

**2007 Sepphoris Expedition Sponsored by the Hebrew University
and DOAR Litigation Consulting
in Loving Memory of Noam Shudofsky
June 24 – July 20, 2007**

An Archaeological Report
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Prof. Zeev Weiss
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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The 2007 excavation season at Sepphoris was sponsored by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and DOAR Litigation Consulting in loving memory of Noam Shudofsky, with the help of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The excavation season, which took place between June 26 and July 20, 2007, was directed by Prof. Zeev Weiss (Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem) and conducted in four different areas along the *decumanus* in Sepphoris's Lower City.

About sixty people took part in the dig, including students from Criswell College in Dallas, Texas, a group of high school students from nearby Hoshaya, local volunteers, and hired workers. The following staff members participated in the project: Rona Evyasaf, Avner Ecker, Michal Freisen, Ben Gordon, and Shulamit Miller (area supervisors, HU undergraduate and graduate students), Maya Sherman (assistant area supervisor and find registrar), Anna Iamim (surveying and drafting), Gabi Laron (photographer), Sky View (aerial photography), Dr. Barbara Johnson (pottery) and Mansur Subhi (administrator). The expedition enjoyed the ongoing support and help of Mr. Binny Shalev and the assistance of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

The *Decumanus* (Area 68.1)

Another segment of the *decumanus* (approx. 20 meters long) from the Roman and Byzantine periods was unearthed and almost entirely preserved in Lower Sepphoris, 85 meters east of the colonnaded street's intersection (fig. 1).



Figure 1: Plan of the *decumanus* and the shops to its south.

The width of the stone-paved street that lay between sidewalk curbs is 6 m. Sizeable slabs arranged in one row across the width of the street indicate the existence of a channel that ran in a north-south direction beneath the pavers (fig. 2). This channel, the continuation of which was uncovered south of the *decumanus* in the previous season, measures ca. 6.61m long, 55cm wide, and 1.1m deep, and has walls built of ashlar. The direction of stone pavers across the breadth of the *decumanus* changes slightly east of the channel, from the point where the road begins to incline eastward to conform with the natural topography.



Figure 2: Aerial photograph of the *decumanus* and the area to its south.

A 1.5 x 1.3-m. probe conducted beneath the stone pavement of the *decumanus* revealed three successive layers below street level (fig. 3): A thin upper layer composed of soil and soft plaster lay directly on top of a thick, hard, cement-like plaster layer; beneath this layer was an earth fill composed of red soil and gravel embedded with an abundance of pottery sherds and supported by bedrock. The pottery assemblage from the probe dates the construction of the *decumanus* to the late first century and no later than the first half of the second century CE. The six stone slabs that were removed to conduct the probe were later restored to their original position.



Figure 3: Probe conducted beneath the stone pavement of the *decumanus*, looking north.

Excavation of the northern side of the street exposed the continuation of the steps running parallel and adjacent to the *decumanus* (fig. 4). Three steps were found in the section unearthed this year, although several stones, mainly from the easternmost part of the second step, were robbed. In previous seasons, it was assumed that the steps were originally built in the late first or early second century CE, together with the *decumanus*; however, based on our work this season in Area 78.2 (see below), it seems that they were added only at a later stage, probably in the early Byzantine period. Nevertheless, and as assumed earlier, these steps led to the northern sidewalk that hypothetically followed the course of the adjacent *decumanus*.



Figure 4: The *decumanus* looking west. Note the steps on the northern side and, to the south, the wall constructed above the pavement at a later stage.

Several squares were opened south of the *decumanus*, while major efforts were made to connect the new finds to the remains unearthed in the adjacent area in previous years. Here we were able to discern several architectural phases, starting with the construction of the *decumanus* and through the early Arab period.

The southern side of the street is aligned with the sidewalk on whose curb a stylobate with columns was built to support its roof. The original stylobate, built at the same time as the street, was robbed in most places, but two probes enabled us to locate its foundation. Remains of a renovated stylobate were found this year, as well as in the previous season along the eastern section in the *decumanus*.

