

CHRISTIAN BURIALS IN WESTERN GALILEE AND THE EMERGENCE OF CHRISTIAN LOCAL MORTUARY TRADITIONS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Preliminary Considerations at the Onset of a Research Project

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The goal of the research project described and discussed here is the meticulous assessment of the tombs and cemetery sections investigated in two geographically fairly restricted regions: Western Galilee and the broader area of Caesarea Philippi, both lying in the former Late Roman province of Phoenicia. With the generous support of the Israel Antiquities Authority, we were granted access to several mortuary assemblages that have remained unpublished or were only partially published. The meticulous assessment of these assemblages provides a unique opportunity for studying mortuary practices in the Eastern Mediterranean on a micro-regional level as well as for tracing changes through half a millennium at a finer resolution. We expect to gain a deeper understanding of the region's mortuary traditions and their change as well as of local attitudes to death among the region's pagan and pagan-turned-Christian population across half a millennium.

Despite the long centuries that elapsed between his times and the end of the Long Late Antiquity, the essential truth inherent in Jesus's declaration, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" (Luke 4:24, NRSV), upon his return to Nazareth during his journey through Galilee after his ministry started, has lost very little of its relevance. While the Galilee of the Roman and Byzantine periods was a vibrant meeting-place of different cultures, Christianity struck roots in the region with mixed success.

The presence of Jesus's followers in Galilee in the decades after his death is attested by a collection of his teachings in the so-called *Sayings Gospel Q*, ascribed to Galilean communities. In contrast, archaeology is rarely able to provide uncontested evidence for Galilean Christian and Jewish-Christian communities in the first centuries CE (TAYLOR 1993). As in so many provinces of the Roman Empire, the volume of unquestionably Christian elements in the material record begins to increase from the fourth century CE. However, the chronological and geographical distribution of these Christian remains is rather uneven across the region of Galilee. As previous surveys of the available evidence clearly show, the majority of the population both in Upper and Lower Galilee remained Jewish throughout the Late Roman and Late Antique centuries, while the emergence of major Christian centres in these areas was intimately connected to the growing financial and political support provided by the Roman state administration from the time of Constantine I onwards (AVIAM 1999, 2004). This is by no means surprising in view of the importance of several places in Lower Galilee and around the Sea of Galilee that played a key role in Jesus's early life and ministry, including Nazareth, Kana, Mount Tabor, Magdala, Capernaum, and Kursi, which, quite understandably, attracted both ecclesiastics and Christian pilgrims in later centuries (AVIAM & ASHKENAZI 2014).

The same cannot be said either of Western Galilee or of the region lying north of Roman Upper Galilee.³ In fact, neither of these two broader areas was unfamiliar to Jesus and his disciples. This is clearly shown by his encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28), described as a "Greek, of Syrophenician origin" by Mark (7:24–30), in the course of their visit to the "region of Tyre and Sidon" (Matthew 15:21, Mark 7:24, 31) as well as the probable location of Jesus's transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36, Matthew 17:1–7), and the Confession of Peter (Mark 8:27–30, Matthew 16:13–20) near *Caesarea Philippi* (Hellenistic *Paneas*, modern Baniyas, Israel). To be sure, some of these famed episodes of Jesus's ministry did not escape

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³ For the geographical coverage of the term Galilee in Biblical and Roman to Late Antique times in the political-administrative and geographical senses, see the brief discussion in FRANKEL et al. 2001, 141–142.

later commemoration, but in fact both regions, predominantly inhabited by non-Jewish population groups in Jesus's time, were rather peripheral to his social and geographical world. Lying on the fringes of Jewish Galilee both in the first century CE and in Late Roman times, as well as of the Christians' Holy Land in Late Antiquity, and inhabited by a pagan population of Phoenician origin, or more generally of "Syro-Phoenician" origin in *Caesarea Philippi*'s case, the spread of Christianity took a different course in the above regions.⁴

