

Ancient Magdala. Archaeological Excavations (2010–2017).
Volume I: Daily Life, First Interpretations



Ancient Magdala

Archaeological Excavations (2010–2017).
Volume I: Daily Life, First Interpretations

Edited by

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The Magdala Archaeological Project 2010–2017

Foreword

Jerusalem and Judea have traditionally been the focus of much historical research on Southern Levant, often leading to an underappreciation of other areas in the region that hold equal importance in the shaping of historical narratives related to Jews and Judaism. The ancient Galilee, however, is of paramount importance to those who seek to understand Jewish history, especially from the Hellenistic period and the Hasmonean expansion onwards, which transformed the region and prepared it for its later incorporation into the kingdom of Herod the Great, who ruled under Roman authority. Some decades after the Jewish – Roman war in 66–70 CE, the Galilee became home to the early development of rabbinic Judaism, the mother of all mainstream forms of Judaism today, and the place where the Mishnah was codified around 200 CE. The area was also home, of course, to the historical figure of Jesus, so that scholars such as Sean Freyne have noted that the reconstruction of the historical Jesus has often turned into reconstructions of 1st-century Galilee. Indeed, while earlier scholarship has focused on Jerusalem and the Diaspora when analysing the rise of the messianic movement after Jesus's death, it has become increasingly clear in recent years that the Galilee, too, played an important role in this dynamic and diverse process. Most scholars place the production of the (hypothetical) Q document in the Galilee, for example, and the theory that the Gospel of Matthew was written in the Galilee has gained ground steadily over the last decades. This means that researchers focusing on the early and intertwined histories of Judaism and Christianity, including Jewish/Christian interaction and relations, have found the Galilee to be of exceptional interest, especially for learning more about how Jewish ancestral traditions and customs have been embodied locally over time by Jewish and Christian individuals and groups.

It is precisely with regard to the latter, the embodiment of Jewish life and thought during these early centuries, that archaeology becomes vital to the project of historical reconstruction. While texts produced by people who lived in the area are important, needless to say, they still reflect the perspective and selective focus of only a very small minority belonging to the literate elite. It is not until we direct our attention to archaeological remains and inscriptions that we are able to learn more about how ordinary people lived and moved in their social, economic, cultic, and political environments: how the ancients related to housing and urban planning, fishing and commerce, culture and trading; which coins were circulated; how ceramics were made and used; which animals were kept as pets and livestock; what colours inhabitants saw and what fragrances they smelled; which tools they manufactured, bought and used; how plaster was composed and made to hold water; what it meant in day-to-day life to have a certain profession; what medicines were taken when health issues arose; how religious beliefs were reified and cultic procedures enacted; how people responded when faced with the threat and tragedy of war. Such practices are the bricks to understanding how the daily life of ordinary people was built, and the evidence is always, necessarily, local in nature.

The chapters in the present volume address and engage many of these issues, making aspects of ancient life in this place – Magdala, or *Taricheae*, as the city is called in Graeco-Roman sources and Josephus, or *Migdal Nunnaya*, as rabbinic sources name it – emerge from the mists of history. Through its broad range of analyses, the volume contributes to our understanding not only of this ancient Galilean city, however, but also, when seen in its regional context, to our knowledge of life around the lake and beyond. From the Hellenistic period until the early centuries of the common era, Galilee provides the historian with rich archaeological remains, literary material, and inscriptions, all of which, when brought together, unveil a region that has seen tremendous and consequential change over the centuries.

For historian and layperson alike, the data on display, as well as its interpretation, helps us understand better not only the ancient world, but also ourselves; both in terms of the vastly different cultures we inhabit, and with regard to the constantly evolving and devolving historical trajectories that meander their way through ever-changing geographical and chronological landscapes, eventually pausing for a brief moment in front of us. The present volume, long-awaited, fills a gap in the literature in our search for the past, guiding the reader through key aspects of local Galilean life, as intertwined in its larger regional contexts. Regardless of whether one's interest lies primarily with pre-rabbinic Jewish life, or the historical Jesus and his movement, or in archaeological work and material culture – or, indeed, even in finding comparative material with which to read and understand other parts of the region – the attentive reader will be richly rewarded by the chapters to follow.

Because of my long involvement in this site, and the ways that I have seen it develop, I am particularly excited to see this book in print as the first installation of a total of two volumes. In the academic year of 2009–2010, as I was a visiting professor at the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University, I had the privilege of easily being able to visit archaeological sites in the land, both new and old. Towards the end of my year in Jerusalem, and with the assistance of Father Eamon Kelly, I had the opportunity to see and study the Magdala archaeological site, including the then newly excavated synagogue. The trip had been planned so that James F. Strange (1938–2018) and I could coordinate our visit and discuss the site, together with Marcela Zapata-Meza. Since then, as I have been travelling and excavating with students, I have been able to observe how she and her team have skilfully transformed the site into an important place for teaching and learning. Throughout, I have been impressed by her careful work and rigorous methodology. From this perspective, too, it is very gratifying to see the present volume in print, a crowning of her and her team's many achievements.