A large section of the southern sidewalk (over 25m long) was fully excavated this season, exposing two successive layers of plaster (fig. 5). The early surface is dated to the third century CE whereas the upper one was laid in the late Byzantine period. A pipe composed of clay segments running in an east-west direction was detected along the early sidewalk, from the easternmost square, through Area 77.1 and westward, toward the intersection of the two colonnaded streets.

The foundation of a thick wall (ca. 1.1m wide) built of ashlar was found south of the sidewalk while its continuation was found in Area 77.1 (see below). This wall delimited both extremities of the sidewalk and stood in front of a monument, traces of which were found south of the *decumanus*, thus separating the two areas.



Figure 5: Western view of the southern sidewalk with the thick wall to its left (marked with an arrow). The four walls projecting from the baulk and built on top of the thick wall belong to the shops constructed in second phase.

A row of five shops was added south of the sidewalk in the second phase, probably in the third or fourth century CE (fig. 6). The stratigraphical relationship between the shops and the thick wall delimiting the sidewalk indicates that the latter was partially dismantled at this time while its remaining part was integrated and used as a façade for the newly built shops. These shops, which were partially excavated this season, stood adjacent to a previously excavated area containing five other shops that were uncovered in past years. Only the northern part of the five shops excavated this season was unearthed; each had a plaster floor with a different width (3.44m–4.17m), however since the shops have not yet been fully excavated their length is unknown.



Figure 6: Frontal view of the partially excavated shops south of the *decumanus*.

Remains of later walls, a water channel, and some installations were uncovered along the sidewalk and above the stylobate in the southeastern square of Area 68.1 (fig. 7). These finds, together with similar remains from previous seasons found in the adjacent squares along the sidewalk, belong to the third phase identified in this area, which is dated to the late Byzantine or early Islamic period. The new architectural elements introduced in this period were not constructed at one time but over several subphases. A water channel running from east to west (ca. 35m long, 24cm wide, and 18–25cm deep) was built on the sidewalk where, at a certain point, it turns southward into the area of one of the original shops and continues beyond it. The shops were expanded in this period, not only preventing pedestrians from walking on the sidewalk but also transforming this public space into an area for private use. The two *tabuns* unearthed this season on the easternmost side of the excavated sidewalk, or the

round installations coated with fine plaster found in previous years in one of the expanded shops, may suggest that these expanded shops were used for the dyeing of textiles or some other manufacturing process.



Figure 7: Remains of later construction along the sidewalk and above the stylobate in the southeastern square.

A series of plaster layers were found on top of the *decumanus* whereas the easternmost squares had only one layer. These layers, together with a few later walls constructed on either side of the main route, belong to the latest phase identified in this area. In most cases, the plaster layers exposed this year, and their composition, resemble those excavated in previous years in the section on top of the *decumanus*. Between each layer lay a thin accumulation of debris with a different composition. The pottery sherds and coins found in the lowest layer of fill concealing the *decumanus*, and the sealed layers above it, may suggest that the first pavement that covered this main thoroughfare was laid in the early seventh century CE and the others in the ensuing period. The existence of several layers on top of the *decumanus* pavement clearly indicates that the same route, although on a higher level, was still being used in the early Islamic period.

Four round structures with a diameter of 90 centimeters each were constructed to an average height of 75 centimeters; one pair stood on the *decumanus* and the other on the sidewalk, close to the shops that were excavated this season (fig. 8). These structures resemble those found last year in terms of both their construction and stratigraphical relationship to other architectural elements found in the vicinity. The purpose of the round structures is ambiguous for the present; however, considering the method of their construction and relationship to the uppermost plaster layer, they

should be regarded as foundations for some unidentified structure that stood nearby at some later stage.



