

SOCIO-ECONOMIC HIERARCHY AND ITS ECONOMIC
FOUNDATIONS IN FIRST CENTURY GALILEE:
THE EVIDENCE FROM YODEFAT AND GAMLA

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Introduction

The most common approach to the study of the socio-economic structure in the Galilee at the time of Jesus and the First Jewish Revolt was developed through the research of the New Testament and the works of Josephus Flavius, and one can summarize the common picture as “wealthy cities” and “poor villages”.¹ According to the New Testament, Jesus visited mainly the rural parts of Galilee and avoided the cities, although in *Matthew* 4:25 people from the Decapolis appeal for help from Jesus. Bethsaida is mentioned a few times as having been visited by Jesus, although it is unclear if Bethsaida was a city or a polis? Hence, as a reflection of the narratives of the New Testament, the common view of Galilee became “the land of peasants”.² Outside of the few references to “the lands (the territories) of Caesarea Philippi” and the “lands (the territories) of Tyre and Sidon” Jesus did not visit cities. He did not frequent Tiberias, Sepphoris, Hippos, Scythopolis or Ptolemais. Were the Galilean villagers poor, or were the city men rich? When one reads Josephus carefully, the scene looks slightly different. The only time that the terms “poor” or “destitute”, regarding people in the Galilee, are mentioned, is when Josephus is writing about the political party of “the sailors and destitute class” in Tiberias (*Life*, 66). Although no social identification was assigned to Simon and Andrew or Zebedee and his sons (*Matthew* 4:18,21), it might be that sailors and fishermen around the Sea of Galilee were at the bottom of the social pyramid. On the other hand we have some references to rich and wealthy homes in Galilean villages such as the statement about

¹ As clearly reflected in the works of both scholars: Freyne 1980: 155–208. Horsley 1995, 1996.

² Horsley 1996.

Chabulon, “He admired its beauty with its houses built in the style of those at Tyre, Sidon and Berytus” (*War* 2.504). Chabulon, or Kabul, was a small village on the western outskirts of Galilee, and according to Josephus it had wonderfully rich houses. The site is usually identified with the modern Arab village of Kabul that has never been excavated extensively. A second-third century CE tomb was excavated there with stone and clay ossuaries. Another location that could be identified as Chabulon was a site north of the Arab village at Kh. Beza.³ In another case, Josephus speaks about the rich, fortified house of Jesus, a local leader at Gabara (*Life* 246). If so, the impression from Josephus’ narrative is that more “poor” people lived in the cities than in the villages.

The Evidence from Yodefath and Gamla

The archaeological excavations at both first century northern towns of Yodefath and Gamla, show that most of their inhabitants lived their lives between levels of prosperity and simplicity, but not poverty. The different types of finds do not suggest the existence of an impoverished population, but rather a population of medium and high social ranks. The houses that were uncovered, in both sites, but especially at Gamla, are nicely built, some of which probably belonged to very rich families. There were some families who lived in luxurious mansions that were decorated with frescoes and stucco. At Gamla, chunks of plaster with fresco and stucco were discovered for the most part in what was called by the excavators as the “wealthy quarter”. In this area two workshops were identified, the first is an oil press built inside a well-built, arched roofed building, with a *miqve* cut into the northern rock-wall.⁴ The second is a flour-mill with a few large grinding stones that could produce a large quantity of flour. The proximity of these two workshops to the private houses, of which some were decorated with fresco and stucco, can hint that the owners of the workshops probably lived nearby and that they were of a high socio-economical class. At Yodefath an olive-press was discovered in a cave on the eastern-upper slope very close to the private houses on the eastern edge of the town in area XI. The easiest accessible way to the oil-press was from these

³ Aviam 2005: 15, 32.

⁴ *Miqve* is the halachically mandated ritual bath.

