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Religions de Rome et du monde romain

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At the invitation of Professors Nicole Belayche and Arnaud Serandour, I arrived at the EPHE on January 23, 2018 to deliver four conference lectures within the framework of their seminar. The conference series, "Cult, Culture, and Intercommunal Relations in Roman and Late Antique Galilee," was intended to evaluate and assess the intricate relationship between the Jewish community and other socio-religious populations residing in the region, based on the archaeological finds uncovered in Sepphoris and at sites beyond the boundaries of the Galilee.

The first conference, "Sepphoris: From Galilean Town to Roman Polis," held on January 24, 2018, presented the archaeological finds uncovered in Sepphoris and discussed their significance in light of several related topics, e.g., urbanism, private and public space, and acculturation. The rehabilitation of Jewish society after the Destruction in 70 CE and its recovery from the ravages of the war were made possible, in no small measure, by the stability of the Galilean settlement to which Judean refugees fled. In the new reality, the Jewish settlement in the Galilee continued to exist and even to extend its geographic, demographic, and constructional limits. New spirits would resuscitate it and impact upon its construction, art, and generally, the local population's cultural patterns. It was argued that the building of Sepphoris as a Roman *polis* at the end of the first or beginning of the second century CE attests to the change that took place in the Galilee *vis-à-vis* Rome and its culture then and in the following period—a change that would transform the urban landscape of Sepphoris into a city no different than other cities that flourished in ancient Palestine in the first centuries CE. The wealth of finds—public buildings, colorful mosaics, coins, and small objects—conveys a picture of a Hellenized city in which Jews and pagans coexisted and built impressive monuments. And yet, the diverse archaeological evidence uncovered throughout the site demonstrates that the Jews—who lived in simple houses, used *miqva'ot* and soft limestone vessels for ritual purposes, consumed special wares manufactured primarily for the Jewish population, and most probably gathered in the local synagogues—were the predominant social segment in the city in the first centuries CE.

The second conference, "Images and Figurative Images in the Urban Galilee: Defining Limits in Times of Shifting Borders," held on January 31, 2018, was dedicated to the use of figural images in the Galilee in the Late Second Temple

period and first centuries CE. The diverse finds uncovered in ancient Sepphoris in recent years provide important information regarding the use of images and figurative art in the Galilean cities, which were populated mostly by Jews. In the course of my talk I focused on some wall painting fragments recently uncovered at the site, the house of Dionysus and its colorful mosaics, as well as three dimensional statues through which I examined the nature of such finds, probed their meaning, and explored the possibility of their use by the Jews residing in the city during the second and third centuries CE. I argued that although the interpretation of the artistic finds lies in the eyes of the beholder and requires an assessment of how far the Jewish community was willing to go in adopting foreign influences, a broader view of the range of data indicates that following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple and the suppression of the Bar-Kokhba revolt, the frustration and anger of certain sectors of the Jewish population in ancient Palestine adopted a positive approach and an appreciation of Rome and its culture. The understanding that exposure to Graeco-Roman culture was not harmful to the Jewish religion paved the way to absorbing foreign influences in all realms of life. I demonstrated that this shift finds expression in rabbinic literature but is also visible in other areas connected to the material culture, such as urbanism, attending the Roman games, and the use of figurative art.

The third conference, “From Roman Temple to Church: Shaping Religious Space in Ancient Sepphoris,” held on February 8, 2018, focused on the cult buildings known to date in Sepphoris – a Roman temple, a synagogue, and two churches – and discussed the implications of these edifices for the study of the architectural development, social structure, religious behavior, and cultural relationships between Jews and other segments of society in this city. As the Jewish capital of the Galilee in the Roman period, Sepphoris had a significant pagan and, later on, Christian population with the economic, political, and societal means to build these large and impressive buildings in the heart of its civic center. The construction of the two churches reflects, at first glance, the natural expansion of the Christian community and its establishment within the Jewish city, however it should also be viewed as a political-religious act of the imperial authorities, emphasizing to the local population, through architectural symbols, who the ruler and true victor is. And yet, it has been argued that the construction of three synagogues in the city in the early fifth century and their long existence (probably up to late sixth or early seventh century CE) indicate that the Jewish community preserved its status and place in the city even after the conversion of the empire to Christianity and despite the increased power of the church in the provincial government and imperial legislation against the Jews.

The fourth conference, “Building God’s House: Synagogues, Churches, and Intercommunal Relations in Late Antique Palestine,” held on February 14, 2018, departed from Sepphoris and examined Jewish-Christian relations generally, focusing mainly on aspects pertaining to synagogues and churches. In presenting the archaeological finds, I focused on various aspects shared by these two sacred spaces – their architectural layout, spatial arrangement, construction and building materials, furnishings, and artistic decorations. The resemblance between the two

building varies, but one thing remained constant: the Jews did not refrain from borrowing functional and decorative elements from the Christian realm, nor did they care if their building resembled the church used by their neighbors the Christians. The Judaeo-Christian controversy undoubtedly affected the complex relationship between the two communities, especially in those cities or villages where Jews and Christians lived side by side, a relationship that seems to have only widened the gap between the two rival communities over time. However, an examination of the archaeological finds offered an opportunity to explore the broader context of the relationship between these two religious communities, suggesting that the Jews might have had a closer and more amicable day-to-day rapport with their Christian neighbors than one might think. They were neighbors and, as such, shared common patterns, the minority population adapting itself to the dominant culture. This conclusion is evident not only in synagogue art, architecture, and even liturgy, as argued by some scholars, but also finds expression in other realms of life – burial customs, the ornamentation of personal objects, the use of magic, and more – where Jews and Christians had much in common, living as neighbors in close proximity to each other.