Figure 8: Northern view of the two round structures constructed on the sidewalk, close to the shops.

The architectural features and plaster layers on top of the *decumanus*, found both this season and in previous years, belong to the strata postdating the city of late antiquity. The walls and structures built on the sidewalk and along the *decumanus* represent the various architectural phases that tapered the Roman-Byzantine road. These changes were not made all at once but were slowly introduced over the years. Such a phenomenon is known to have also existed in other cities in the region where, by the end of the Byzantine or early Islamic period, private construction reduced the size of the earlier designated public areas.

The Monument and Other Buildings – Area 77.1

Our assignment in Area 77.1 was to complete the work that was aborted last year due to the precarious security situation in the Galilee, as well as further expand the excavation in order to examine the hypothesis raised in previous seasons, wherein it was assumed that some of the architectural features uncovered in this area belonged to a single large early Roman compound located south of the *decumanus* (fig. 9). This year, our work was concentrated in the area in front of the recess unearthed two years ago, primarily south of the adjacent sidewalk.

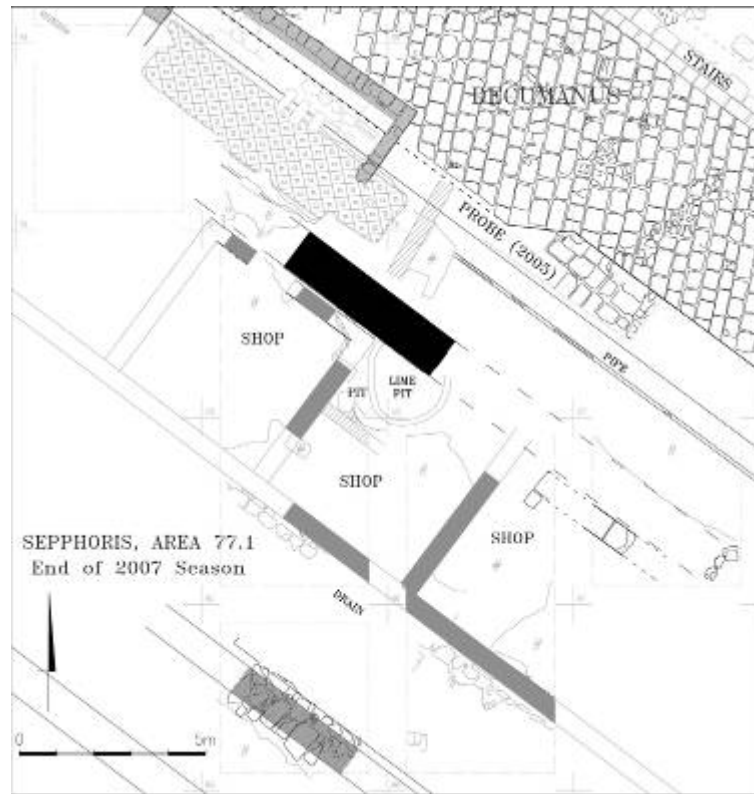


Figure 9: Plan of Area 77.1.

Another segment of the thick wall (ca. 5m long and 1.2m wide), similar to the one mentioned above, was unearthed in this area as well (fig. 10). In addition, a few stone slabs, some of which actually served as part of the foundation of later constructed walls, were found to the south. These pavers were part of a larger floor that was presumably connected to the *stylobate* found here two years ago; together with the thick wall, it represents the first architectural phase in this area. The scanty evidence found this season adds new information regarding the area in front of the monument that presumably stood south of the *decumanus*. However, only continued excavations will give us access to additional data that will confirm our assumptions.



Figure 10: Aerial view of Area 77.1. The thick wall is marked with an arrow; below it, to the south, are the three shops.

