

# Gadara

Contributed by Micah Key and Stephen Langfur

Perched 1800 feet above the Lake of Galilee, six miles south of its southern shore, is a collection of tumbled ruins known to locals as Umm Qais. Here was the city of Gadara. The name is probably related to the Semitic root for "fence" or "border." The site does indeed mark a natural border. While linking the two international highways, the King's Highway and the Great Trunk Road, it also has 1800-foot slopes for defense on the west (the Jordan Valley) and the north (the Yarmuk River), as well as the slope down to Wadi al-'Arab on the south. In peacetime, ascent and descent were no great problem on horseback, so Gadara possessed extensions below: a harbor on the lake and, from the 2nd century BC, hot mineral baths on the Yarmuk at a place now known as Hamat Gader. Until 1967 a Palestinian village named al-Hamma. It was included in the British Mandate according to the Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1923, demilitarized in the armistice agreements of 1949, conquered by Israel in the war of 1967 and has been held by it since then. Today, in addition to its monuments, the site offers grand panoramas over Israel, Jordan and Syria.

Here you can see its strategic position linking the highways:

And here is a tilted view, closer in:

And now still closer. Note the steep slopes on the north and south. On the west there is a fertile plateau, followed by a steep descent to the Jordan Valley.

Attracted by the strategic position, Ptolemy was a general of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death, he and his successors controlled Egypt, from which their rule extended to both sides of the Jordan. They lost this extension to the successors of Seleucus, another general of Alexander, around 200 BC. Ptolemies established the first settlement here, which received a wall around 200 BC. This may have been built as preparation for war with Seleucus, another of Alexander's heirs, held a huge territory including Mesopotamia and Syria. His successors were pushed out of Mesopotamia by the superior cavalries of the Parthians. Wanting to make up for the loss, the Seleucids cast their eyes to the south and took both sides of the Jordan from the Ptolemies. Seleucids, who, with the help of battle elephants, took both sides of the Jordan from the Ptolemies at about that time. Much of the wall can be traced today for about two miles. The original fortress-settlement continued to determine the basic shape of the city center.

In 167 BC, the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes offended Jewish religious sensibilities, provoking the Maccabean

revolt. Gadara held out for decades. Only around 100 BC did the {tips}The Hasmoneans: family of Judah Maccabee ("the hammer") and his brothers, who revolted successfully against the Greek Empire in 167 BC. They ruled until 63 BC. {tips}Alexander Jannaeus take the city after a siege of {tips}Josephus, Antiquities XIII 6.1.6 (356){tips}ten months. {tips}

When the Roman general Pompey conquered the region in 64 BC, he restored Gadara to local rule. The grateful citizens adopted a new calendar dating from his edict. Independence did not last long, however. In 30 BC Augustus awarded the region to {tips}Herod ruled the land under Roman auspices from 37 - 4 BC. Some time after his death (it is not clear when), people began referring to him as "the Great." Christians chiefly remember him, however, as the killer of the innocent children (Matthew 2: 16). {tips}Herod. {tips} After chafing under his rule for a decade, {tips}Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, Book XV, Ch. 10{tips}the Gadarenes complained to the emperor. {tips} Their petition was denied. Expecting a dose of Herodian wrath, some slit their throats or jumped from one of the precipices. After Herod's death in 4 BC, however, the city was again awarded its independence, becoming part of the {tips}A league of cities under Roman auspices. Sometimes ten are mentioned, sometimes more. They included Damascus (an honorary member), Hippos, Gadera, Gerasa (Jerash), Pella, Scythopolis and Philadelphia. {tips}Decapolis. {tips}

The Achilles' heel of Gadara was water. The first inhabitants dug and plastered cisterns. There are at least 70 within the city center, ranging in capacity from 6 cubic meters to 450. (The Kingdom of Jordan plans to create a shaded panoramic walk among some of them, with opportunities to get wet.) Assuming an average yearly rainfall of 19 inches, archaeologists estimate that the cisterns would have supplied enough for 2100 people. There were also three modest springs nearby. (Source)

The concept must have changed radically when Gadara hitched its destiny to Rome. Any self-respecting Roman metropolis had to have public baths and fountains. An average Roman urbanite used 400 liters daily, according to engineer Matthias Döring (for comparison, the average German urbanite today uses 150). It was probably after Pompey, therefore, that the Gadarenes tunneled through limestone to a spring called 'Ain Turab 7 miles away. Dependent on gravity, the tunnel twisted and turned to avoid intervening valleys, so that its actual length was 13 miles.

