

MAGDALA

Plain of Gennesaret. The fertile plain called Gennesaret (Mt. 14:34), by whose name the lake was also known (Lk. 5:1), stretches for nearly three miles along the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Today, it includes Migdal Junction (Magdala), Migdal, Ginosar, and Tabgha. The Jewish historian Josephus described the Plain of Gennesaret in these words:

Skirting the lake of Gennesar, and also bearing that name, lies a region whose natural properties and beauty are very remarkable. There is not a plant which its fertile soil refuses to produce, and its cultivators in fact grow every species; the air is so well-tempered that it suits the most opposite varieties. The walnut, a tree which delights in the most wintry climate, here grows luxuriantly, beside palm trees, which thrive on heat, and figs and olives, which require a milder atmosphere. One might say that nature had taken pride in thus assembling, by a *tour de force*, the most discordant species in a single spot, and that, by a happy rivalry, each of the seasons wished to claim this region for her own (*Wars* 3.10.8).

Magdala. This city was located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, about three miles north of Tiberias. Magdala was known for fishing in the time of Jesus. A mosaic floor was found there that features a fishing boat, which symbolizes the importance of the fishing industry. The name Magdala is derived from the Hebrew term *migdal*, which means “tower” or “fortress.” This city was apparently the one that Josephus identified by the Greek name Taricheae, which means “salted fish.” The Talmud called the place Magdala Nunayya, or “fish tower” (Talmud *Pesahim* 46a).



Mosaic Featuring a Fishing Boat

Excavations have led archaeologists to believe that the city was founded during the Hellenistic period—either the third or second century B.C. The Greek influence can perhaps explain the presence of a hippodrome there, which was mentioned by Josephus (*Wars* 2.21.3).

Magdala was the hometown of Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom Jesus had cast seven demons (Mk. 16:9; Lk. 8:2). She was one of the women from Galilee who supported Jesus from her own means. Mary followed him to Jerusalem, witnessing his death, burial, and resurrection. The name Magdala appears in some Greek manuscripts in Matthew 15:39 and Mark 8:10. The names Magadan and Dalmanutha found in other ancient witnesses are probably alternate names for Magdala.

The city of Magdala (Taricheae) was an important stage for battle between the Jews and Romans during the First Jewish War (A.D. 66-73). In fact, Josephus, who served as the commander of Galilee, used it as his military base (*Josephus Life* 32). At one point, he mustered a fleet of 230 boats to sail from Magdala to Tiberias (*Wars* 2.21.8). The Roman army, led by Vespasian and his son Titus, attacked Magdala and defeated it. As many as 6,500 were killed, another 6,000 were sent to Nero to dig the canal through the isthmus in Greece, and 30,400 were sold as slaves (*Wars* 3.10.9-10).

A Roman Catholic organization has constructed the Magdala Center, a place for Christian pilgrims to stay and meditate near the Sea of Galilee. In the process of excavating for this construction, a first-century synagogue—like those at Herodium, Masada, and Gamla—was discovered by authorities in 2009. (A second synagogue in Magdala was uncovered in 2021.)



Early Construction of the Magdala Center with Black Canopies over the Synagogue

The Magdala synagogue measures 26.5 feet by 23.5 feet. Stone columns supported the structure, and the roof would have been made from wood and packed earth. Low benches for seating ran along the walls. The synagogue had mosaic floors, and its walls were decorated with frescoes. An ornate stone was found in the midst of the structure, which may have functioned as a table for the scrolls of the Hebrew Bible when they were read. Among the carvings on the stone, a seven-branched menorah stands out. The synagogue may have been destroyed in the First Jewish War.



The Magdala Synagogue



Mosaic on the Synagogue Floor



The Ornate Stone (Reading Table?)



Menorah on the Other Side
of the Ornate Stone



Boat Chapel in the Magdala Center