



Arfan Najar, an archaeologist at the Israel Antiquities Authority, introduces a replica of the Magdala Stone at the Magdala Archeological Park in Israel



# THE *Magdala* STONE

By Professor Lawrence H. Schiffman







Aerial view of the synagogue in Horvat Kur in 2013.

Eyad Bisharat examines the bronze incense shovel being held by Arfan Najar at Magdala where it was discovered.



The Jews of Rome and the authorities of the Vatican seem to have decided that if so many people believe that the Vatican has the Menorah in its possession, they might as well capitalize on this “urban myth,” as it has been described by Rome’s Chief Rabbi Riccardo Di Segni. They decided to put together a joint exhibition, with part of it in the Jewish Museum of Rome, near the Great Synagogue, and the other part in the Vatican Museum in Vatican City. This reminds me of a meeting I attended years ago at the Vatican Museum, where the then director jokingly pointed to a modern Israeli *chanukiyah* and said, “See, we have the Menorah!” The myth will never die, but the decision to hold this exhibit, aptly entitled “Menorah: Cult, History and Myth,” has certainly been a wonderful result of its longevity.

In fact, it is an example of the expanded cooperation between the Vatican Museum and Library, and Jewish and Israeli cultural institutions. It was not long ago that the Vatican exhibited some magnificent illuminated Rambam manuscripts at the Israel Museum in Yerushalayim. The present exhibit, which took over three years to organize, is the joint effort of Barbara Jatta, Director of the Vatican Museums, and Alessandra Di Castro, Director of Rome’s Jewish Museum. Clearly, this kind of concrete cooperation results from the Vatican’s *Nostre Aetate* document issued in 1965. It redefined Catholic attitudes about Judaism and formally rejected anti-Semitic beliefs and practices. Vatican recognition of the State of Israel and establishment of diplomatic relations in 1993 was another milestone in this process. While there is still much to be accomplished, and things are certainly not perfect, this exhibit is certainly an example of changed attitudes.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is the earliest known menorah to be found in a synagogue, that of the amazing Magdala Stone. This phenomenal archaeological discovery is still little known outside of a small group of academic professionals. Thanks to the exhibit,

we will all have a chance to see it and learn of its enormous significance. But first, the rather amazing story of its discovery:

The small village of Magdala (Aramaic for tower; *migdal* in Hebrew), located on the western shore of the Kineret (Sea of Galilee), is of importance to the early history of Christianity. The full name of the town in rabbinic sources appears as either Migdal Nunaya (“Tower of Fish”; *Pesachim* 46b) or Migdal Tzabaya (“Tower of Dyers”; *Yerushalmi Taanis* 4:8, 69a). It is also known in Greek as Taricheae ([Tower] “of the Fish Salters”), likely due to the town’s famed fish-curing industry that is closely connected with fishing in the Sea of Galilee.

Because of its significance in Christian history, its *Bayis Sheini*-period remains were excavated by the Franciscan Catholic order, which had legal claim to its southern part. Another Catholic order had acquired the northern part of what was ancient Magdala, intending to build a retreat center and a new church. In the process, as is required for all building projects in Israel, archaeologists from the Israel Antiquities Authority had to certify that the site was free of archaeological remains and that it could be built upon. In examining the northern area directly west of the sea, only 20 inches or so deep, they immediately came upon remains from the Hasmonean and early Roman periods; they were uncovering 1st century BCE and 1st century CE Magdala. They came upon a building approximately 120 meters square that they quickly realized was an ancient synagogue. It was beautifully decorated, and somewhat close to the center of the main hall they uncovered this amazing artifact, known as the Magdala Stone, now on exhibit in Rome.



The town has a very rich history. It is known to have been settled as early as the 3rd century BCE. Under the Hasmoneans (Maccabean kings), the village grew in the second half of the 2nd century BCE. According to Josephus, it was already the largest settlement on the western shore of the Kineret in the 1st century BCE. It continued to flourish into the early Roman period (after 63 BCE, when the Romans conquered Eretz Yisrael) and served as a district capital. Josephus, during his ill-fated career as rebel commander of the Galilee, before he surrendered to the Romans, fortified this town in preparation for the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE. Nevertheless, the city was conquered by the Romans in a devastating sea battle.

It continued to be inhabited until the 4th century CE. Inscriptions listing the *mishmaros kehunah*, the schedule of priestly service, indicate that it was still inhabited by *kohanim* at that time. Later it became a Byzantine monastery and then an Arab village, which it was when I visited it many years ago.

