The ethnic identity of first-century C.E. Galileans has long been a matter of scholarly dispute. Some scholars have seen the region as predominantly Jewish, with Gentiles as a small minority. Others have reversed these proportions, arguing that Galilee’s population consisted mostly of gentiles of various ethnicities. Still others have suggested that Galileans were the descendents of the northern tribes of Israel who remained there after the Assyrian conquest; in this view, though Galileans shared their Israelite heritage with their neighbors to the south in Judea, they were not, properly speaking, Jews. The variety of these views is partly due to a lack of epigraphic evidence—most Galilean inscriptions are late second century C.E. or later—and to our present inability to identify first-century C.E. synagogues as such (Galilean synagogues become archaeologically distinct only in later centuries).  

Sean Freyne, throughout his distinguished career, has been one of the most influential advocates of the first position, which sees ancient Galilee as a mostly Jewish region. In his early work, he argued that first-century C.E. Galileans were largely descendents of ancient Israelites. As our archaeological data increased, Freyne modified his view accordingly to take into account the lack of evidence for dense habitation in the wake of the Assyrian conquest as well as the proliferation of new sites in the wake of the Hasmonean conquest. Freyne’s more recent works trace the ancestry of most first-century C.E. Galilean Jews to settlers who arrived in the Hasmonean period.

Two recent developments in scholarship clearly support Freyne’s position that Galilee was predominantly Jewish: first, the publication of archaeological survey data that shed considerable light on Galilee’s historical development and, second, the corroborating findings of three different systematic reviews of the region’s first-century material.

---

1 For an overview of the various scholarly positions, see Chancey 2002, 1–27.
2 Freyne 1980.
culture. In this article, I will summarize the findings of these studies, noting also the questions they leave unanswered and the new questions they pose.

Surveys demonstrate that there was little continuity in Galilee between the pre-Assyrian conquest population and that of the post-conquest period. The shift in Freyne’s own view was prompted by Zvi Gal’s 1992 overview, which revealed that numerous sites in Lower Galilee were abandoned in the wake of the Assyrian invasion and that the region’s small population began to grow only in the Persian and following periods.\(^4\) A more recent survey, published in 2001 by Rafael Frankel, Mordechai Aviam, Nimrod Getzov, and Avi Degani, sheds additional light on the development of Galilee’s population. It suggests that the situation in Upper Galilee was similar to that in Lower Galilee: the number of occupied sites, particularly in the center of the region, dropped in the Iron Age, a change that seems to correspond to the effects of the Assyrian conquest.\(^5\) While these finds do not rule out the possibility that a few first-century c.e. Galileans were descendents of the ancient northern tribes, they do fatally wound the thesis that most were.

In addition, the survey of Upper Galilee by Frankel et al. shows that the area’s pottery profile in the Hellenistic period reflected the presence of two distinct pagan groups. In the Late Hellenistic period, a wave of site abandonments demonstrates that both groups withdrew, while the emergence of new sites seems to correspond to the influx of Jewish inhabitants in the wake of the Hasmonean conquest.\(^6\) The survey seemingly confirms the importance of the Hasmonean conquest for understanding the population of Roman Galilee.

One of the pottery types the surveyors associate with a gentile group began appearing in the Persian period in eastern Upper Galilee in the region around Mt. Meiron. Dubbed Galilean Coarse Ware, it occurs in

---


\(^6\) Most scholars follow Emil Schürer in reading Josephus’s description (Ant. 13.318–319) of Aristobulus’s conquest of northern territory c. 104–103 B.C.E. as a reference to Galilee (Schürer 1973, vol. 1, 216–18); Aristobulus presumably would have had to go through Galilee to reach Iturean territory. Josephus does not specifically mention the conquest of Galilee in this passage, however, and it is possible that the region was not fully annexed by the Hasmoneans until the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 B.C.E.). On the Hasmonean conquest of Galilee, see Freyne 2001; Aviam 2004; Chancey 2002, 41–47; and Reed 2000, 34–43.