houses. This proximity suggests that the owners of the olive-press lived there. These houses are not as fancy as those at Gamla and neither is the oil press itself. Nevertheless, each of these two houses has its own *miqve* which not every house in the town had. Cutting, building and plastering and maintaining a *miqve* with a special water proof plaster was not a simple and cheap task. It is very common now to associate *miqvaot* with food production, and especially with liquids such as oil and wine that can easily absorb impurity. Immersing into a *miqve* before and during the production process was the way to produce pure oil or wine that could be sold to different groups that kept purity laws very strictly or even directly to the Temple in Jerusalem. In contrast to the simple building in Area XI, the north-east quarter of Yodefata was built in a much more delicate way. The houses were built along three strong and solid terraces with wide walls, well-cut stones and raised up to two or three stories high. The excavation in one of the buildings yielded an unusual find. In one of the rooms beautifully frescoed walls were discovered preserved to a height of 1.5 m. They are in the "masonry style" of the Second Pompeian style, in red and ochre tables separated by black, white and green stripes, and frames of marble imitation. A bigger surprise was that the floor itself is decorated with frescoes of red and black pavers. This is a rare find that was discovered in Israel only in the Herodian theater's orchestra at Caesarea, and also at Leptis Magna in the 1st century CE orchestra. Retrieved among the many pieces of frescoed plaster, were also some nicely shaped pieces of stucco. According to Silvia Rosenberg of the Israel Museum, they can be dated to the third quarter of the 1st century BCE—the Herodian period. There is little doubt that mosaic floors during this time as were found in the Herodian palaces and in the rich mansions at the Western hill in Jerusalem in pre-70 CE, or in private mansions at Caesarea and Dor, were even more expensive than frescoed floors; but fresco work was very expensive as well. The houses and palaces with their fresco walls and mosaic floors represent the highest class of the socio-economic pyramid. It is possible that rich houses in both Galilean capitals—Sepphoris and Tiberias, had similar mansions. The house at Yodefata represents a lower class, compared to Masada, Herodium, Jerusalem, and Caesarea, but is still very high in the social stratification. As mentioned, only a small portion of the mansion was excavated and one can believe that there is much more information about this house in Yodefata, of the Galilee and on 1st century life that is lying there under less than 2 m. of debris, waiting

to be uncovered. There are also two small finds that were discovered in this “wealthy quarter”. The first is a multi-nozzle gray oil lamp which is a unique find, and only a few were reported from archaeological excavations. In the final report of Masada, discussing three nozzles of this type found at the site, Barag and Hershkovitz suggest: “it... seems to be the only specimens of type XIII from a controlled excavation in Palestine—Trans-Jordan. This type is rather rare”.⁵ The best parallels are to be found in private collection. The oil lamp from Yodefah is probably the most complete one of this type originating in a scientific excavation, and was doubtless a luxurious artifact. The second find is a fragment of a stone table, one of very few known in the Galilee. As Gutman already suggested for Gamla, it seems as if these towns were heavily sacked by the conquering Roman troops, as very few luxurious artifacts were found in the debris. At Yodefah, a few small scale-plates were found, probably used for measuring precious metals, powders or perfumes, three gems, a few rings and worked bone fragments were also found in different excavating fields, and very few silver coins. A small hoard that included some bronze coins and seven *tetradrachms* from the time of Emperor Nero, of which the latest is from the year 64 CE was found in the underground shelter under the western town wall. This hoard is probably a small hint of the money that was in the houses before they were sacked by the Romans. At Gamla, a hoard of twenty Tyrian *sheqels* and seven *tetradrachms* from the time of Nero were found in the street, and were probably lost by one of the refugees, or by one of the Roman soldiers.

An important part of the reconstruction and understanding of the social hierarchy within the Galilean Jewish communities is the research and analysis of the economy of the Galilee in general, and of Yodefah in particular.

The common view about the Galilean economy was based on assumptions and some evidence from the texts, as well as on some archaeological evidence from later periods. According to them all, olive oil was the most important product of Galilee. Josephus’ story about John of Gischala and his profiteering in olive oil probably indicates the wealth of Galilee in olive oil (*War* 2.591–592; *Life* 74–75). The finds in both surveys and excavations at Yodefah and Gamla yielded only 1 or 2 olive presses per town. This is not the magnitude of olive-presses that

⁵ Barag and Hershkovitz 1994: 24–58.

would enable the exporting of large amounts of oil from the region. In his book Gutman ascribed part of the importance of Gamla to its geographical position, and connected it with its olive oil production and export.⁶ It should be admitted that the main problem in studying the 1st century Galilean economy is the lack of actual evidence, i.e., the small quantity of clean 1st century archaeological loci. In any case, the finds from Yodefath and Gamla impel us to prune down our confidence in the importance and role of olive oil production in Galilee, at least in the Lower Galilean economy. The situation in Upper Galilee might be different, based on the story about John of Gischala. The only complete oil-press found at Yodefath is the one in the cave, it has only one squeezing installation in contrast to the one at Gamla and Mishmar HaEmeq that each used two, thereby yielding twice the production at any given time. Oil production was an important product in the Galilean economy, it was a highly profitable product, though not as important as was thought before by researchers.⁷