In the past decades, tremendous efforts have been devoted in Israeli archaeology to trace the changes in settlement patterns and, in conjunction, in religious and ethnic boundaries in the Roman to Late Antique Galilee. Mapping the geographical distribution of cult buildings (pagan temples, synagogues, and churches) and other archaeological remains related to religious life (such as *mikva'ot*, carved chalk stone vessels, and Christian and Jewish symbols), the products of various ceramic workshops, and the like, resulted in the broad identification of the main geographical areas inhabited by pagan, Jewish, and Christian communities (TSAFRIR, DI SEGNI & GREEN 1994; FRANKEL et al. 2001; AVIAM 2004, 2007). An important study of the Late Roman-period mortuary record from Western Galilee by Edna Stern and Nimrod Getzov (2006) succeeded in drawing the actual geographical line separating the Jewish and Phoenician pagan populations in the third and early fourth centuries. However, investigations into certain elements of the mortuary evidence also revealed that specific find types ascribed to specific religious communities can appear beyond the main geographical areas as defined by the bulk of the available evidence. One case in point is represented by Roman-period clay ossuaries, a few of which appear outside Jewish Galilee (e.g., Horvat 'Uza and Nahariya in Western Galilee and Castra on the western slopes of Mount Carmel: SION & AVIAM 2002). Another interesting example is the often-quoted tomb assemblage excavated by Na'im Makhoully in el-Jish/Gush Halav in Jewish Upper Galilee, among whose sixth- to seventh-century finds several are decorated with Christian symbols (BOLLÓK IN PREPARATION), although the village itself was an important Jewish settlement throughout the Roman and Late Antique periods. The number of similar—albeit often less clear-cut—examples could be multiplied.

This state of affairs calls attention to the importance of the mortuary record in tracing the dynamics of religious communities through the centuries. In contrast to cult buildings, which either mirror the existence and financial means of larger groups of people or hark back to state initiatives and thereby provide evidence for the presence of communities on particular settlements, burials were in general family affairs in Antiquity and therefore indicate the presence of people on the family level. As such, under fortunate circumstances, they are not only suitable for detecting the presence of given persons and groups, but they can also contribute to gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of changes at a finer resolution. For example, while the decision to construct a church edifice was often made only after the size of a Christian community (and thus also its financial strength) had grown large enough to need its own cult building as well as to be able to afford its erection, the spread of the new religion could last for several decades, or even centuries, before this moment arrived and can mainly be traced through changes in the mortuary record.

With respect to these and other advantages offered by the mortuary record, we started a new project to systematically explore the tombs and cemetery areas excavated in Western Galilee in course of the past century. Thanks to the generosity of the Israel Antiquities Authority, we were granted access to several unpublished or partly published burial assemblages. The personal examination and publication of these assemblages from two fairly restricted geographical areas—Western Galilee and the wider area of *Caesarea Philippi*—provide a unique opportunity for studying mortuary practices in the Eastern Mediterranean on a micro-regional level, and, thereby, for tracing changes through half a millennium at a finer resolution. The particular case of these two areas is especially instructive from this perspective because mortuary assemblages in these micro-regions are surprisingly rich in finds as compared to several other areas of the Late Roman and Late Antique world. It thus offers a unique opportunity to trace the changes sparked by the shifting social and religious customs through a refined chronology of mortuary artefacts deposited for one reason or another in Late Roman and Late Antique burials.

⁴ For the boundary between the Jewish and Phoenician groups in Western Galilee in Late Roman times, see STERN & GETZOV 2006.



Fig. 1. 1. Pair of Late Roman golden earrings, 2. Late Roman golden finger-ring, Tomb 1/1972, Khirbet Alya, Israel (photo by Ádám Bollók, ©Israel Antiquities Authority)

glass vessels of open shapes (bowls, beakers, etc.) in funerary assemblages was gradually abandoned during the fourth and early fifth centuries, while the frequency of pottery lamps, a commodity rarely present in Western Galilean mortuary assemblages until *ca.* the turn of the third and the fourth centuries CE (STERN & GETZOV 2006, 120–121), rose significantly (Fig. 2), especially in the fifth century and later. Since these and other changes took place within the span of a century or slightly more, and since the studied tomb assemblages do not all reflect the same mortuary rituals, a detailed chronological scrutiny of each mortuary assemblage and site is needed to trace these changes, first on the level of the family and the community, and then on that of the micro-regions. Based on the patterns gleaned from this investigation, we can then attempt to reconstruct the mortuary rituals leading to the deposition of the known artefact types, which, in turn, will provide important clues for explaining the shifts which had taken place between the third and the seventh centuries.

