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Uncovering First Century Magdala

The first century city of Magdala was a thriving center for commerce, religion, and Jewish identity as evidenced by the historical record and the sophistication of the recently discovered harbor, homes, marketplace and synagogue. Current archaeological work indicates that it was a prospering Mediterranean city similar to the large cities in Greece and Asia Minor. Christian sources identify Magdala as the home of one of Jesus' most important disciples, Mary Magdalene. Given Mary's prominent role in the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, it is interesting that her home town has received so little focus over the years until now.

Throughout the centuries Mary Magdalene herself has received her share of attention from sources as diverse as gnostics, popes, fiction writers, historians and theologians. There is much speculation among scholars whether or not Jesus could have been married to Mary or whether Mary is an example of the endorsement of women as leaders in the early church. The Legionaries of Christ, a Roman Catholic order based in Mexico, is investing a great deal of resources into turning the site of the ancient city of Magdala into a center for pilgrims in the Galilee. Ironically traditional Roman Catholic ideas of celibacy of priests and women in leadership could be greatly challenged if material evidence of Mary's life were to surface. Perhaps the uncertainty about the real story of Mary Magdalene has provided some of the impetus for exploring her home town.

In this paper I will survey the historical record of and archaeological discoveries in Magdala to date and offer some insight into the possible motivations for the various phases of the archaeological work.

A City with Many Names

The modern Israeli city of *Migdal* (also known in Arabic as *Al-Mejdel*) is about 6 kilometers north of Tiberias at the junction of the ancient roads from Tiberias and from Nazareth. It sits at the foot of Mount Arbal, on the western coast of the Sea of Galilee. In ancient times it was known by several names. *Magdala* (Aramaic for “high tower”) is the name that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew uses to refer to the town where Jesus traveled immediately after he had fed the 4000. According to Matthew, Magdala is where the Pharisees and Sadducees ask Jesus for a sign and he promises them no sign except the sign of Jonah the prophet ¹. The ancient city was also known by its Jewish name, *Migdal* ²(1 Maccabees 9:2). In the Talmud the city is called *Migdal Nunia* which means “fish tower”. Josephus calls the city by its Greek name *Tarichea* which means “pickling”, relating to the salting of fish. ³ Some of the names reflect the fact that this area was known for its fish processing industry ⁴.

In a passage parallel to the one in Matthew, the writer of the gospel of Mark records the name of the town where Jesus visited, taught, and argued with the Pharisees as *Dalmanutha*. ⁵ Dalmanutha may be still another name for Magdala or it may refer to a different small town located just 500 feet north of Magdala ⁶(Ngo).

¹ Matthew 15 and 16

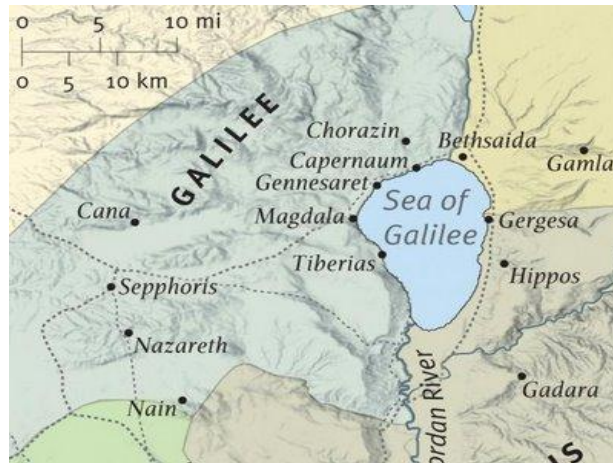
² 1 Maccabees 9:2

³ Josephus, War of the Jews 3.462-4.0

⁴ Pesachim 46a

⁵ Mark 8:10

⁶ Robin Ngo, “Has Dalmanutha Been Found?” September 20, 2013, Biblical Archaeological Society <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-sites/has-dalmanutha-from-the-bible-been-found/> April 15, 2014.