That much tunneling through limestone is incredible. But even this was not enough, apparently, to meet Gadara's Roman ambitions. The city was to become the goal of an underground water tunnel 58 miles long.

This second tunnel, by far the longest known in the ancient world, could have had its start during any of several building surges among the Decapolis cities. The first post-Pompeian surge came under Vespasian (69-79 AD), whose trusted officer Traianus paved a road from Palmyra to the Euphrates, enabling better commerce with Mesopotamia and India. His son Trajan, emperor from 98 until 117, continued this effort; after annexing the Nabataean kingdom in 106, he built the famous Via Nova Traiana from the Red Sea to Bostra. His successor, Hadrian, wintered in the Decapolis around 130 AD, granting privileges to its cities. Much of the monumental construction stems from this time.

After Christianity established itself in the region under the Byzantines, Gadara became a bishopric. As such it had a part in the councils of Nicaea, Chalcedon and Ephesus. The Byzantine church and the baths date from this time (see the next section).

When the Muslims won the Battle of the Yarmuk in 636, driving the Byzantines out of the land for ever, Gadara continued to prosper. It was brought down by the earthquake of 749, which destroyed

many other cities in the Jordan Valley and beyond, including Tiberias and Scythopolis . The survivors abandoned the fallen structures for less distinguished but safer localities. Weeds took over the city of philosophers.

In 1806, Ulrich Seetzen, a German explorer, identified the ruins as ancient Gadara.

{mospagebreak title=Visit}

### A Visit to Gadara

Upon entering the site, one meets the jumbled buildings of an abandoned Ottoman-era village, first constructed in the 1890s by recycling stones from the ruins. West of the village is the West Theater, built entirely of basalt. It could seat around 3,000 and included special high-backed seating for dignitaries. In the middle of a row stood a white marble statue of Tyche, the Fortune of every Roman city, which can be seen today in the museum, sans head.

East of this theater was the acropolis, now obscured by the ruins of the Ottoman village. To the north is the Basilica Terrace. Here we find the foundations of a Byzantine church built above a row of shops. Its atrium is surrounded by white pillars. These stand in stark contrast to the central octagon at the altar, which is ringed by black basalt columns that probably supported a dome. Behind the altar stands a thin pink marble pillar with a cross carved into it. The entire structure sits on remains of a monumental building from the 2nd century AD.

North of the Basilica Terrace is the colonnaded Decumanus Maximus, running east-west. This was the axis of the city's development, for there was little level space to the north or south. The fertile plateau on the east was left to agriculture. The city developed, therefore, to the west.

The Decumanus passes Byzantine baths to the western gate. Just beyond is the site-enclosure fence, but across the modern road the Decumanus continues past the hippodrome to another monumental gate, 1400 yards from the starting point. From here the road ran over the plain and down the slope to the Jordan and Scythopolis , thence to Caesarea Maritima or Ptolemais (Acco), where ships could be found to Egypt or Rome. (See the satellite map above.)

At the eastern end of the Decumanus Maximus are the remains of the so-called North Theater, today a depression in the hill—the stone seats are gone, having been recycled. Built in the 1st century AD, it was designed to line up approximately with the axis of a temple (to Zeus?) erected between 150 and 100 BC, that is, before the conquest by the Hasmoneans. At that time the area was outside the walls. This temple was destroyed not by the Hasmoneans, rather during the first Jewish revolt against Rome (66-70 AD). In fact, Josephus claims to have taken Gadara. (He was not yet a historian, rather a top general leading the revolt in the north). After Rome re-established control, a new temple was built, this time aligned precisely with the theater.