Anders Runesson
University of Oslo

December 2023

Introduction: Magdala Archaeological Project. A Brief Reflection

Marcela Zapata-Meza

Universidad Anáhuac México, Centro de Investigación en Culturas de la Antigüedad

The Magdala Archaeological Project, supported by the Universidad Anáhuac México and the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, has its roots in the research carried out by the Franciscan Custody and the Israel Antiquities Authority from 1970 to the present. Each of these entities has applied different techniques and methodologies in the field of archaeology to understand the settlement known as Magdala/Taricheae, addressing aspects ranging from its toponymic identification and geographical location to its extent, temporality, and occupation.

In 2010, the archaeological team from Universidad Anáhuac México, led by the author of this brief text, joined academic efforts, with the aim of contributing to the knowledge of the ancient settlement of Magdala/Taricheae. The project that I presented to the Israel Antiquities Authority¹ has stood out for its interdisciplinary approach, particular interest in exploring the aspects of the daily life of the ancient inhabitants of Magdala, and the application of Mexican methodology in Israel, a methodology designed and integrated by Linda R. Manzanilla Naim. The project was executed from the prospecting phase to extensive excavation, systematically recording three-dimensional archaeological documents and their associations in areas of activity, conducting material, soil chemistry, and palaeobotanical analyses. The project has been characterised by its professionalism, scientific vision, and multidisciplinary and multi-institutional strength.

Over these 13 years of field and desk work (laboratory), we have recovered a wealth of information that, rather than answering our initial questions, has generated more inquiries, leading us to reconsider the scenarios with which we started and to generate new ones. Six areas, totalling 5000m², have been excavated, providing information related to domestic, economic-commercial, and religious (ritual) aspects. The results presented in these two volumes are the outcome of this work, but they should be considered preliminary; they are merely an approximation to the daily life of the population of Magdala, laying the groundwork for future projects.

The first volume, which I edit, includes 11 chapters that range from historical aspects to very specific analyses of various archaeological materials. The first two chapters place us in the historical context of Magdala, from the history of archaeological interest in this small place in the Galilee region, the historiographical debate within the academic world about the location and identification of Magdala in the region and sources, to general aspects of the synagogue discovered during a salvage excavation by the archaeologists of the Israel Antiquities Authority in August 2009. Regarding this second chapter, I find it appropriate to mention that, although my team was not responsible for these works, the synagogue is a fundamental part of Magdala, and without this brief contribution our vision of the site remains incomplete, hence the decision to include a chapter on this significant discovery.

¹ The Israel Antiquities Authority has granted six licenses to condition the excavations: G-64/2010, G-2/2011, G-28/2012, G-9/2015, G-63/2016 and G-51/2017.

The remaining nine chapters present reports on archaeological materials that help us better understand various aspects of the inhabitants of Magdala: fragrances, medicines, and colours; limestone vessels as indicators of Jewish presence; animal economy; tools related to fishing, a predominant activity in settlements along the Sea of Galilee; and various metal objects. Reports on unique objects, i.e., the gladius hispaniensis sword, the intaglio with inscription, the Rhodian stamp, and, finally, a report on the conservation and restoration work we have carried out, are also included.

More than being a purely technical report, this work is the first account of the historical-archaeological context of Magdala/*Taricheae*, providing initial interpretations that, together with the reports to be published in the second volume, will offer an objective view of the settlement from the Late Hellenistic period to the early Late Roman period. These volumes are added to the many publications and academic conferences which, as an archaeology team, Rosaura Sanz-Rincón, Andrea Garza Garza-DíazBarriga, and I have carried out over these years.

Without intending to overlook anyone, my deepest and sincerest thanks must go to all the researchers who believed in me and joined this great project; all of you have brought the Magdala Archaeological Project into focus, not only academically but also as an important enclave in Lower Galilee in the 1st century. I take these pages to thank the more than one thousand volunteers who lent their hands to touch history; without them, this project would not be possible.

Finally, I must apologise to all our collaborators for the time it has taken to publish this volume, and I appreciate your many hours given and dedication to the writing of your reports. The compilation and editing of this first volume have been a titanic endeavour, one that has entailed much more than I planned, but I am confident that upon seeing the outcome, we will all say, 'It has been worth it'.