

A monastery in Magdala (Taricheae)?

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Ancient Magdala is located at the foot of the E slopes of Mt. Arbel, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (map ref. 7477/2478) (fig. 1). The Aramaic name Magdala or Migdal Nunayya (“The tower of the fish”), mentioned in Rabbinic sources of the Roman period, is preserved in the name of the Arab village of “el-Mejdel” that stood on the site until 1948. The identification is also confirmed by ancient sources that indicate Magdala was located on the main road a few kilometers from Tiberias. In 1877, Charles Wilson suggested identifying this site also with the toponym Ταριχέα (Taricheae, “factories/vats for salting fish”), which is mentioned only in Greek and Latin sources (Cassius Longinus in Cic., *Ad Fam.* 12.11; Plin., *NH* 5.71-72; Strab. 16.2.45, Josephus [see below], and Suet., *Tit.* 4.3), although they do not mention the name Magdala. It becomes evident from these sources that the town was located on the shore near Tiberias; Josephus’s explicit note, placing it 30 stadia (c.5.4 km) from Tiberias, exactly fits the site of el-Mejdel. Although some scholars raised alternative identifications, it has become widely accepted that the names Magdala and Taricheae are synonymous and that they should be identified with the Arab village of el-Mejdel.¹

Several sources point to the town’s importance and its large Jewish population in the Early Roman period. It is associated with a revolt against Rome that broke out shortly after the Roman conquest, resulting in its capture and the enslavement of 30,000 people (Jos., *AntJ* 14.120). In the 1st c. A.D., the site served as the capital of a toparchy (Jos., *BJ* 2.252; *AntJ* 20.158-59). It played a significant rôle in the events of the First Jewish revolt against Rome (e.g., Jos., *BJ* 2.573, 596, 599 and 632-41; *Vit.* 96, 127 and 132-64). The area around Magdala is apparently mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, but its name is corrupt. The epithet “Mary Magdalene” is thought to have derived from the toponym “Magdala” (on the Christian sources, see below). The site is referred to in Rabbinic literature reflecting the 3rd and 4th c. A.D. that mentions a synagogue and sages living in the town. The latest mentions in ancient Jewish sources appear in Byzantine liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) where it is one of the Galilean villages associated with the families of the 24 priestly courses that served in the Jerusalem Temple.² Subsequently, the site is mentioned only by Christian writers and pilgrims.

1 W. F. Albright, “Contributions to the historical geography of Palestine: the location of Taricheae,” *AASOR* 2-3 (1921-22) 29-46; Y. Tsafir, L. Di Segni and J. Green, *Tabula Imperii Romani: Iudaea-Palaestina* (Jerusalem 1994) 173; S. Mason, *A history of the Jewish War A.D. 66-74* (New York 2016) 344-45 and 395-401. For Magdala in the Rabbinic sources, see G. Reeg, *Die Ortsnamen Israels nach der rabbinischen Literatur* (Beihefte TAVO; 1989) 391-97; F. Manns, “Magdala dans les sources littéraires,” in E. Testa, I. Mancini and M. Piccirillo (edd.), *Studia hierosolymitana in onore di P. Bellarmino Bagatti*, vol. 1 (SBF Coll. Maior 22, 1976) 307-37. For discussion, see U. Leibner, *Settlement and history in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee: an archaeological survey of the eastern Galilee* (Tübingen 2009) 217-25; S. De Luca and A. Lena, “Magdala/Taricheae,” in D. A. Fiensy and J. R. Strange (edd.), *Galilee in the late Second Temple and Mishnaic periods*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis, MN 2015) 280-91; and now R. Bauckham, “Magdala in Rabbinic traditions,” in id. (ed.), *Magdala of Galilee. A Jewish city in the Hellenistic and Roman period* (Waco, TX 2018) 307-44. For an alternative identification of Taricheae, see N. Kokkinos, “The location of Tarichaeae: north or south of Tiberias?” *PEQ* 142 (2010) 7-23, with reservations by M. H. Jansen, “Magdala/Taricheae and the Jewish Revolt,” in Bauckham *ibid.* 269-86.

2 Leibner (supra n.1) 231-32, and now R. Bauckham, “Magdala in the list of the twenty-four priestly settlements,” in id. (supra n.1) 287-301.