

Has Bethsaida-Julias Been Found?

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In the nineteenth century, European and American explorers visited the Holy Land in exerted attempts to identify historical sites (biblical and extra-biblical), whose locations had long been forgotten. Many of these cities, towns and villages were destroyed or abandoned, and the only traces of their existence are to be found in passing references in the ancient historical records. The task to identify these lost sites requires a complex application of multiple disciplines, including history, toponymy, topography, and archaeology (Rainey and Notley 2006:9-24; Rainey 1984:8-11). Absent actual inscriptional evidence, archaeology serves as the best means to confirm whether the material remains from a site correspond to the physical descriptions and events (e.g. settlement, destruction, etc.) found in the historical records. Of course, archaeological data was not available to these early explorers until the beginning of the twentieth century. So, it should come as no surprise that some of the earlier suggested site identifications were later found to be mistaken.

One of the lost places that interested the early explorers was a small Jewish fishing village called Bethsaida, first mentioned in the New Testament. Edward Robinson proposed its location at et-Tell on a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee (Robinson and Smith 1867:2:413-14). Gottlieb Schumacher countered that et-Tell's significant distance from the lake prevented it from being a fishing village. Instead, he proposed el-Araj, which was situated on the lakeshore, as the preferred location for Bethsaida (Schumacher 1888:93). The debate over the location for Bethsaida and these two proposed sites has been recently rekindled with news of the finds from the 2017 season of excavations at el-Araj. These results have posed new challenges to the claims by those who have excavated et-Tell for over thirty years.

We will not revisit the serious problems that contest et-Tell's identification with Bethsaida-Julias. These have already been outlined in an article in *Near Eastern Archaeology* (Notley 2007:220-230). Instead, we will bring here briefly the findings from the first two seasons of excavations at el-Araj, giving attention to how the results correspond to the descriptions we have of Bethsaida-Julias in the historical sources. While our efforts at el-Araj are young, we have been struck by how closely the archaeological finds at el-Araj follow the contours of history recorded by those who walked the streets of Bethsaida-Julias in the Roman and Byzantine periods. No one on our team has suggested that the matter is settled with finality, but we are of the opinion that in light of this season's discoveries, el-Araj must now be considered the leading candidate for the location of Bethsaida-Julias. Only further excavations will confirm whether we have finally found the lost city of the Apostles.

On the following pages, we will first present the historical portrait of Bethsaida-Julias provided by those who knew it first-hand. We will then summarize the results from our first two seasons of archaeological excavations at el-Araj. Finally, we will outline the conclusions that can be drawn from the archaeological finds in the light of their historical setting.

History: Early Roman Period Bethsaida-Julias

The earliest historical descriptions of Bethsaida place it on the lakeshore. Jesus is reported to have travelled there by boat (Mark 6:45), just as the Jewish reinforcements did from Taricheae (Magdala) during the early days of the Jewish revolt against Rome reported by Josephus Flavius (*Life* 406). The Gospel of John states that it was the home of fishermen (Peter, Andrew and Philip), who were numbered among Jesus' followers (John 1:44). Early rabbinic

sources speak frequently about the fishing industry at Bethsaida (e.g. y. Šeqal. 6, 50a). Lastly, Josephus locates the village of Bethsaida “next to the lake” (πρὸς λίμνη).

The Jewish historian adopts the toponym, Βηθσαιδά only once in his writings in order to explain why the name was changed to Julias, when the tetrarch Herod Philip urbanized the village.

And to the village of Bethsaida [located] next to the lake of Gennesar, he granted the dignity of a city by [introducing] a multitude of inhabitants and other fortifications, and he called it Julias after the name of the daughter of the emperor (*Ant.* 18:28).

Otherwise, Josephus always refers to the city by its new name Julias, mostly in his descriptions of the nearby fighting in 66-67 CE (*Life* 398-399, 406). He also tells us that Philip died at Julias and was carried from there in a funerary procession to his mausoleum that he had previously constructed (*Ant.* 18:108). Despite frequent claims to the contrary, Josephus does not inform us of the location of Philip’s tomb, and its whereabouts remain unknown.

Two other classical authors refer to Julias in the Roman period.

Pliny the Elder (77 CE): The source of the river Jordan is the spring of Paneas from which Caesarea described later takes its second name. It is a delightful stream, winding ... it widens out into a lake usually called Gennesar. This is 16 miles long and 6 broad, and is skirted by the pleasant towns of Julias (*Juliade*) and Hippus on the east... (*Nat. Hist.* 5.71).

