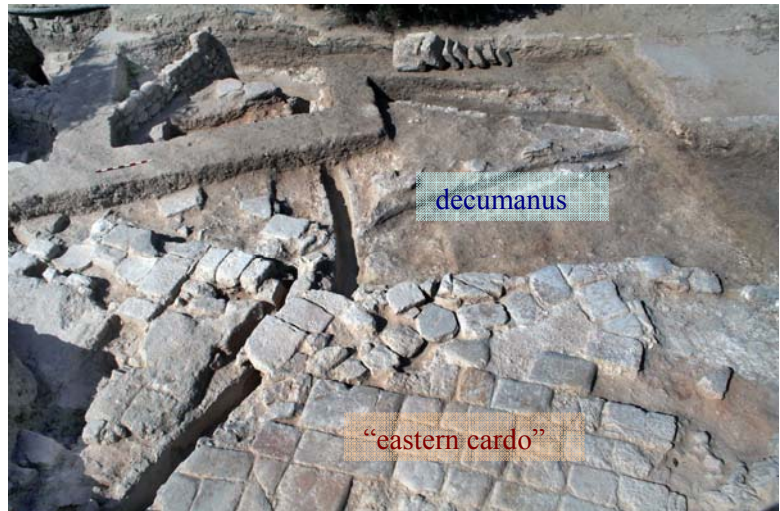


Figure 10: General view of Area 68.2. The “eastern cardo” with the channel to its left (in foreground). Parts of the *decumanus* with the channel to its north (above).

to west by 0.94 meter, creating a slope of about 3.6 degrees over a distance of 13.7 meters. About 5 meters of the north-south street, the “eastern *cardo*” that intersects the *decumanus*, were unearthed this season. This 5.8-meter-wide street is paved with rectangular cut stones of various sizes and in part laid diagonally across its breadth. Its continuation seems to disappear under the southern baulk, indicating that the ancient route ran further southward.

Four water channels were uncovered in this area; two are narrow and served as local drains. The other two, plastered with gray mortar, are sizeable and well preserved, each flanking the excavated streets in this area. One channel runs along the northern side of the *decumanus* in an east-west direction for about 15.3 meters (fig. 11), while the other, which is



Figure 11: Western view of the *decumanus* in Area 68.2, with the main water channel on the right, north of and adjacent to the street.

preserved for 10.57 meters, runs in south-north direction along the western side of the “eastern *cardo*,” passing under the *decumanus* pavers and converging with the east-west channel (fig. 10). The meeting point of the two channels seems to indicate that the latter conduit clearly severs the southern wall of the former, suggesting that it was added at a later, as yet undefined, stage (fig. 12). The east-west channel is 40 centimeters wide and averages 57–62 centimeters deep (the angle of descent is 3.5–4.5 degrees), while the width of the south-north channel is 32 centimeters wide and 37 centimeters deep.



Figure 12: Converging point of the two water channels. One channel (above) runs along the *decumanus*; the other aligns with the “eastern *cardo*”.

The two channels might function as drains for the run-off water from the two streets and adjacent structures. A

more plausible theory connects the two channels with the extensive water system emanating from the Mashad and e-Reine springs east of the city. When approaching the city, the aqueduct split into two channels that fed the two known reservoirs east of the site. Yet, despite the abundance of information regarding Sepphoris’s water system, it was not clear how and where the water reached the Lower City. It is suggested that the water channel that runs along the *decumanus* was most probably connected with the northern arched reservoir, which is dated to the late first century CE, while the other channel that runs along the “eastern *cardo*” should be associated with the impressive reservoir constructed in the second century CE, southeast of Lower Sepphoris. The two excavated channels, fed by two different sources, converged close to the intersection of the two streets excavated this season. From this point the water was funneled into one channel running westward along the watershed and into the civic center in Lower Sepphoris.

Remains of an unidentified structure constructed in the second phase were found adjacent to the southwest corner of the street’s intersection. The introduction of the

new building and the construction of its northern and eastern walls flanking the thoroughfares adjacent to the intersection caused a slight change in the width of the nearby streets (fig. 13). The *decumanus* was narrowed by 25 centimeters and the “eastern *cardo*” was most probably widened by 1 meter. The northern ashlar wall facing the *decumanus* included a niche for some decorative element. Only two plaster-paved rooms were partially excavated of this building. The bottom part of two small plastered pools was exposed in the room adjacent to its northern wall; the western pool drained into the westward-flowing channel. In addition, a short segment of a lead pipe was found nearby, beneath the continuation of the northern wall. The various installations found in relation to this building attest to some sort of arrangement connected with water, however only future excavations will furnish more information about this building and its use.



Figure 13: Aerial view of the intersection of the *decumanus* and “eastern *cardo*.” Blue arrow indicates the building constructed in the second phase; red arrow points to the niche in its northern wall.

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A series of a few hard-packed layers of plaster was found above the two streets excavated in this area. Such layers were also found in the *decumanus* to the west and in Areas 68.1 and 77. 1; their existence here, however, is a further indication of the continued use of some major thoroughfares in a later period, when the city declined.

* * *

The importance of this year’s finds is especially great, shedding new light on several areas of research regarding Sepphoris and enriching what we know about Sepphoris’s urban plan and impressive orthogonal street network in the Roman period. The new finds confirm that the area of the city was larger than what we had thought until now, at least in the east. Moreover, the channels exposed this season in all probability

indicate where water entered the city, thereby connecting, for the first time, the city's water system in the east with the built areas in the Lower City.



Figure 14: Students at work.



Figure 15: Students touring the excavated areas during the dig.