www.enterthebible.org

Historical Record

Magdala had been the Roman administrative center of the western basin of the Galilee until Tiberias was built in 19 CE. Josephus claims that Magdala had a population of 40,000 residents and writes of a hippodrome and a theatre located there.⁷ Perhaps because of its strategic value as a harbor city, Magdala has seen its share of military battles. During the Maccabean War the Jews fought the Syrians near Migdal.⁸ Josephus records that in 37 BC Herod the Great trapped and massacred freedom fighters in the caves above the city.⁹ Josephus, who was commander of the rebel forces in Galilee, also records that he used the city as a base for a naval operation during the first Jewish Revolt. He writes that the battle there resulted in so great a slaughter by the Roman army of 6,500 Jewish troops that the water of the Sea of Galilee was turned red by their blood.¹⁰ The Galilee earthquake of 363 CE most likely disrupted life in the city that had been rebuilt after the Jewish War¹¹.

⁷ Josephus, War of the Jews, 3.10.

⁸ 1 Maccabees 9:2

⁹ Josephus, 16.2-5

¹⁰ Josephus, 3.462-4

¹¹ Marcela Zapata-Mesa, "Preliminary Geoarchaeological Observations of the Magdala Archaeological Project: One of the Most Important Archaeological Discoveries of the Last 50 Years", October 27-30, 2013, abstract of paper pre-

Christian pilgrims wrote of visiting a church built to mark the home of Mary Magdalene from the sixth century. Epiphanius the Monk, writing between 750-800 CE, notes that two miles south of Heptapegon is “a church in which is the house of the Magdalene at the place called Magdala. There the Lord healed her.” Euty chius, writing around 940 CE, also notes that the “Church of Magdala near Tiberius bears witness that Christ here drove out the seven demons which were in Mary Magdalene.” Other medieval accounts indicate that there was a pilgrim site known as *the house of Mary Magdalene*, about halfway between Tiberias and Tabgha that was venerated during that time. There are references as late as 1626 to the existence of this house¹²

Very little is known about the general area during the Mamluk and early Ottoman periods. At some point a small Palestinian town known as Al-Majdal was established nearby. Russian Zionists established the town of Migdal in 1910 and the Palestinian town was depopulated and destroyed in the 1940’s.¹³

From the historical record we would expect to discover material evidence of an affluent Roman-style city with a thriving Jewish population during the first century. We would hope to find remains of industries connected to fish, commerce and transportation on the Sea of Galilee. In the later material record we would look for evidence of pilgrim sites honoring Mary Magdalene. We may expect that there would be a pattern in the debris that would indicate the city was destroyed during the Jewish War (68 CE) and the Galilee earthquake (363 CE). We would predict little evidence of significant settlement in the area from the time of those events to the resettlement of Israel by Zionists in the 1940’s.

sented at Geological Society of America , Denver, Colorado,
<https://gsa.confex.com/gsa/2013AM/webprogram/Paper233638.html>. April 17, 2014

¹² Denys Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus, Volume 2, L-Z*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), page 28.

¹³ Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Village Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, (Washington DC: Institute for Palestinian Studies, 1992), page 530.



Yellow—Franciscan Land—Roman-style city with baths, Byzantine settlement, some finds from Mamluk and Early Ottoman periods
 Red—Legionaries North boundary
 Blue—Legionaries Constructed Spirituality Center & Hotel
 A—Synagogue
 B—Mikvaot
 C—Fish pools/market place
 D—Storage Areas
 E—Production area, fishing activities
 F—Harbor

Archeological work on Franciscan Land

The Franciscans, who are custodians of a portion of the land at Magdala, began excavation of their site in the early 1900's. Father Bellarmino Bagatti reports the remains of a church with an apse and cross-incised stone bearing the date of 1389 near the Birqat Sitti Miriam (*Spring of our Lady Mary*). The remains of another vaulted space, but not a church, were also recorded in the 1930's by Bagatti.¹⁴

Fathers Virgilio Corbo and Stanislao Loffredo excavated the area from 1971-1977. Their work revealed a Roman city with a gridded street pattern, blocks of buildings and a sophisticated

¹⁴ Pringle, page 28.

water system. (See photo one.) Pottery and coins found on site indicated late Hellenistic and early Roman habitation. They found remains of a small building which measured 8.16 x 7.25 meters. It featured rows of columns creating aisles in the main hall and five rows of benches on one side. They concluded that the building was a synagogue, but were puzzled over its small size. It was nicknamed “the Small Synagogue.” (See photo two.) They found channels for water surrounding the Small Synagogue on three sides. Corbo and Loffedo also found a large building with mosaic floor which they believed to be a Roman villa and a Roman-period masonry water tower.¹⁵ (See photo three.)