Claudius Ptolemy (150 CE): Part of the Jordan river flows through Judaea toward the Dead Sea ... the interior towns are: In Galilaea. Sapphuri. Caparcotni. *Iulias*. Tiberias. In Samaria. Neopolis. Thena” (*Geog.* 5.15.3).

To these should be added references in early rabbinic literature (e.g. t. Nid. 6:6; b. Nid. 52b; b. Ketub. 62b; m. Git. 7:5). The rabbis do not use the Hellenized name of Julias but retain its previous Semitic name of Tzaidan (צַיִדָן). The references in rabbinic literature to Tzaidan occur in connection with figures in the first and second centuries CE and only a few in the third century (Freund 1995:267-311).

Freund concluded that Bethsaida was not a city familiar to the rabbis after approximately the third century CE. We find a similar lack of familiarity in the late Roman period by Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea. In his *Onomasticon* (ca. 305 CE) Eusebius compiled a catalog of most of the cities, sites, and regions mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels. Supplementing his list when possible, he provided detailed information concerning the places' history and location, including their distances in Roman miles from other well-known metropolitan centers in fourth-century Palestine. At times, the brevity of Eusebius's descriptions with nothing more than the barest details taken from the biblical text, suggests that the location of the site was already lost by the time of his writing at the beginning of the fourth century.

Of Bethsaida, Eusebius reports: "The city of Andrew and Peter and Philip. It is located in the Galilee next to the lake of Gennesar" (*Onom.* 58.11; Notley and Safrai 2005:58). Eusebius received his information about Bethsaida from the tradition of the Fourth Gospel that it was the home of Philip, Andrew, and Peter (John 1:44), and located in the Galilee (John 12:21). He borrowed *verbatim* the detail that the village was "next to the lake of Gennesaret" from the description of Josephus (*Ant.* 18:28). Elsewhere Eusebius credits Josephus by name (cf. *Onom.* 1.2=*Ant.* 1.92-95; *Onom.* 40.9=*Ant.* 1.118; *Onom.* 82.2=*Ant.* 1.147). Since Eusebius only repeats details about Bethsaida found in well-known first-century sources, and he himself supplies no additional physical description, it seems that by the end of the third century CE the hometown of the apostles had been abandoned and its location forgotten. Other deserted biblical sites, which amounted to little more than visible piles of ruins in the fourth century, are described as such by Eusebius (cf. Chorazin; *Onom.* 174.23). The absence of any physical details describing Bethsaida seems to indicate that the Roman city of Bethsaida-Julias had disappeared entirely by the end of the third century CE (Notley 2007:228).

History: Bethsaida in the Byzantine Period

The next mention of Bethsaida is by Theodosius, a Byzantine pilgrim to the Holy Land in 530 CE. He succinctly describes his journey from Tiberias to Paneas.

From Tiberias to Magdala, where Saint Mary was born, is two miles. From Magdala to the Seven Fountains (Tabgha), where the Lord Christ baptized the apostles, and where also he fed the people with five loaves and two fish, is two miles. From the Seven Fountains to Capernaum is two miles. From Capernaum it is six miles to Bethsaida, where were born the apostles Peter, Andrew, Philip, and the sons of Zebedee. From Bethsaida to Paneas is 50 miles. There the Jordan emerges from two sources, the Jor and the Dan (cf. Geyer 1898:138).

While the pilgrim's distances and Christian traditions may be called into question, a few details are important for our interests. First, Theodosius' stated mileage is incorrect, but his perspective that the relative distance from Capernaum to Bethsaida is about three times the distance from Capernaum to Taghba is accurate. Even more important is the simple fact that at the beginning of the sixth century CE, this Christian pilgrim was able to speak about a site identified as Bethsaida. Apparently, its location was no longer unknown. Of course, this does not mean necessarily that Bethsaida in the Byzantine period is at the same location as the earlier Roman city. Examples of Byzantine misidentification are legion. However, what can be said is that after a brief hiatus, Christians in the Byzantine period once again identified the location of Bethsaida.

Theodosius does not include in his itinerary any mention of churches or shrines, only references to New Testament events. So, we cannot be sure how the location of Bethsaida was exhibited. In addition, the direction and stops on his itinerary seem not to be haphazard or unique to Theodosius. Leaving Tiberias, he journeyed from west to east around the northern shore of the lake. After crossing the Jordan River and visiting Bethsaida, he continued north to Paneas and

the headwaters of the Jordan. This is the same journey that we read a century later in the visit by Willibald, the bishop of Eichstätt in Bavaria.