We should look at other archaeological evidence to learn what the main means of production of the Galileans were. Doubtless, archaeology will not be able to reveal all the means of production because some of them do not leave any archaeological trace, nevertheless some do. As part of the study of Yodefath's economy, I conducted a ground survey of the entire possible agricultural territory of the town, directed to locating and identifying agricultural remains. One of the surprising results was finding only 2 wine presses, (while in other areas in the Galilee there are hundreds)⁸ one of those was dated according to its plaster to the Byzantine period. It does make sense that the inhabitants of Yodefath grew grapes and produced wine, but according to the surface find it was a very marginal product. The entire potential agricultural territory of Yodefath is about 15 sq. km. of which about 40% was probably cultivated and terraced for farming. The rest, mostly stony and rocky soil, was mainly grazing land. More than 25 cisterns were

⁶ Gutman 1994.

⁷ We should try and learn from Judea as well. Three or Four First Century CE sites were recently excavated in Judea: Qiryat Sepher, Kh. Etri, Modiin, and Kh. Burnat and in each one of them not more than 1–2 olive presses were found. This situation is completely different from what we know about sites from the Late Roman and Byzantine periods in Galilee, Golan, Samaria and Judea (Frankel 1999, Ben David 1998, Aviam 2004: 170–180).

⁸ Frankel 1999, Frankel and Gezov 1997, Aviam 2004, 170–80, Aviam and Shalem forthcoming.

identified in the surveyed area (not including the cisterns in the town) which is much higher percentage of cisterns for an area this size than is found in any other surveyed and published Galilean region.⁹

This information was combined with the osteological evidence from the dig, which was analyzed by Carol Cope. According to her report, out of the 3075 identified animal bones, 80% belonged to cattle, sheep and goats, 6.8% to chickens, 2.9% to partridges, 2% to pigs (most of which were found in the Hellenistic levels), and the rest to various other animals. Of the 80%, 48% belonged to sheep and goats and from the bones that can be distinguished between goats and sheep, 80.4% belonged to sheep, a much higher percentage than in the regular breakdown of osteological finds from the Hellenistic to Byzantine periods, in which the percentage of goats is little higher. All sheep bones belong to adult animals, which indicates that they were not grown mainly for meat, but rather for wool and milk. It is likely that this conclusion matches the evidence from the land survey around the town which suggested that about half of the land was unsuitable for farming, and thus was used for grazing. The more than 25 cisterns that were found in the area probably to supplied the drinking water for the herds.

In addition, during the dig more than 250 kiln-fired, clay loom-weights were retrieved, the highest number ever found in Early-Roman period Palestine (only at Marisa is the number larger, but most of those were not fired and are dated to the Hellenistic period). At Gamla, where the excavated area is twice as large, only about 60 loom weights were found. Taking all these in consideration, it is suggested that grazing sheep and goats, and especially sheep, was one of the most important economic underpinnings of the inhabitants of Yodefāt, while weaving wool fabrics was one of their main export products.

Surprisingly, at the southern margin of the town, we discovered four pottery kilns. It seems as if this part of the town was mostly occupied by potters' workshops and can be named "the potter's quarter". According to the wasters collected around the kilns, the Yodefāt potters produced cooking pots of the same type as Adan-Bayewitz suggested we call "Kfar Hananya Ware".¹⁰ They look the same, and their color is the same, yet they differ from the "Golan Ware" identified by

⁹ Hanita map: Frankel and Gezov 1997 and Amqa map: Frankel and Gezov forthcoming.

¹⁰ Adan-Bayewitz 1993.

Adan-Bayewitz, as similar in shape to Kfar Hananya ware, however different in clay composition and color. Without chemical analysis it is impossible to determine whether the Yodefata cooking pots are local production or an import from Kfar Hananya, or perhaps from another Galilean village that produced the same type of vessels. However, the existence of wasters prove that at least those were locally made.

The Yodefata potters also produced a type of storage jar which is well attested in First Century CE Galilean sites,¹¹ and although we identified this production center at Yodefata, there is no reason to name them "Yodefata jars". Names should be given according to the shape of the vessels rather than the place of production, as identical types of pottery were produced in different places. To identify that type of jar it is preferable to use the term "ribbed-neck jar". The local potters also produced other vessels such as bowls, stands, and probably the loom weights. This is the first time that a pottery production center was identified on a top of a high hill, away from the source of raw material. All other kilns identified in the Galilee, from different periods, are located near the valleys.

