

Kursi

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

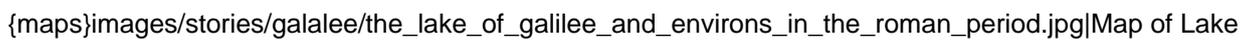
In 1969 the Israelis were building a road along the Sea of Galilee's eastern shore, three miles north of Kibbutz Ein Gev. Kibbutz member Mendel Nun, an avid student of the lake's traditions and archaeology, was trailing one of the bulldozers on his bicycle, when he noticed that the "new roadbed was covered with earth mixed with fragments of Byzantine pottery and building stones... At both sides of the roadbed the tops of walls protruded from the ditches. I reported this immediately to the Department of Antiquities." (Mendel Nun, Gergesa (Kursi): Site of a Miracle, Kibbutz Ein Gev, 1989|Nun, p. 17.) Work was halted and an exploration ensued. Archaeologists discovered a large monastery and pilgrims' center from the 5th or 6th century AD, including a basilica. The road was shifted closer to the lake.

What were Christians remembering when they built this center?

First, it lies on the south side of a valley coming down from the Golan Heights. The valley continues beneath the sea as a bank, which the local people, through the centuries, have called "the bank of Kursi." "Kursi" may be echoed in the "Gergesa" of Matthew's Gospel, where the evangelist locates the miracle of the swine. There is scholarly debate over the location of this miracle, however, because the most ancient texts of Matthew place it in the region of Gadara, while Mark and Luke name that of Gerasa. Yet neither of these two alternatives fits the Biblical account. First, the miracle is preceded by a boat ride from Capernaum, marked by a storm on the lake, and the destination is the "other side" (Matthew 8:28, Mark 5:1). Gerasa, 33 miles southeast of the lake, can hardly count as the "other side." As for Gadara, the city itself was 6 miles to the southeast, and high up, but it did have a harbor on the lake's southern edge. The area around this harbor had no "steep bank," however, down which a herd of swine could rush. The only place that fills these requirements is the site of the ancient village of Gergesa. The steep bank stands a few hundred yards south of Kursi.

Here is another view of the slope with the cliff-like projection (above the trees), this time from NW:

The name Gergesa is attested in various sources, designating a village on the lake's eastern shore. The Septuagint, reflecting a textual family different from the traditional Hebrew Bible, names the kingdom mentioned in Joshua 12:5 as that of the "Girgesi," instead of the Hebrew "Geshuri." The Jerusalem Talmud (written in Tiberias!) connects this area with a people called the Girgashites. Ancient Rabbinical commentary also refers to "Gergeshta on the eastern shore of the Sea of Tiberias." The third-century church father A Christian thinker (ca. 185-254 AD), the greatest to appear after Paul, who thought through the Christian faith from what he called "First Principles." He did most of his work at Caesarea Maritima. Origen, after noting the problems with Gadara and Gerasa, suggested Gergesa, "an ancient city...by which is a cliff overhanging the lake, from which they [the local inhabitants - SL] show that the swine were cast down by the devils" (Origen, Commentary on John 6:41). Rainey and Notley, The Sacred Bridge, Jerusalem: Carta, 2006, pp. 359-360|Notley suggests that at a very early stage in the development of the Gospel texts, "the name of the lesser-known village of Gergesa was exchanged for one of the two renowned cities of the Decapolis," Gadara and Gerasa. Under Origen's influence, later versions of Matthew made the correction to Gergesa. For a full discussion, see Nun Mendel. Gergesa (Kursi): Site of a Miracle. Kibbutz Ein Gev, 1989|Nun, p. 14.

Map of Lake area|The name Kursi, however, may be the original one, derived, from the shape of the broad valley that runs from here eastward, till it is abruptly cut off (as the seat of a chair by its back) by the steep slope of the Golan Heights. Viewed from above, the formation appears like a chair: kursa or kursi in Semitic tongues.

Through the valley runs the Samakh (fish) River. "During the breeding season in winter nights, enormous schools of sardines swim to the bank of Kursi to deposit their eggs on the stones." (Nun Mendel. Gergesa (Kursi): Site of a Miracle. Kibbutz Ein Gev, 1989 p. 6.) By day come barbel, eager to eat the breeding sardines. For the fishermen, this would have been "the other side" of the lake from Capernaum, as in Matthew 8:28.