From [Tiberias] they went around the sea, and by the village of Magdala to the village of Capernaum, where our Lord raised the prince's daughter. Here was a house and a great wall, which the people of the place told them was the residence of Zebadee with his sons John and James. And [from Capernaum] they went to Bethsaida, from which came Peter and Andrew. There is now a church, where previously was their house. They remained there one night, and the next morning went to Chorazin, where our Lord healed the demoniacs, and sent the devil into a herd of swine. Here was a church of the Christians. Having performed their devotions there, they went to the place where the two fountains, Jor and Dan, issue from the earth, and flowing down from the mountain are collected into one, and form the Jordan (Wright 1848:16-17; cf. Baldi 1982:266)

Willibald's unfortunate reference to Chorazin has led many scholars to assume that he was confused about which places he visited in this itinerary. Since it makes little sense to cross the Jordan River to reach Bethsaida, cross it again to visit Chorazin, and cross it yet a third time to journey north, scholars have assumed that Willibald confused Bethsaida with Capernaum. Accordingly, the Byzantine church in Willibald's description is often "corrected" and identified with the Byzantine church at Capernaum.

The bishop's itinerary is mistaken, but not in the way that it is often assumed. He has correctly ordered the places visited, but he has confused the Latin name for Chorazin (*Chorazin*) in Galilee with the site at Kursi (*Chorsia*) with its Byzantine church on the eastern shore of the lake. Any hesitations whether Willibald intended *Chorsia* (Kursi) and not *Chorazin*, should be laid to rest with his description that it was there, "our Lord healed the demoniacs, and sent the devil into a herd of swine." The Byzantine Christian tradition of Jesus' exorcism recorded in the Gospels (Luke 8:26-39) is identified at Kursi and never Chorazin (Tsafirir, Segni, Green 1994: 104; Safrai 1996:16-19). Rightly understood, Willibald provides another Byzantine pilgrimage

itinerary around the lake, not unlike that of Theodosius, but one which also includes details about a church built over the house of Peter and Andrew at Bethsaida.

Archaeological Evidence at El-Araj

Laurence Oliphant described a visit to el-Araj in 1879 where he found the surface covered with basalt architectural fragments.

Here, at a distance of half a mile east from [the Jordan River's] mouth, are situated the ruins of El 'Araj, which consists of foundations of old walls, and blocks of basaltic stone, cut and uncut, which have been used for building purposes. The ruins cover a limited area (Oliphant 1889:244)

Most of the surface ruins earlier attested by Schumacher, Oliphant and Dalman (Dalman 1935:162) have disappeared in the intervening the years (cf. Nun 1998:24-27; Notley 2007:222); but still today there are pillar drums, including a limestone "heart-shaped" drum that is typical to Galilean synagogues. The earlier group of this type (1-3 centuries CE) is usually built of pillar drums. There is also a basalt capital of "pseudo-Doric" style, similar to the ones uncovered in the excavations at Magdala. Other smaller fragments of cornices were identified by the team incorporated in the walls of 19-20th century buildings on the site.

Early Roman period pottery was found at el-Araj in the survey of Stepansky (Stepansky 1991:87; cf. Urman 1985:121; Urman and Flesher 1995:522-240). In the summer of 2014, we conducted a shovel-testing survey, digging 6 squares to 30 cm deep. Additional early and middle Roman period pottery was found, as well as Byzantine and medieval pottery.

In July 2016, we began the first season of excavations. In squares next to the ruins of the Ottoman villa (Beit Habek) we discovered a thirteenth-century CE building that was used for sugar production. Those who built this structure used earlier massive walls which were dated from the sixth to the eight centuries CE. In one of the squares, a large section of a monolithic limestone pillar had been placed upside down by the Crusader period builders. This pillar is

similar in size to the "heart-shaped" pillar drum found on the surface, and they may both have originated from a synagogue or another public structure. A few late Byzantine coins were found on the floors, and in the 2017 season when we dug below the floors, we found about 30 coins, most of which are from the fifth century CE.

The finds from the Byzantine layer included a large quantity of tesserae with various colors and a handful of tiny gilded glass tesserae, which point to the existence of a wealthy building. A large quantity of clay roof tiles, as well as marble slabs, indicate that these probably belonged to a church. If so, this could be the church visited by Willibald. Further evidence for the Byzantine church may also be indicated by an accidental discovery reported nearly a century ago. In October 1929, a German priest Rudolf de Haas chanced to visit Beit Habek during its renovations.