It is well known in the study of the pottery industry that pottery production is one of the solutions for groups of people who suffer from a lack of farm land. This was also the situation at Yodefata. Together with evidence of wool weaving it seems that in a creative way, Jews in mountainous Galilee adapted themselves to the geographical conditions of rocky terrain and lack of arable land. As their agricultural land was poor, they developed wool and textile industry along with pottery production. It is clear that the potters of Yodefata had an advantage over those of Kfar Hananya because they were much closer to the main markets at Sepphoris.

Finally, the bones of dozens of human beings, men, women and children were found at Yodefata, gathered and buried in cisterns and caves, and buried under the collapse of houses and fill. There is no chance of a mistake in dating them to the First Century CE, as the latest finds in the fill belong to this period. Some of the bones carry marks of violence that prove that they were all the victims of the war. According to the study of these bones they could represent more than 2500 human beings and maybe more, slaughtered in the 67 CE war. Among the victims were citizens of the town and refugees from nearby

¹¹ Fernandez 1983: 187.

villages. Therefore, this large collection of human remains represents a population not only from one town, but also from a larger area in Lower Western Galilee. If this is so, it provides us with a larger view of the health and economic conditions in the mid-First Century CE Galilee. Anthropological research¹² proved that they were all in good health, fed under conditions of normal nutrition, did not suffer from any starvation or malnutrition; they were in an environment of normal sanitation and did not suffer from any severe diseases before they died.

Summary

All this evidence shows that the socio-economical hierarchy in 1st century Galilee was not as simple as “poor peasants” and “wealthy townsmen” as is usually discussed. There was social hierarchy in cities, towns and villages. From the beginning of their settlement in the Galilee during the Hasmonaean reign, the Galileans developed their economy cleverly and wisely, adopting every chance that the land and environment could offer. Under the Hasmoneans, the economic foundations were built.¹³ Under Antipas, the Galilee grew rapidly after years of neglect in the reign of Herod the Great. Evidence for this can be seen at Yodefat which grew from a small, fortified village/stronghold on the top of the hill, to become a prosperous town on the Eastern and Southern slopes, and on the Southern plateau as well. A similar development was followed at Gamla. The Hasmonaean village/stronghold was built on the North-Eastern corner of the hill and was abandoned during part of the end of the first century BCE, maybe as a result of the Herodian campaign in 38 BCE. From the end of that century to the time of its destruction the town grew very fast under Phillip, Herod’s son.

According to finds from Gamla and Yodefat, the character of the houses, frescoes and stucco, luxurious pottery and small finds, different means of production and human remains, it is possible to attempt to reconstruct part of the socio-economic strata.

¹² The study was conducted differently by V. Eshed and C. Cope.

¹³ Aviam 2004: 41–58.

At the bottom, one can find, as was suggested by Freyne,¹⁴ who did not base his view on any archaeological remains, the day-workers, shepherds and beggars. Other groups in the lower classes were potters, spinners, weavers and probably simple farmers who worked for others or had only small plots of land, if any land at all. From different studies we do know that pottery production was not considered a source of great wealth (Arnold 1985). Above them there were the owners of the small industries or workshops: olive oil and flour producers, blacksmiths, carpenters and others. The olive oil was, as today, an expensive product, but as the hard work of picking and pressing lasts only about two to three months a year, it is possible that these families took part in the wool production as well. It seems as if the wool craft was widely spread at Yodefat and probably in other Galilean mountainous towns, and could have been not only a source of income by itself, but also supported other kinds of economic activities. At the top of the pyramid, there were probably the merchants, important dealers in produce, oligarchic families, tax collectors, and high officials as reflected by the rich mansion at Yodefat and the story of Phillip son of Jacimus, a high officer in Agrippa's army who lived, or part of his family lived at Gamla (*War* 4.81–82; *Life* 46, 179).

The results of modern, scientific excavations at Gamla and Yodefat offer the first opportunity to discuss some of the most important socio-economic questions of 1st century Galilee from the ground up. The historical evidence by itself from Josephus and the New Testament are not sufficient, they should be clarified and supported by archaeological finds.

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¹⁴ Freyne 1980: 194–200.

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