The three shops excavated south of the thick wall are aligned with the shops in Area 68.1. A stratigraphical analysis of the finds, the construction method of the building, and the chronological evidence suggest that they belong to the same phase. The central shop (measuring 4.42 x 4.46m) was fully excavated. Its walls, here as in the other shops, were constructed with reused stones and its floor was plastered. One wall, together with an adjacent, partly preserved, installation found in the same shop, may suggest some changes that were introduced in the second phase. Two stones integrated into the back wall of the eastern shop deserve special attention. One is the capital of a Corinthian pilaster (fig. 11) and the other bears two large Greek letters, ΔΙ, probably mason marks, that left their imprint on the other stone. Later on, this shop was covered with dirt, and another plaster layer was placed on top of it, as revealed last year in the adjacent shop to the west. This later accumulation most probably belonged to the church south of the *decumanus* that was excavated in previous years.



Figure 11: Capital of a Corinthian pilaster integrated into the back wall of the eastern shop.

Monumental Building with Columns – Area 78.2

Area 78.2 was opened last year in order to learn more about the building that was constructed northeast of the colonnaded street's intersection. Here, too, work was aborted mid-season due to the unstable security situation in the Galilee. This season, however, we continued excavating the four squares launched last year and expanded the area westward with four additional trenches (fig. 12).

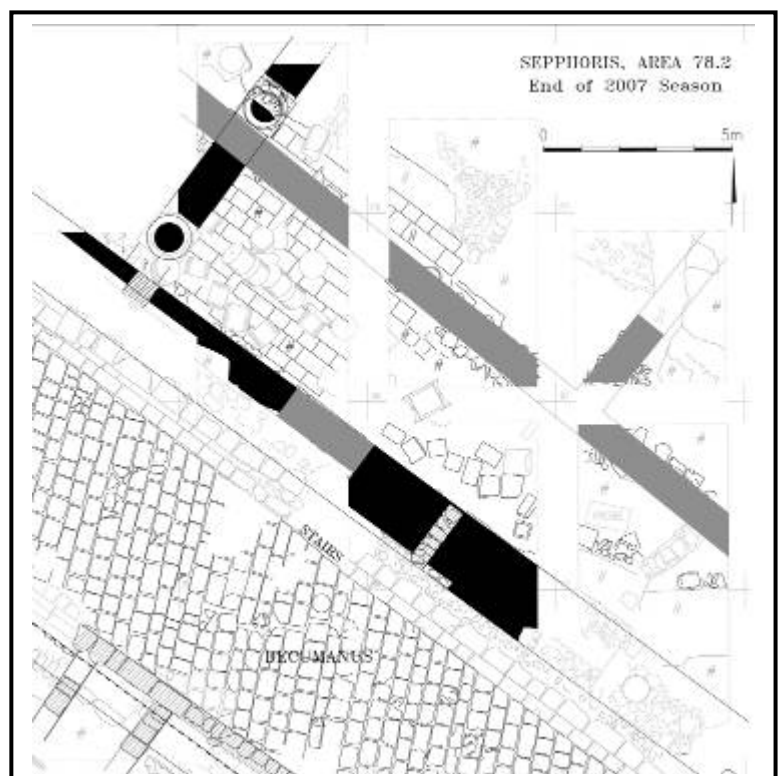


Figure 12: Plan of Area 78.2.

The remains unearthed this season further support the three construction phases identified last year. At the same time, previous assumptions regarding the use and date of the three steps aligned with the *decumanus* were completely revised (see below).

Several architectural features of a monumental building dated to the Roman period belong to the first phase in this area (fig. 13).



Figure 13: Aerial view of Area 78.2.

The foundation of a thick wall (1.92m thick and 16.7m long) running adjacent and parallel to the *decumanus* delimits the monumental building on the south. To its north is a well-preserved stone pavement with smooth rectangular slabs executed in high quality and composed of two sections on different levels (fig. 14). The largest section measures 5.55 x 4.35m whereas the smaller segment on its west, which looks like a raised sidewalk running northward, is 5.06 x 1.41m and 25cm higher than the main floor. A plaster layer bearing the negative imprint of stone slabs, as well as several stones pavers found *ex situ*, may suggest that the lower pavement originally extended eastward – bringing the total size of the lower pavement excavated thus far to 17 x 5.5m.