Photo One www.magdalaproject.com

¹⁵ Jack Finegan, *The Archaeology of the New Testament*, (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) page 82.



Photo Two Biblical Archaeology Society



Photo Three Arqueologia Mexicana Magazine

South of this area, Corbo and Loffredo also found the remains of a Byzantine monastery, but the church to which the early Christian pilgrims referred, has not yet been found.¹⁶

Further work was done on the Franciscan property from 2002-2009, opening up land south of the 1970's work and reaching new strata in the areas excavated during the 1971-1976 campaigns. The work in the 2000's was led by Stephano De Luca. It confirmed the Hellenized foundations of the city and exposed intricate water networks which supplied fresh water to public fountains and served a large thermal complex. The team found evidence of two phases of major urban-reorganization: 1st century BC to 1st century CE and second half of 3rd century CE to first half of 4th century CE, corresponding with the destruction of the city in the Jewish War (68 CE) and the Galilee earthquake (363 CE). The first Franciscan excavators had exposed what they thought was the main piazza of the city. De Luca discovered it was instead a quadriporticus which gave access to the bath and pool complex.¹⁷ Apparently the city was much larger than what the first excavators had understood it to be.

¹⁶ Finegan, page 82.

¹⁷ Stephano De Luca, "Urban Development of the City of Magdala", abstract of paper presented at Symposium on Greco-Roman Galilee, posted to Magdala Project web page on September 11, 2009.
<http://www.magdalaproject.org/WP/?p=247>

Pottery from the Mamluk and early Ottoman periods was found in the southernmost area of the dig, but not further north. This indicates that the settlement during the earlier Islamic periods did not include habitation over most of the area of the Roman city. The pottery finds were the first material evidence of any quantity found from the Mamluk and Ottoman periods in the Magdala area.¹⁸

De Luca also found Magdala's harbor complex to be the most preserved harbor from the first century on the Sea of Galilee. He recommended its protection from current ongoing business projects in the area.¹⁹ (See photo four.)

Current Archaeological Work on Legionaries Land

The Legionaries of Christ have successfully run a center for pilgrims in Jerusalem and have plans to provide a similar operation in the Galilee. The plans for their Galilee project include a hotel, multi-media center, and spirituality center as well as restaurants and shopping areas. They chose a location for their project that would have historic significance for Christian pilgrims, near the Franciscan-owned site of the ancient city of Magdala. They began purchasing parcels of land in the year 2006 and construction permits were issued in 2009.²⁰

Dina Avshalom-Gorni led an excavation of the site on behalf of the Israeli Antiquities Authority. She discovered what turns out to be the remains of a first century synagogue on the property. The discovery of this synagogue has helped to confirm that the Franciscan Small Synagogue was instead a springhouse, *nymphaeum*, or latrine.

¹⁸ Hanaa. Abu-‘Uqsa, “Migdal”, September 26, 2005, Hadashot ArkheologiyotExcavations and Surveys in Israel, Volume 117 (2005). http://www.hadashotesi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=238&mag_id=110

¹⁹ De Luca

²⁰ Magdala Project Web Site. <http://www.magdalaproject.org>

Excavation of the Legionaries site is ongoing. Avshalom-Gorni led the work from 2006-2009, opening up sites on the Franciscan property as well as the Legionaries' land. From 2010 to the present Marcela Zapata-Meza of the University of Mexico has been the archaeologist in charge of the work. Four areas are open in the current excavation, exposing Hellenistic, Early Roman, Late Roman and Byzantine periods.²¹

Near the ancient shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, the excavation uncovered the remains of a large building with different sized rooms and a stone paved area which is possibly a north-south aligned street from the Early Roman period. Whole pottery and glass vessels were found in the building. Fieldstone and pebbles were aligned to protect the eastern wall of the building from waves. One of these stones is the remains of an anchor. Perhaps the building was a storeroom or warehouse used in the fishing industry. (See photo four.)