... We happened to just come in time to inspect a splendid Roman Mosaic to the left of the flight of stairs leading up to the house, at a depth of two meters. Wadih (the Arab administrator) had quite unexpectedly met with it. As it stretched far underneath the main building, he could not properly examine it and had to cover it up again. A sarcophagus not very far away and all sorts of broken columns, capitals and a mass of building stone testify to the wealth hidden below the surface. Willibald, the German pilgrim ... tells us of a church of Zebedee he saw here in 765 [sic] AD (De Haas 1933:222).

De Haas may well be correct in his association of the mosaic floor with the Byzantine church described by Willibald. Our current excavations further suggest that there was probably a pilgrim monastery around the church.

During the 2017 season, when we dug below the Byzantine floor, after 40 cm we arrived to a layer which yielded *only* Roman period pottery. The pottery dates from the late 1st century BCE to the 3rd century CE. A coin found in this layer was dated to the second century CE. In the western probe, about 2 m below the Byzantine floor, we found the top of a well-built wall, which was covered by the Roman period layer. Beside the wall, there were a few pieces of mosaic

floor, probably not *in situ*, one of which is 40x30 cm, white with a black meander design. There was also Roman period pottery, chunks of strong plaster and many broken clay bricks, a few of which are *tubuli* (tubular vents). Found together, it is clear that these belonged to a Roman period bathhouse. In the eastern probe, we continued down another 1 m to what seems to be the virgin soil of the Beteiḥa valley. While digging down, to a level lower than the level of the bathhouse and in a layer in which there was Roman pottery, a denarius of the Emperor Nero was found dated to 65-66 CE.

We would add two notes of significance in light of the historical descriptions of Bethsaida-Julias from the early Roman period. Our excavations at el-Araj have already found about 20 fishing net weights. All came, until now, from the later levels. These fit Bethsaida's reputation as a fishing village. Second, during an earlier field survey Urman reported finding two early Roman period coins. "We found two coins at the site [of el-Araj]; one was identified as a coin of Philip from 29 or 33 C.E. and the other as a coin of Agrippa II" (Urman and Flesher 1995:2:523). It is doubtless a coincidence that the two coins Urman found belonged to the two rulers from the Herodian dynasty that Josephus describes governed Bethsaida-Julias in the first century. Nevertheless, these finds are a tantalizing hint at the rich Jewish history that remains to be unearthed on the site of ancient Bethsaida-Julias.

Conclusions:

1. The site of el-Araj was settled at least from the end of the 1st century BCE, and was not submerged under 2 m of water as Arav and others have suggested in the past.
2. The collection of pottery types is the typical Galilean style, which may hint to a Jewish site.

3. The existence of a Roman styled bathhouse indicates an urban setting rather than a village.
4. The recent suggestion by Arav that the remains of the bathhouse belonged to a Roman military camp has no parallel in the archaeological evidence. There are no remains of first-century army bases of client kings in the region. Moreover, according to Josephus the Roman general Sulla encamped with his troops about 1 ½ km distant from Julias on the inland road that led from Cana to Gamala (*Life* 398). There is no evidentiary reason to relocate the camp to the site of el-Araj on the lakeshore, nor is there any evidence for bathhouses in temporary military camps like the one described by Josephus.
5. The many architectural fragments in the past and present, support the identification at el-Araj of an urban center, which corresponds to the report of Josephus and strengthens its claim as a Jewish polis.
6. El-Araj appears much more of an urban center than et-Tell, and therefore it is a better candidate for Herod Philip's Julias. From time to time, since Schumacher, the theory has been advanced that Bethsaida and Julias were at different locations. Yet, Josephus' description of the tetrarch's urbanization of Bethsaida gives no hint that he built Julias anywhere other than on the site of Bethsaida. According to the Jewish historian, Philip transformed the previous Jewish fishing village into a polis. If el-Araj is found to be the site of Herod Philip's Julias, it follows that it is also the location for New Testament Bethsaida.
7. A gap in material remains for about a century or two, suggests the site was probably abandoned towards the end of the third century CE, likely the result of flooding from the

Jordan River. This gap in material remains corresponds to the silence in the historical witnesses during the same period.

8. After a hundred years or two, the tradition of identifying the place with Bethsaida was resumed by Christian authorities or pilgrims or both, and a church with a possible monastery was built above the site. The Christian site continued probably until the eighth century CE when it was abandoned.
9. We have excavated only 6 weeks and in a very small area. Nevertheless, the results are significant and clear. It is a Roman period site with evidence of urbanization. We hope that in the coming seasons further evidence of Herod Philip's efforts and the Jewish village he transformed can be uncovered.

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