Figure 14: Stone pavement laid in two sections on different levels, strewn with the column drums; the four fallen drums of one column, in the center, were found *in situ*, in their original sequence of installation.

Two columns with a 3-meter-stretch of a partly preserved stylobate between them, as well as the beginning of another segment to their north, left their imprints west of the raised sidewalk. These elements, together with additional finds unearthed in the vicinity (see below), most probably belong to a larger portico running from north to south in this part of the building. A square plinth (1.25m), molded base (diameter 1.20m), and part of a drum (diameter .76m) from the southernmost column were found in situ, whereas only the foundation marking the location of the northern one was preserved here (fig. 15).



Figure 15: The southernmost column found in situ, with a fallen drum to its left. Traces of spiral flutes in stucco are still attached to the drum.

Several other drums (average diameter of 75cm) were scattered over the stone pavement, including four fallen drums of one column that were found in situ, in their original sequence of installation. Additional architectural elements were uncovered in the adjacent squares; some were even integrated into later walls, e.g., molded bases, drums, Ionian and Corinthian capitals, as well as other fragments. Most of these elements were made of local limestone, others of marble; it is not clear, though, whether the latter were used in the monumental building or brought from elsewhere. The decoration on the architectural elements made of local limestone was executed in stucco, e.g., moldings of bases, vertical and spiral flutes of shafts, and the detail on an Ionian capital. Segments of stucco decoration were found still attached to some of the above-mentioned architectural elements, and large quantities of broken molded plaster

pieces of different sizes were found in the debris covering the remnants of the building. Several pieces even exhibit elaborate decorations, e.g., dentils, spirals, *ovolo*, and an inhabited acanthus scroll (fig. 16). Fresco fragments were also found this year, thus providing evidence for another artistic medium that once decorated this monumental building.



Figure 16: Stucco fragment decorated with an inhabited acanthus scroll.

The data revealed so far clearly indicate that this was a monumental and richly decorated building, although at the moment its precise purpose cannot be determined. The stone pavement and columns may suggest that it was an open space surrounded by porticos, but these elements equally could have been part of an entrance area in front of a larger structure buried behind them, to their north. Based on the material collected in a probe conducted inside the building, it appears that this structure was constructed in the second century CE. It was abandoned at some stage, however the single fallen column as well as the position of other architectural elements and decorative pieces found in the debris may suggest that it was struck shortly thereafter and probably damaged by an earthquake. The array of pottery sherds collected in the fills and debris covering the building's remains indicates that it occurred some time in the fourth century CE. Future excavations will shed new light and provide additional information about this magnificent building that stood in the insula northeast of the central colonnaded intersection in Lower Sepphoris.

The demolished building and its heavy collapse of debris was left in ruins and buried beneath the structure constructed over it in the next period. The relationship between the thick wall delimiting the southern end of the monumental building and the three steps running along the *decumanus* supply further evidence to support this

hypothesis. It is evident throughout the area that the three steps partially superimposed the thick wall at its southern end, most probably after it was dismantled. The stratigraphical relationship between the two architectural elements clearly indicates that the three steps postdate the monumental building and therefore should be assigned a later date than previously assumed – the fourth century or slightly later. It seems that the steps were built in a later period to overstep the debris concealing the destroyed monumental building and to allow access to the structure built above the buried remains (see below).