The walls enclose an area that is largely unexcavated. Archaeologists have uncovered but a fraction of the story that lies beneath this grassy hill.

{mospagebreak title=Water from afar}

Water from afar

Sources: English. German.

In 2004, engineer Matthias Döring was summoned by German archaeologists to a Bronze Age site in Jordan named Zeraqon, about 15 miles ESE of Gadara, to investigate a stepped shaft that led deep into the earth. Sixty meters below the surface was a section of plastered tunnel. The workmanship and the waterproof plaster indicated the Roman period. Exploring the area nearby, Döring found more such shafts, leading to horizontal sections of tunnel that were all at the same level. There was no large city from the Roman era in the vicinity, so Döring hypothesized that these sections must have belonged to a long-range system. Knowing that the Romans liked to keep the gradient of their aqueducts (the angle at which the water descends by force of gravity) down to around 1%, he took a topographical map and saw three cities that might be candidates: Adraa on the King's Highway and Abila and Gadara on the link road. He sketched out a possible line and went with a team in search of more shafts. Within weeks they had discovered 30. By the end of their 2006 campaign, the number topped 300, many of which had been filled. (Since the shafts are cut at distances of 30 to 50 yards, the final figure will probably exceed 2900.) The shafts led to three separate underground tunnels. The longest stretched from Wadi Shellala, a tributary of the Yarmuk, to Gadara. Its length is 58 miles.

To give an idea what this means: The tunneling was through limestone. It had to be kept around the height of a man, so that the workers would have air. A laborer wielding an iron hammer and chisel could advance four inches per day. That's 58 miles at 4 inches per day. At the bottom of each shaft, two laborers would have chipped in opposite directions, with the hope of meeting their colleagues from shafts about 50 yards distant—not bypassing them, not cutting too high or low.

Lines left by the water in the plaster indicate its height in the tunnel. In a section near Abila, the lines varied between 50 cm and 80 cm. According to Döring, this would indicate a flow of 40,000 to 60,000 cubic meters per day. Where would so much water have come from? The source must have been a lake (later a swamp, now dry) some 37 miles north of the first tunnel, near the road to Damascus, at Dille in Syria today. Portions of an above-ground aqueduct have been found, leading from there to Adraa. The duct would have incorporated springs en route.

We have, then, the following picture. First, an above-ground duct from Dille to Adraa. Then the duct curves west toward Abila and Gadara. It must somehow cross Wadi Shellala, a chasm 600 feet deep. Moreover, the land on the east side of the wadi is 40 m. higher than on the west, but the gradient must be kept moderate. (Too steep a drop would destroy any aqueduct.) Tunneling began, therefore, east of the wadi and south to a point where it was shallower. Here the Romans built a bridge 20 meters high, 100 meters long. On the west side began the 58-mile tunnel, winding often to skirt valleys. The total length from Dille to Gadara: 105 miles.

Although the Romans measured carefully, using levels and plumb lines, there were mistakes. Sometimes the chippers passed each other and "then"—"then" meaning months of work—had to make corrections. Sometimes they didn't get the levels right. Toward Gadara, the accumulation of errors resulted in failure. The last phase of the tunnel was never plastered, an indication that it wasn't used. But the usable part had reached the spring of Ain Turab, and it is possible that the Roman engineers may have led the new duct's water into the older, deeper duct that supplied Gadara from here.

The work cannot yet be dated, except to say "Roman." Radiocarbon testing suggests the 2nd and 3d centuries AD. However, because the proportion of C-14 in the atmosphere varies at different places and times, the dates are not firm until calibrated by means of dendrochronology, still patchy for the Middle East before 362 AD.

