

## *National Garden Tzippori (Sepphoris)*



Mona Lisa of the Galilee

**Tzippori** (Hebrew: צִפּוּרִי, צִפּוּרִי), also known by the Greek **Sepphoris**, the Latin **Dioceserea**, and the Arabic **Saffuriya** (Arabic: صفورية) or **Suffurriye**, is located in the central Galilee region, six kilometers north-northwest of Nazareth, in modern-day Israel. The site holds a rich and diverse historical and architectural legacy that includes Assyrian, Hellenistic, Judean, Babylonian, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Crusader, Arabic and Ottoman influences.

Interest on the part of Biblical archaeologists is related to the belief in Christian tradition that the parents of the Virgin Mary, Anna and Joachim, were natives of Sepphoris, which at the time was a Hellenized town. Other notable structures include a Roman theater, two early Christian Churches, a Crusader fortress that was renovated by Daher El-Omar in the 18th century, and some 40 mosaics.

Tzippori used to be the center of Jewish religious and spiritual life in the Galilee and remains of a 6th century synagogue have been uncovered in the lower section of the city. An Arab village, Saffuriya, was later established but depopulated in 1948. The Israeli moshav Tzippori was established adjacent to the site in 1949, and the area occupied by the former Arab village was designated a national park in 1992. Moshav Tzippori falls under the jurisdiction of Jezreel Valley Regional Council, and in 2006 had a population of 616.

## **History**

### **Early history**

Although the date of the city's establishment is a point of some dispute, it is at least as old as the 7th century BCE, when it is fortified by the Assyrians, subsequently serving as an

administrative center in the region under Babylonian, Hellenistic and Persian rule. Throughout this time period, the city was known as Sepphoris.

In 104 BCE, the Hasmoneans settled there under the leadership of either Alexander Jannaeus or Aristobulus I. The city was called Tzippori and may have derived from the Hebrew word for 'bird,' *tsippor*, perhaps because of the bird's-eye view the hilltop provides.

The Hasmonean Kingdom was divided into five districts by the Roman pro-consul Gabinius and Sepphoris came under the direct rule of the Romans in the year 37 BCE, when Herod the Great captured the city from Mattathias Antigonus reportedly at the height of a snowstorm.



The Galilee in late antiquity

After Herod's death in 4 BCE, the city's largely Jewish inhabitants rebelled against Roman rule. The Roman army moved in, under the command of the Roman Governor in Syria, Varus. The Roman army completely destroyed the city and sold many of its inhabitants into slavery.

Herod's son, Herod Antipas was made Tetrarch, or governor in 1 CE, and he proclaimed the city's new name, *Autocratis*, or the "Ornament of the Galilee."

Autocratis' inhabitants did not join the resistance against Roman rule in the First Jewish Revolt of 66. They signed a pact with the Roman army and opened the gates of the city to the Roman general Vespasian upon his arrival in 67. They were rewarded by having their city spared from the destruction suffered by many other Jewish cities, including Jerusalem.

Coins minted in the city at the time of the First Revolt carried the inscription *Neronias* and *Eirenopolis*, "City of Peace." After the revolt, symbology used on the coins was little different from other surrounding pagan city coins with depictions of laurel wreaths, palm trees, caduceus, and ears of barley.

Just prior to the Bar Kokhba revolt, the city's name was changed yet again to Diocaesarea. Following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 132–135, many Jewish refugees settled there, turning it into the center of religious and spiritual life in the Galilee. Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, one of the compilers of the Mishnah, a commentary on the Torah, moved to Tzippori, along with the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish religious court. Before moving to Tiberias by 150 CE. Jewish academies of learning became based there. Diocaesarea, so named in honor of Zeus and the Roman Emperor, became not only a center of spiritual and religious study, but also a busy trade route town.

In 363, Diocaesarea was destroyed by an earthquake, but rebuilt soon afterwards, retaining its importance in the greater Jewish community of the Galilee, both socially and spiritually. Jews and pagan Romans lived peacefully alongside one another during the Byzantine period, and the city welcomed a number of Christians, as well.

## Islamic conquest and the Crusaders

In the 7th century, the city was incorporated into the expanding Umayyad dynasty, and *al-jund* coins were minted out of by the new rulers. Umayyad rule was replaced by Abbasid rule, and Arab and Islamic dynasties continued to control the city, with a brief interlude during the Crusades, up until its conquest by Israel in the war of 1948. Throughout this period of time, the city was known by the Arabicized name of the Greek original, i.e. Saffuriya.

In the 14 centuries between the rule of Herod of Antipas and that of the Ottoman empire, the city reportedly thrived as a center of learning, with a diverse, multiethnic and mutlireligious population of some 30,000 living in relatively peaceful coexistence.

The early 12th century brought the Crusaders to Palestine. They built a fortress and watchtower atop the hill, overlooking Saffuriya, and dedicated it to Anne and Joachim, the parents of the Virgin Mary. This became one of their local bases in the Kingdom of Jerusalem and they renamed the city La Sefhorie. In 1187, the Crusaders were dispatched from La Sefhorie to fight the Battle of Hattin, against Saladin. They were defeated at Hattin, and the Third Crusade ultimately failed as a whole.