Several walls built of fieldstones, cut stones, and architectural elements in secondary use, including a stone altar, were unearthed this year; some of them are the continuation of walls excavated last season. These poorly constructed walls, the largest being 18m long and 0.90m wide, were founded in most cases either directly on the surface level of the destroyed building or cut through its remains (fig. 17). Their quality stands in sharp contrast with the three steps mentioned above, which were of a better construction. In light of their dissimilarity, it may be assumed that the two architectural components actually represent different structural phases. It is still possible, though, that these poorly constructed walls actually served as the foundation upon which a well-constructed superstructure that matched the steps was added in this same stage. The builder of these walls penetrated the debris covering the Roman building and aligned the new foundations to conform with the earlier remains. The three steps presumably gave access from the *decumanus* into this building, which was constructed on a higher level and, being close to surface, became completely eroded over the years.

Several scattered architectural elements and some fragmentary pieces found this season join the water cistern, a small segment of a water channel, and traces of a nearby floor exposed last year, and most probably belong to the third and final phase in this area.



Figure 17: Section of an east–west wall constructed in the second phase, cutting through the pavement of the monumental building.

The “Eastern *Cardo*” and Adjacent Structures – Area 68.2

Following the 2006 excavation season, it was suggested that the small street segment south of the *decumanus*, exposed in Area 68.2, is actually an “eastern *cardo*” running parallel to the main *cardo* in Lower Sepphoris. Over ten trenches south of the previously excavated area were projected for excavation this year in order to assess this hypothesis and uncover the continuation of the eastern *cardo*, as well as gain some information regarding the structures constructed along this route (fig. 18).

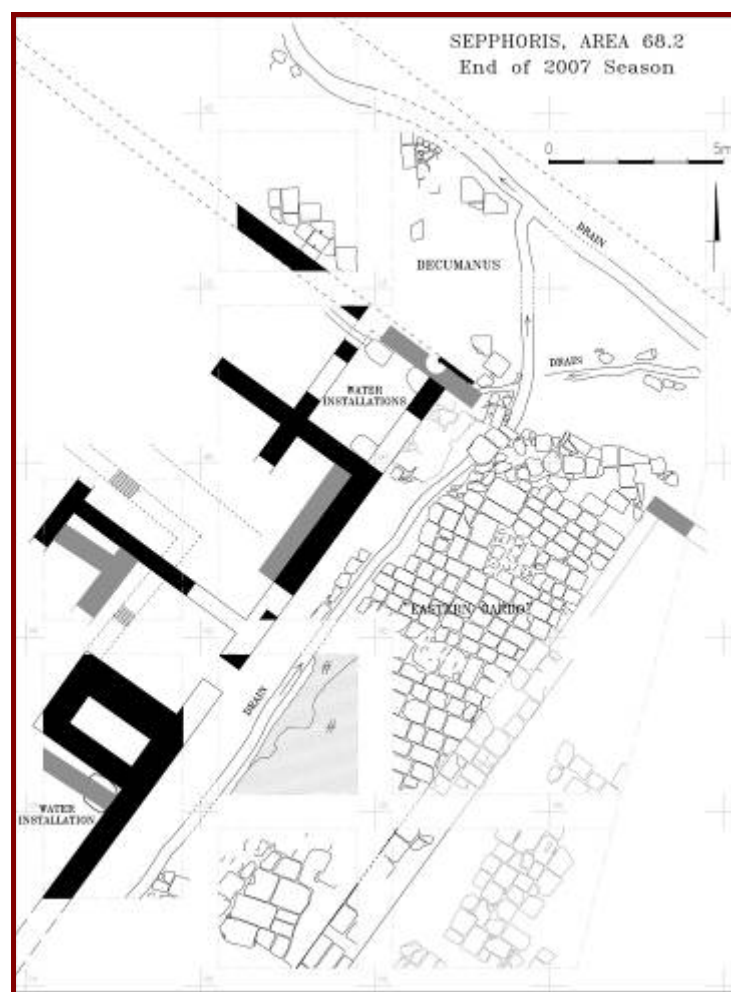


Figure 18: Plan of Area 68.2.