The breakwaters of an anchorage were discovered beneath the water. (The lake's level has risen in the last thousand years.) Beside it was a fishing village, as indicated by more than a hundred lead sinkers, as well as a plastered storage tank, roughly ten feet on each side, used to keep fish alive. The pottery found in a surface survey indicates the Roman and Byzantine periods. The area awaits excavation.

A paved road connected it with the monastic and pilgrimage center to the east.

The archaeologists focused their work on this center, the largest of its kind in the country. Its stone walls measure 145 by 123 meters. It included "streets and sewage facilities. Public buildings, private homes, agricultural and fishing facilities, and particularly guest houses for pilgrims, were all crowded within the enclosure." (Nun Mendel. Gergesa (Kursi): Site of a Miracle. Kibbutz Ein Gev, 1989 p. 20.)

The basilica stood a bit off center. It has been partly restored, using basalt as in the original. We enter the atrium. (Were it not for Nun on his bicycle, the modern road would have cut through it.) It includes two holes leading down to a long cistern, about 18 feet deep. Rainwater flowing from the roofed porticoes ran into this cistern. We can peek into the auxiliary wings to the north and south. The northern contains an olive press. The southern has a small chapel, beneath which a crypt contained thirty male skeletons, laid out in stone enclosures.

Through the main gate we enter the nave, which was separated from the two side aisles by limestone columns. Ahead is the single apse, on whose curved bench sat the clergy. Even in partial reconstruction, the church still makes a majestic impression.

The altar was not found. Beneath the place where it would have been, however, the diggers discovered a stone reliquary, which would have held something associated with a saint, for example the bones or clothing.

Mosaics once covered the church's entire floor, but now we see them mainly in the side aisles. Amid the geometric designs are depicted the fruits of the land. Nun identifies several that one would not expect to find here in antiquity: an orange, watermelon, and bananas. There were also pictures of animals, but the iconoclasts of the 8th century effaced most of them. (These iconoclasts were Muslims who interpreted the ban on graven images very strictly.) It would have been helpful to find a portrait of a pig or two!

The room just south of the apse includes a mosaic inscription: "In the time of Stephanos the priest and abbot, most beloved of God, the mosaic of the Photisterion was made..." The Apostle Paul uses this word, meaning illumination, to refer to baptism. In fact, a baptismal font for infants was found here. The mosaic gives the date as well: "in the time of King Mauricius." That would put it at about 585 AD.

Passers-by had always noticed a large rock jutting up in front of the cliff to the south. Long ago someone built a wall around its base, presumably to keep it from falling. Behind it, in 1980, archaeologists discovered a chapel whose apse reached into a cave. The builders perhaps identified this cave with one of the tombs from which the demoniacs emerged. There must have been a strong tradition, for otherwise no one would have chosen to build on so awkward a site. This chapel may have been the first church at Kursi, for its mosaic floor includes crosses. (In 427 a Christian emperor, Theodosius II, forbade the depiction of Christian symbols in floors). If so, it would have been here that St. Sabas prayed in 491, as reported by his 6th-century biographer. Sabas and a disciple, heading north from Scythopolis, walked along the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee to "Chorsia," where they prayed. (St. Sabas is also called Mar Saba; he founded a famous monastery in the Judean desert that today bears his name.)

In the excavations of 2001 and 2002, just northwest of the basilica and contemporary with it, the diggers found the hot and cold rooms of a bathhouse. No doubt this added to the attractions of the place. Dependent on pilgrims for their sustenance, the monks would have needed to draw them to this eastern shore, which was otherwise devoid of traditions.

Logistics:

Kursi is a National Park. (Main office: 02/500-5444)

Opening hours:

April 1 through September 30, from 8.00 - 17.00. (Entrance until 16.00)*

October 1 through March 31, from 8.00 - 16.00. (Entrance until 15.00)*

*On Fridays and the eves of Jewish holidays, the sites close one hour earlier. For example, on a Friday in March one must enter by 14.00 and leave by 15.00.