After the defeat of the Crusaders by Saladin, the Ayyubid Sultan renamed the city Saffuriya. In the 15th century, Saffuriya came under the control of the Ottomans. It remained a titular see of the Roman Catholic church.

## Modern history



Tzippori, 1859

Though it lost its centrality and importance as a cultural center, the village thrived agriculturally. Saffuriyya's pomegranates, olives and wheat were famous throughout the Galilee. The village is still known for its pomegranates and *molokhia* (an edible green cooked in a stew with chicken).

In summer of 1931, archaeologist Leroy Waterman, began the first excavations at Saffuriya, having procured permission from Arab villagers to dig in part of the school's playground which had been the site of a Crusader fortress.

During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Arab village of Saffuriya was captured by Israeli forces along with the rest of the lower Galilee in Operation Dekel. Most of the villagers fled northwards toward Lebanon, some of them settling in the refugee camps of Ein al-Hilwa, Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon. After the military assault, the 80 remaining Palestinian Arab inhabitants were joined by returnees. In September 1948, the returnees were again expelled. As the village population again increased with more returnees until the Palestinian Arab population stood at about 550, the Israeli government adopted a plan proposed by the regional military governor (Major Elisha Sulz) for the expulsion of Saffuriyya's Arab population to al-Reina. On 7 January 1949, fourteen residents of Saffuriyya were expelled from Israel and the remaining 550 were ordered to 'Illut. Many settled in the nearby town of Nazareth in a quarter now known as the al-Safafira quarter because of the large number refugees from Saffuriyya living there.<sup>1</sup> The neighbourhood is a few kilometers from the site of their former homes, but the Israeli government has resisted attempts to repatriate or compensate them for the homes and lands that they lost

On 20 February 1949 a moshav was founded on the site by immigrants from Morocco and Tunisia, and the name Tzipori was resurrected. In the 1950s the founders were joined by immigrants from Romania.

## Archaeological sites



Crusader Fortress

The Crusader fortress sits high atop the hill, overlooking both the Roman theater and the majority of the Jewish city. It was built in the 12th century, using Roman elements, and was rebuilt by the Ottomans in the 18th century, and then converted into a girls' school, and used for this purpose until 1948. Today the fortress houses a small museum, and provides a beautiful view of the surrounding area from its rooftop.

Much of the town itself has been excavated, revealing Jewish homes along a main cobblestone street. Several images have been found carved into the stones of the street, including that of a menorah, and another image that resembles some ancient game reminiscent of tic-tac-toe. Mikva'ot (pl. of Mikvah ), or Jewish ritual baths, have been

found as well, identified by the steps leading to the bottom, carved out of the earth along with the rest of the bath.



Zodiac Wheel Mosaic in the great synagogue of Tzippori, 5th century CE

The Roman theater sits on the northern slope of the hill, and is about 45 m in diameter, seating 4500. Most of it is carved into the hillside, but some parts are supported by separate stone pillars. The theater shows evidence of ancient damage, probably from the earthquake in 363, but also quite possibly from the Arab conquest.



Offering of fruits and grains, the Nile House Mosaic

The remains of a 6th century synagogue have been uncovered in the lower section of the city, evidence of an interesting fusion of Jewish and pagan beliefs. In the center of the floor is a mosaic depicting the zodiac wheel. Helios sits in the middle, in his sun chariot, and each zodiac is matched with a Jewish month. Along the sides of the mosaic are strips depicting Biblical scenes, such as the binding of Isaac, as well as traditional rituals, including a burnt sacrifice and the offering of fruits and grains.



Mouse taken from the Nile house mosaic

A modern structure stands to one side of the excavations, protecting the remains of a 5th century public building, with a large and intricate mosaic floor. Some believe the room was used for festival rituals involving a celebration of water, and possibly covering the floor in water. Drainage channels have been found in the floor, and the majority of the mosaic seems devoted to measuring the floods of the Nile, and celebrations of those floods.



Roman villa mosaic floor

Finally, a Roman villa is arguably the centerpiece of the discoveries, containing one of the most famous mosaics in all of Israel. It was built around the year 200, and destroyed in the earthquake in 363. The villa is in the traditional form of a triclinium; seats would have been arranged in a U-shape around the mosaic, Roman villa mosaic floor and people would have reclined while dining and drinking, talking and contemplating the mosaic images. The mosaic, for the most part, is devoted to Dionysus, god of wine, and of socializing. He is seen along with Pan and Hercules in several of the 15 panels.



Dionysus Party

The centerpiece of the mosaic floor, however, at least for the archaeologists, is an image of a young lady, possibly meant to be Venus, which the researchers have dubbed "The Mona Lisa of the Galilee." Smaller mosaic pieces, called *tesserae*, were used to allow for greater detail and a more life-like result. The image is certainly more life-like, and more detailed (as in the shading and blush of her cheeks) than most expect mosaics to be.