

# Excavations at Khirbet Wadi Hamam (Lower Galilee): the synagogue and the settlement

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with an appendix by U. Leibner and S. Miller

## Introduction

Khirbet Wadi Hamam is located in the eastern Lower Galilee above the gorge of Wadi Arbel (Hamam), two km west of the Sea of Galilee (fig. 1). The site (map ref. 2460/7480) is situated on a steep slope at the base of the massive cliffs of Mt. Nitai, opposite Mt. Arbel (fig. 2). Surrounded on three sides by the riverbeds of Wadi Arbel and Wadi Savyona and on the fourth by cliffs, it benefits from a naturally fortified setting. The settlement, the remains of which cover *c.*3 ha, was one of the largest villages in the eastern Galilee during the Roman period. Its growth was encouraged by the presence of a flowing spring directly below the site and by its situation close to the ancient route that led from the Sea of Galilee through Wadi Arbel to central Galilee, and from there to the Mediterranean coast.

Despite its size, central location and proximity to long-settled sites such as Magdala (2 km) and Tiberias (6 km), the ancient name of this village has not survived. The Arabic name 'Hamam' ('pigeon'), derived from the flocks of pigeons that nest in the nearby cliffs, is recorded for an agricultural plot already in the Ottoman census of the 16th c.<sup>1</sup> Bedouin families that had settled in the lower part of the site in the 1950s have since moved to a permanent location opposite, also called Wadi Hamam.

## Earlier research

The ruins were first identified in the 19th c. by the Survey of Western Palestine.<sup>2</sup> The surveyors, who noted only "heaps of stones", mistakenly called it by the name of a nearby site, Khirbet el Wereidat (preserved today on Israeli maps as Hurvat Veradim). J. Braslavsky was the first to draw attention to architectural elements at the site that seemed to belong to a synagogue of 'Galilean' type.<sup>3</sup> The remains were surveyed again in the 1970s and 1980s by G. Foerster and Z. Ilan.<sup>4</sup> In 1991 Y. Shahar and Y. Tepper suggested that the site was the ancient village of Arbel, mentioned many times by Josephus and Rabbinic sources, and usually identified with the nearby Khirbet Irbid.<sup>5</sup> The site was recently surveyed yet again as part of the Eastern Galilee Survey, in which hundreds of datable potsherds were collected from the surface.<sup>6</sup> In the same survey, the site was also sampled using a shovel-testing technique, whereby shallow test pits were dug throughout the village and all of the soil sifted. Altogether, nearly 600 identifiable sherds were collected and found to belong to the first centuries A.D., with none postdating the late 4th c.<sup>7</sup>

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\* All dates are A.D. unless otherwise indicated.

1 Rhode 1979, 88.

2 Conder and Kitchener 1881, 409.

3 Braslavsky 1925, 140.

4 Foerster 1983, 243; Ilan 1991, 128.

5 Shahar and Tepper 1991; see my reservations concerning this identification in Leibner 2009, 210-12.

6 Leibner 2009, 205-10.

7 Ibid. 71-74.