In-depth investigations into the chronology of the single object classes recovered from Galilean mortuary contexts is indispensable, even more so because at the present state of research, the transition between the typical Late Roman (late third to *ca.* mid-fifth century CE) and Byzantine (*ca.* mid-fifth to earlier seventh century CE)⁵ jewellery and costume accessory types is not very well understood. This gap is partly due to the fairly low number of published mortuary assemblages covering the fifth century CE (see e.g., TACHER, NAGAR & AVSHALOM-GORNI 2002; GORIN-ROSEN 2002), and partly to the dearth of the necessary fixed points provided by cross-cultural dating on the strength of better-dated assemblages known from other regions of the Eastern Roman Empire and her fringes, which offer reliable anchors for dating the multiple burials characteristic for the Levantine sites of the Late Roman and Byzantine period (Fig. 3). On the other hand, systematic surveys in Upper Galilee indicate that – to a certain degree in contrast to the Jewish parts of Galilee (LEIBNER 2006) – set-



Fig. 2. Late Roman ceramic lamp, Tomb 1/1958, al-Makr, Israel (photo by Ádám Bollók, ©Israel Antiquities Authority)

⁵ Note that in Israeli archaeology the term “Late Roman” is generally understood to cover the period between 284 and 324, or more generally, between the mid-third and the mid-fourth centuries CE, while “Byzantine” is employed for the period between 324 and the 640s, or more generally, between the mid-fourth and mid-seventh centuries CE. In contrast, in the Western Roman provinces, the development of Late Roman material culture can be traced up to the middle third of the fifth century CE, depending on the time when the respective region was lost to the Empire.

lements flourished in Western Galilee during the Byzantine period (FRANKEL et al. 2001, 114–116),⁶ which suggests that the gap detected among certain categories of small finds is more of an optical illusion than a genuine absence. For this end, one of the main priorities of our project is to examine those mortuary sites whose use for burial during the fifth century CE is known from previous publications (e.g., the evaluation of ceramic lamps by SUSSMAN 2017).

By the end of our project, we expect to gain a deeper understanding of the region's mortuary traditions and their changes across half a millennium, whose major portion coincided with the spread and blossoming of Christianity among the pagan and then the pagan-turned-Christian inhabitants living on the western and northern fringes of Roman and Late Antique Upper Galilee. In theory, we can thus rightly hope that our analyses will provide us with a detailed image of how local communities adopted and adapted to the Christian teaching in their mortuary behaviour. This will allow us to enhance our knowledge of the characteristics of the local Christian world in the two studied micro-regions, lying on the fringes of the one-time world of Jesus, and its relation to the Christian traditions of more distant provinces of the Later Roman East (for local Late Antique Christianities, see FRANKFURTER 2018). To be sure, considerable caution will have to be exercised to avoid employing the concept of Christianisation as a heuristic model by interpreting all changes detected in the mortuary realm as signs proving the spread of the new religion's teaching. Changing habits and shifts in the social realities of given communities and regions could contribute to changes in people's mortuary behaviour as much as religious changes, not to mention the impacts of cultural shifts resulting in the appearance of new as well as the disappearance of old artefacts and forms of social, and thereby of mortuary display. Drawing a clear-cut distinction between these and other elements often poses a tremendous challenge to archaeologists and historians studying the past. In our hope, embedding our future results in the broad historical picture of Late Roman and Late Antique Galilee will provide useful tools for distinguishing between the possible options, thereby properly contextualising our findings.⁷

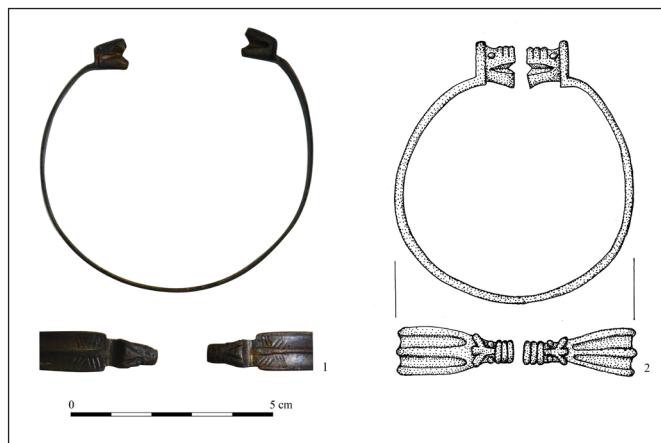


Fig. 3. 1. Cast copper-alloy bracelet, Tomb 2/1937, Gush Halav, Israel (photo: Ádám Bollók, ©Israel Antiquities Authority) 2. and its parallel, securely dated to the mid-sixth century CE, from Grave 239 of Cemetery II at Cibilium, Abkhazia (drawing by Magda Éber after VORONOV 2003, Pl. 139.11)

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⁶ For the methodological difficulties in comparing the results of the different surveys conducted in Galilee, see LEIBNER 2006, 121–122, note 56.

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