So far, a 17-m-long well-preserved and completely leveled section of the eastern *cardo* was excavated. The lower courses of two walls were preserved and aligned with the street, apparently defining the eastern and western ends of the thoroughfare and indicating its approximate width of 6.75 meters. The construction of a later wall on the eastern side narrowed the street in the second phase to 6.35 meters. Like the

other major route in Lower Sepphoris, the eastern *cardo* is paved with rectangular cut stones (fig. 19) of various sizes and in part laid diagonally across its breadth. One section of the street at the southeastern end is cut entirely into the bedrock while the adjacent pavers were laid flush with the leveled surface.



Figure 19: Aerial view of Area 68.2, of the intersection of the “eastern *cardo*” and the *decumanus*.

The continuation of the water channel running from south to north along the western side of the “eastern *cardo*” was unearthed here as well, thereby recording a total of over 23 meters of a well-preserved conduit, though without its covering stones (fig. 20). The new section, like the previously excavated segment, is 30cm wide, 40cm deep, and coated with a single layer of smooth gray plaster. This year’s excavation results confirm the hypothesis that the channel must have been part of the water supply system initiated by the local municipality. They may suggest, however, that its construction postdates the eastern *cardo* because, for example, the southernmost section of the excavated channel appears to rise some 20cm above the street pavement and in another section it seems to cut the street’s pavement.



Figure 20: Water channel running from south to north along the western side of the “eastern *cardo*.”

Remains of unidentified buildings were uncovered on either side of the eastern *cardo*. A partially excavated stone pavement was found behind the wall defining the

eastern side of the street. The debris covering this pavement included some fallen ashlars, several architectural elements, as well as polychrome mosaic pieces, roof tiles, and a wealth of pottery sherds, implying that an ornate building probably stood on this side of the street. These finds also clearly indicate that the city extended eastward and that there may have been another *insula* with a dense concentration of buildings.

Several walls excavated west of the street belong to a structure or structures that stood at the southwestern corner, near the intersection of the *decumanus* and the eastern *cardo*. Two clear construction phases can be identified here, both conforming to the city plan, although the layout or use of the structure/s cannot yet be determined. The majority of finds here belong to the first phase, which was presumably constructed at the same time as the two thoroughfares or slightly later. Two rooms built of ashlar, paved with plaster, and subdivided into smaller spaces were found right next to the intersection. The northeastern room included three built-in basins, all measuring about 0.5 x 0.5m. The foundation level of other walls constructed with roughly cut stones were found further south. No floor can be clearly associated with these walls and only one round plastered installation (0.9 x 0.8m) was unearthed in conjunction with them (fig. 21). Several walls are attributed to the second phase of construction, although its date is not yet certain. These walls built with cut stones abut or conceal earlier architectural elements, although their actual use or relationship to earlier structures cannot be ascertained on the basis of the meager evidence.



Figure 21: Northern view of the “eastern *cardo*” with remains of unidentified buildings exposed on either side of the thoroughfare.

A series of five hard-packed layers of plaster was found above the eastern *cardo* (fig. 22). The coins and pottery sherds found in the plaster surfaces, and in the fill between them, may suggest that the first layer concealing the eastern *cardo* was laid some time in the sixth century CE. The existence of these layers provides further information regarding the use of some major thoroughfares in the late Byzantine period.



Figure 22: One of the hard-packed layers of plaster found above the “eastern *cardo*.”

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This year’s finds shed new light on several areas of research regarding Sepphoris and what we know about its urban plan and impressive orthogonal street network in the Roman period. The stratigraphical analysis of the various excavated areas along the *decumanus* provides further information about the monuments built along this route and the architectural developments and changes that took place in this part of the city, beginning with the late first or early second century CE and through the late Byzantine and early Islamic period. The range of buildings constructed along the *decumanus*, their proximity to each other, and their monumental character emphasize the importance placed on beautifying this route, which, we believe, was the major thoroughfare leading from the east into Sepphoris’ civic center.



Figure 23-24: Students touring the excavated areas during the dig.