Photo four EL 125

North of the warehouse area, a four meter wide channel was uncovered made of round and rough-hewn field stones. The use of the channel might have been to convey water from Mt. Ar-

²¹ Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar, "Migdol", Hadashot Arkheologiyot Excavations and Surveys in Israel, volume 125 (2013). http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=2304&mag_id=120

bal to the Sea of Galilee to keep the settlement from flooding during heavy rains. A round pool for water storage was also found that dates from the Byzantine era. (See photo five.)



Photo five EL 125



Photo six

www.newgatetopeacefoundation.org

The most exciting and significant finds were in the northwest area of the work. Avshalom-Gorni exposed a street, paved with small round stones, oriented east-west, and structures built from basalt stone on either side of the street. (See photo six.) Among the findings in this area are four structures with identical floor plans, each with stone floors and small plastered pools. Adjacent to the pools is a shaft that presumably was used to channel ground water to the pools. The current hypothesis about these buildings and pools is that they were used as a fish market.²² (See photo seven.)

What appear to be private homes with mikvaot were discovered near the fish market. Mikvaot in this area would be luxury items and indicate that parts of the population in Magdala were very affluent. The mikvaot in Magdala were fed by a channel system that utilized groundwater to fill the baths. In comparison, no mikvaot have been found in ancient Capernaum, and it is assumed that the people there used the sea for ritual cleansing.²³ (See photo eight.)

²² Avshalom-Gorni and Najar, EL 125.

²³ James H. Charlesworth, Jesus and Archaeology, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), page 18.



Photo seven EL 125



Photo eight www.regnumchristi.org

A synagogue, measuring 33' x 33', consisting of two large rooms and a smaller room, was found on the north side of the street. Three phases of construction were observed in the synagogue. The earliest building was probably not used as a synagogue, but was adapted for use as a synagogue in the later phases. The preliminary report of the excavation dates the earliest phase to the mid-first century BCE. Ceramic finds of Early Roman jars, clay lamps, limestone measuring cups, and glass artifacts were found. A coin from the year 43 CE was discovered in the mosaic floor of the synagogue. A coin from 80 CE was found on the collapsed ceiling of the synagogue. The coins indicate that the synagogue floor was renovated in or after 43 CE and destroyed sometime before 80CE.²⁴ The synagogue was probably a casualty of the battle with Rome in 68 CE. (See Photos nine and ten.)

²⁴ Avshalom-Gorni and Najar, EL125



Photo nine EL 125



Photo ten EL 125



Photo eleven www.theglobalmail.org



Photo twelve EL 125

The synagogue featured colorful mosaic tile floors with a rosette motif. (See photo eleven.) The walls and columns found were covered with fresco in seven colors including dark red, mustard yellow, blue, black and white. (See photo twelve.) The ceiling is believed to have been made from wooden beams and covered in white plaster. This type of decoration is unknown in village synagogues in Israel from this period.²⁵

²⁵ Paul V.M. Flesher, "What Did a Synagogue of Jesus' Time Look Like?" September 2011, Bible and Interpretation web site. April 10, 2014. <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/fle358001.shtml>

Perhaps the most important and surprising item found in the excavation was a rectangular stone with four feet. Five of the sides of the stone featured carved relief of a seven-branch menorah, amphorae, columns, and other unidentified shapes. The stone is believed by Avshalom-Gorni to have been decorated to evoke the Second Temple. There are different theories as to the purpose and use of the stone. Perhaps it was a prayer table or part of a lectern used in reading the Torah scrolls.²⁶ (See Photos thirteen and fourteen.) It has become known as “The Magdala Stone”.

