

GAMLA

Gamla was located on the Golan Heights about six miles east of the northern part of the Sea of Galilee. The city's name comes from the Aramaic word *gamla*, which means "camel." It was given this name because of the surrounding topography. Gamla was built along a narrow ridge which resembles the back of a camel; three sides of the ridge are deep ravines. These natural features made Gamla more difficult for invading armies to attack.



Gamla (Looking from the East)

A city existed here during the Early Bronze Age (c. 3000 B.C.), but diminished over time. It was revived in the Hellenistic period, with new settlers arriving as early as 150 B.C. These may have been Jews from Babylon who were returning to their homeland. While most returnees probably wanted to settle in Judea, it is possible that some chose Gamla to maintain closer ties with the East. After being ruled briefly by a foreign tyrant, Alexander Jannaeus (a Hasmonean king) captured Gamla in 81 B.C. The town was most prosperous during the rule of Herod the Great due to his tax breaks for new settlers.

The city of Gamla is remembered in modern times for its part in the First Jewish War (Josephus *Wars* 4.1.1-10). The emperor Nero sent his best general, Vespasian, to Palestine in order to quell the Jewish rebellion. After landing at the port of Acco, Vespasian and his Roman legions pushed their way through the northern country of Galilee, swiftly defeating every town and village in their path. In the process of defeating the northern populations, the Roman army also destroyed Gamla in A.D. 67. They had good reason to do this, since Gamla was an important stronghold for the zealots to the east of the Sea of Galilee. (Zealots were Jews who violently opposed Roman domination.) Later, the Romans took Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and Masada in A.D. 73.

Prior to his work as a historian, Josephus had some contact with Gamla. In A.D. 66, he was chosen as a military leader of the Jews in Galilee. He had little military experience, but was an educated man from a priestly family. In his new role, Josephus was responsible for traveling to different areas for inspection. Although outside of Galilee, he came to Gamla and inspected its defenses, preparing for the coming battle against the Romans. Even with his limited experience, it was obvious to him that the city's eastern wall was not strong enough to withstand an attack. The wall was repaired and reinforced in preparation for the coming siege.

Before Vespasian arrived in A.D. 67, King Agrippa II (who sided with Rome) attempted to besiege the city, but failed. Later, Vespasian's army breached the wall in three places with battering rams. His soldiers penetrated the city with the sound of trumpets and great shouts. However, they were repelled by the Jews. Many Romans ascended the rooftops of houses in order to escape, but they fell through to their death. After regrouping, Vespasian's forces tried to attack the city again by pulling down the tower; this second attempt to defeat Gamla was successful. They killed 4,000 Jews with the sword. Another 5,000 were backed to the western end of the ridge where they jumped to their deaths. Because of these events, Gamla is sometimes called "the Masada of the North." The people would rather commit suicide than be enslaved to the Romans. Two women from influential families survived the event, and they informed Josephus about the details of the battles since he was not present at that time.





The war between the Romans and the Jewish rebels in the Galilee reached its peak at Gamla. In preparation for the war, the city was fortified on its eastern side. The Romans suffered defeat in the first battle, but conquered Gamla in the second.



Archaeologists have found many arrow heads of various types in their excavations. This probably indicates that the Romans used archers from other nations in their army, since they themselves were not usually adept at using the bow. Catapult bolts—which were larger than arrows—were also uncovered. In addition, hooks that may have been used for climbing the eastern wall were surfaced. Catapult balls fired by the Romans were found on top of Gamla, whereas rolling stones pushed down by the Jews were discovered below the eastern wall where the Romans mounted their attack. Other items of military interest include a gold-plated tip of a sword's sheath and a silver cheek protector from a war helmet.





Breach Point ("V") in Eastern Wall

The Synagogue

A breach point, which is in the shape of a "V," can still be seen in the eastern wall, which was made of square basalt stones. This damage is obviously the result of the Roman siege in A.D. 67 during the First Jewish War. Adjacent to the breach point is a first-century synagogue, contemporary with those found at Herodium and Masada. The building is in the shape of a rectangle and has three-stepped benches along the sides. It is dotted with the remains of columns that once supported a wooden roof. Just west of the synagogue, steps lead down to a *miqweh* that was used for ritual purification.

The common people of Gamla lived in the vicinity of the synagogue. There was not enough space on the ridge to support all of the population, so houses were built close together on terraces in this area. They were separated by narrow alleys and small squares. In contrast, the houses of wealthy merchants were located on the western hilltop of the city. Some of these homes had frescoes decorated with geometrical designs, in typical Jewish fashion. Archaeologists have discovered jewelry, precious stones, perfume and make-up containers, and dice games in this area—as well as four *miqwaoth* (ritual baths).

The main industry of Gamla during the first century was probably olives, a conclusion reached because of the many oil presses found there. Olive oil was a valuable commodity, being used for lighting, cooking, medicinal treatment, and religious rituals.



The Golan Archaeological Museum in Katzrin contains a special room dedicated to the fall of Gamla.

The ruins of Deir Qeruh, a Christian village from the Byzantine period, are found nearby Gamla. The Byzantine crosses are evident below.





Byzantine Church (6th Century A.D.)



House or Building



Olive-oil press

An ancient installation from the Byzantine period for the extraction of oil from olives using crushing stones and pressure.

An animal moved the wheel-shaped crushing stone around the basin, when it was full of olives. The movement of the wheel slightly crushed the olives before they were placed in the pressing installation to extract the oil.