The beautiful synagogue of Magdala, now covered by a shading roof, is regularly made available by its Catholic owners for prayer by Jewish groups who visit the site. In addition, numerous other archaeological remains have been found and may be visited. The town is built in the crisscross urban plan typical of modern cities which

is actually an invention of Greek architects. There is also an extensive harbor, and Josephus even reports being able to marshal some 230 boats, although this is probably an exaggerated number. Clearly this town was involved not only in fishing but in transporting goods and people on the lake. These excavations have shown that the water level of the Kineret in antiquity was considerably higher than it is today. Also excavated were extensive public baths from the Hasmonean and Roman periods, complete with an exercise area. Interestingly, the mosaics lack pagan symbols and there is no trace of pagan statues. We should also note the existence of *mikvaos* in several places in the village.

Seeing all the pictures of the stone in the Vatican exhibit brought back memories of a conference that was held about this object at Nyack College in lower Manhattan, organized by Professor Steven Niteley. The entire conference was about Magdala and its significance, and a model of the stone was provided to allow us a close-up chance to see what this strange object really was. We debated for days how to understand this artifact—a debate that is still raging among scholars. Now, however, the “real thing” can be seen in Rome.

So what is this phenomenal object? It is essentially a stone block 24 inches long, 20 inches wide and 18 inches high. It is



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supported on stone legs of slightly uneven height and is decorated by carvings on all four sides and on top. The side that faced Yerushalayim when it was first found in situ includes the earliest image of the menorah from any synagogue, dating to the first century CE, clearly constructed before the destruction of the *Bayis Sheini* by the Romans in 70 CE. Some have argued that those who made the Magdala stone would have actually seen the Menorah in the *Beis Hamikdash*, and therefore, that it might constitute an accurate image. We do need to remember, however, that the Menorah was inside the *Heichal*, which was only entered by *kohanim*. Furthermore, menorah symbols were very common during the *Bayis Sheini*. So we cannot really be sure if this depiction was made by people who had seen the actual Menorah.

An image of the *shulchan* appears in front of the Menorah, and the top is decorated with what are probably the 12 loaves of the *lechem hapanim*. The Menorah is flanked on either side by what appears to be a pitcher of oil and two columns. The right and left sides portray images of a columnar structure with four gates, and gates even further inside. Some scholars have argued that the panels of four gates on the two sides are an accurate representation of the architecture of the *Beis Hamikdash*. It is indeed possible that these are images of the colonnades that surrounded the *Har Habayis* of the Herodian *Beis Hamikdash*. As far as we know, nowhere in the *Beis Hamikdash* were there four gates in a row. The other end is decorated with wheels that appear to be symbols of the *ofanim*, angelic beings that supported the Divine throne as stated by *Yechezkel* (1:15-21, cf. *Daniel* 7:9). These symbols seem to have been intended to round out the image of the *Beis Hamikdash* with the notion of its being enveloped in the *Shechinah*, the

manifest presence of G-d.

Nothing like this object has ever been found, so its interpretation remains tentative and under debate. But what might its use have been? There appear to be flat, indented areas on its four top corners that could have supported poles. It has been suggested that this object was the base for what we call a *teivah*, a “chest,” the ancient synagogue furnishing that served both to hold the *sefer Torah* and upon which it was read. This beautiful object would have been part of a synagogue furnished and decorated more extensively than any of the other 1st century CE *shul* buildings excavated in Israel.

But this stone has an enormous significance, way beyond its beauty and rarity. It is the earliest post-*Tanach* evidence we have for the concept that a synagogue is a *mikdash me’at*, “small sanctuary” (*Megillah* 29a), a phrase drawn from *Sefer Yechezkel*

(11:13) where it refers to G-d. Specifically, the decision to richly decorate the base of the *teivah* on which the Torah was read with symbols of the *Beis Hamikdash* was intended to make the statement that the *shul* was intended to function as a local, admittedly less sanctified, version of the *Beis Hamikdash*. This object was decorated richly with such symbols to show that the *tefillah*, Torah reading and study that occurred in this building were likened to the sacrifices offered in the *Beis Hamikdash*. What this means is that the concept of the *shul* as a replacement for the *Beis Hamikdash* did not come into existence as a reaction to the *churban*; rather, it existed way before, for Jews who lived too far away to regularly visit the *Beis Hamikdash*.

This synagogue illustrates something that we all take for granted: that a *shul* in many ways symbolizes the lost *Beis Hamikdash* and partakes in a small way of the numinous *kedushah* that made the *Beis Hamikdash* so special. Our *mesorah* teaches that this is indeed the central role and character of a *shul*, and therefore, that the essence of this special place is the ability to connect to the *Ribbono Shel Olam* through the medium of *tefillah*. This intimate connection and sanctified character of the synagogue was thought by some scholars to have become prominent only in the time of the *Amoraim* (the teachers of the Gemara, 3rd-6th centuries CE). This stone clearly shows that it was at the very heart of the synagogue, as we encounter its earliest archaeological evidence. ●

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