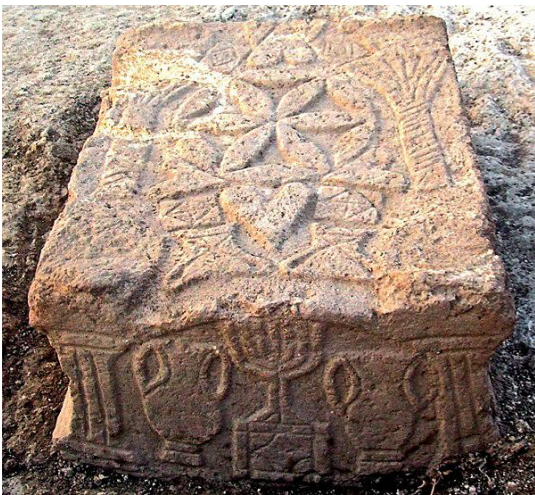


Photo thirteen Moshe Hartal, IAA

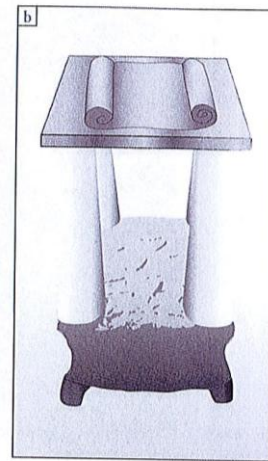


Photo fourteen
Arqueologia Mexicana Magazine

Conclusions

1. **The archaeological work in Magdala is significant because of what it tells us about the Jewish identity of a first century Greco-Jewish population.** The Magdala synagogue is the earliest discovered synagogue in Galilee and one of only seven from this period anywhere in Israel. The artwork on the Magdala Stone indicates that whoever carved it was familiar with temple worship and had actually been inside the Second Temple. During the Second Temple period, access by non-priests into the inner courts of the Temple and the ritual fur-

²⁶ Avshalom-Gorni and Najar, EL 125.

nishings were allowed during the three major pilgrim festivals, making it quite possible that the Magdala Stone carver was an eye witness to the Temple furnishings.²⁷ If the stone was indeed used as part of a reading table or lectern, we may have evidence of the relative literacy and theological sophistication of the population of Magdala. The menorah on the Magdala Stone is the only such representation found that dates from the time that the Second Temple was still standing. The decorated synagogue and the marvelous engineering of the mikvaot with their system of channeling groundwater indicate a population with a strong Jewish identity who highly value ritual and religious education.

2. **The work in Magdala is important because it demonstrates aspects of the civic and commercial life of a first century Galilean town.** Magdala appears to have been a successful mercantile city with sophisticated engineering and artistic expression. The preserved harbor and Roman-style city are very important finds because they shed light on how Jewish communities lived and prospered under Hasmonean and Herodian rule as well as how they developed and thrived in the centuries following the Roman destruction of the Temple.
3. **The work in Magdala is significant because it may illuminate details of Jesus' ministry.** The road from Nazareth intersected with the main road running along the coast of the Sea at Magdala. There is little doubt that Jesus would have been in the city and its synagogue at some time during his ministry in the Galilee
4. **The archaeological work in Magdala is important because it may help to tell the story of one of the most controversial characters in the early church, Mary Magdalene.** The work has been conducted basically in three time periods, the first being in the early part of

²⁷ "Is this What the Temple Menorah Looked Like?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* Vol 37:06, Nov/Dec 2011. <http://members.bibarch.org/search.asp?PubID=BSBA&Volume=37&Issue=6&ArticleID=22&UserID=0&>

the twentieth century when Franciscans did the preliminary survey of their land. Between the 1930's and the 1970's no official excavations were conducted. The second period of work was in the 1970's on the Franciscan owned land. The land was left unexplored again until 2002. These gaps in exploring Magdala may simply be the result of common issues such as the unavailability of financial resources or the lack of imagination of what may lie beyond the original Baggati work. There are, however, correlations between the periods of archaeological work and events in popular culture, theological inquiry, and ecclesiastical history.

Questions that have surfaced about Mary in theological inquiry and popular culture may have been the driving forces to re-explore Mary's hometown. The image of Mary which had been presented by the church throughout the centuries is that of a penitent prostitute. Mary's identity took a new turn in the 1970's when scholarly attention was focused on the newly released Nag Hammadi library. Now we understand that Mary was possibly the *Apostle to the Apostles*, or the *Disciple whom Jesus Loved* or the *Wife of Jesus and the Mother of his children!* This shift of Mary's popular persona resulted in an upsurge of cultural interest in her identity. Curiosity about Mary continued to be fueled by Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970)²⁸, Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)²⁹, and Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* (2003.)³⁰.

Ecclesiastical crises may also have piqued interest in exploring or developing Magdala because of its connection to Mary Magdalene. We could wonder about the desire of the Legionaries to honor biblical women with a pilgrim center in Magdala in the 2000's. The decade was characterized by the sex scandal in the Catholic Church. The founder and leader of the Legion-

²⁸ *Jesus Christ Superstar* by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. First performance October 12, 1971. Musical stage play.

²⁹ *Last Temptation of Christ*. Dir. Martin Scorsese. Perf. William Defoe, Harvey Keitel, Barbara Hershey. Universal Pictures, Cineplex Odeon Films. 1988. Film.

³⁰ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*. (New York: Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 2003)

aries, Father Marciel Maciel Degollado, was exposed as having had affairs, fathering at least one child, and living a double life that includes charges of pedophilia.³¹ Perhaps this crisis in their top leadership led to the Legionaries to want to establish a center that would honor women. Perhaps the hometown of one of the most dominant woman in the Gospels would be an appropriate place for that center.

The Legionaries' plans include a spirituality center that celebrates the *feminine* and honors the women of the New Testament. We must applaud the effort of the Roman Catholic Church to make connections with women they have historically minimized and marginalized. An opposing, more cynical viewpoint might be to assume that this site was chosen to control the flow of information about Mary Magdalene. The celibacy of priests and the ordination of women are fragile ideas, currently under popular scrutiny. Both doctrines could be threatened by the revelation of a first century woman who was married to Jesus and/or was a key leader in the early Jesus movement.

Concerns

We want to assume that the Legionaries have only the best intentions to honor high standards with the dig, yet they are expeditiously proceeding with the hotel complex building plans. That raises a most significant concern. Important public buildings like synagogues are ideally located in the center of the community, accessible to everyone. The synagogue at Magdala is located very near to the western boundary of the Legionaries' property. If the synagogue were to be near the center of the ancient city of Magdala, which reputedly was large enough to have 40,000 residents, we must assume that approximately half of the city of Magdala lies to the north and west

³¹ "Legionaries of Christ Denounce Founder, Marciel Maciel Degollado", February 6, 2014, **The New York Times**. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/07/world/legionaries-of-christ-denounce-founder-marciel-maciel-degollado.html?_r=0 April 14, 2014

of the synagogue. That includes land west of modern Route 90 and north of the Legionaries' property.



www.magdalacenter.com

The Israeli Antiquities Authority (“IAA”) is charged with protecting and preserving significant archaeological sites. The Director-General of the IAA has authority to decide the fate of each site and can disallow development. The Israeli government provided a funding grant for the Legionaries’ project in 2008.³² Apparently the hotel project is deemed important by the government, perhaps for tourism or to maintain good relations with the church. We can speculate about the different interests represented at this site and how the IAA will proceed.

Archaeological work has already revealed the earliest synagogue in the Galilee, the only known village synagogue from that time period with preserved mosaic and fresco decoration, the only found representation of the menorah from the time of the Second Temple, the best preserved harbor on the Sea of Galilee, and a state of the art water system that utilized ground water.

³²Magdala Center Web Page Timeline/History www.magdalacenter.com/contents.asp?pageID=90 April 14, 2014

We have found Mary's synagogue and the market where Mary purchased fish, but the original location of the house of Mary Magdalene that had been marked by an early church has not yet been located. There is definitely more to explore in Magdala. If the Legionaries truly want to honor Mary Magdalene, they need to make sure that their plans don't disrupt the archaeological work that might help to tell of her story.

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