{mospagebreak title="Athens of the East" }

"Athens of the East"

Gadara became a center of Hellenistic learning and philosophy, leading Menahem Luz to dub it "city of philosophers." (We are indebted to Luz's work for much in this section.) It produced three prominent Cynics. The term did not then have a nihilistic or negative connotation. A Cynic was a nonconformist who called people back to the basics: a life of virtue in harmony with nature, free from the distracting pursuit of wealth, power or fame. "For what shall it profit a man, though he win the whole world, if he lose his own soul?" (Matthew 16:26). A Cynic typically lived outdoors (their enemies called them dogs), caring neither about his apparel nor about what tomorrow might bring. It is noteworthy that we find this doctrine in Hellenistic and Roman times high up on the southeast side of the lake, while a similar teaching came from the mouth of Jesus high up on the northwest side (Matthew 6: 24-31):

"No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You can't serve both God and Mammon. Therefore I tell you, don't be anxious for your life: what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor yet for your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food, and the body more than clothing? See the birds of the sky, that they don't sow, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns. Your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you of much more value than they? Which of you, by being anxious, can add one moment to his lifespan? Why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They don't toil, neither do they spin, yet I tell you that even Solomon in all his glory was not dressed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today exists, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, won't he much more clothe you, you of little faith? Therefore don't be anxious, saying, 'What will we eat?' 'What will we drink?' or, 'With what will we be clothed?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first God's Kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore don't be anxious for tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Each day's own evil is sufficient."

Jesus could easily have visited Gadara from Nazareth while a young man, becoming acquainted with its Cynics. Burton L. Mack and John Dominic Crossan of the controversial Jesus Seminar have drawn this connection. The spirit of Hellenism was in the air, after all, and here was a nearby city that embodied it. This is not to say that Cynicism was the dominant component of Jesus' teaching, but it may have played a part.

Gadara's first Cynic was Menippus, a satirist from the 3d century BC. Although nothing of his work has survived, he had great influence. His satires gave rise to a type called Menippean satire, according to the article in Wikipedia, "moves rapidly between styles and points of view. Such satires deal less with human characters than with the single-minded mental attitudes, or "humours", that they represent: the pedant, the braggart, the bigot, the miser, the quack, the seducer, etc." Scholars find Menippean influence in Petronius' Satyricon, Apuleius' Golden Ass, and later in Rabelais, Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift and Lewis Carroll. Menippean: a prose piece combining various targets of ridicule into a novel-like narrative.

Another Gadarene cynic, from the 1st century BC, was Meleager, who called his home town "the Athens of the East." Much influenced by Menippus, he composed this epigram for his tombstone:

Tread softly, Stranger, over the sacred dead

Here lies in well-earned sleep the aged

Meleager, Son of Eucrates, who composed

poems about sweet-teared Eros

combining his Muse with delightful grace

The Holy Land of Gadara and Tyre with her divine boys made a man of him

Lovely Cos of the Meropian people received him in old-age

If you are a Syrian, I say to you 'Salam!', if a Phoenician -- 'Naidios!'

and if Greek -- 'Chaire!' and you return me the same.

(Greek Anthology vii. 419)

This epitaph suggests a grand vision over many lands, relating perhaps to the vast panoramas that a boy would have had growing up in Gadara. Such vistas are not conducive to narrow-mindedness.

In the 2nd century AD, Gadara spawned a third important Cynic, Oenamaus, who satirized the priests of Apollo for hoodwinking the people. God, he held, gives no more thought to us humans than He does to a beetle. "And do you suppose that, for the beetle, there is a harsh Beetle God, and that after the beetle has grown old on his dung heap, the Beetle God takes him up on high to an afterlife in dung-heap land?"

But the Gadarene thinker with the most posthumous luck has been Philodemus (110-43/45 BC). (Among his students at Rome were Vergil and Horace.) In addition to poems and epigrams that have always been known, at least 36 of his treatises were buried beneath the lava of Vesuvius at [Piso](#), a friend of Philodemus, was the father of Calpurnia, Julius Caesar's wife. [Piso's](#) villa in Herculaneum. They were discovered in 1752, along with hundreds of charred papyri, a whole library in fact, and are still being deciphered. Philodemus was no Cynic, rather an [Epicurus](#) (ca. 307 BC), according to Wikipedia, "was an atomic materialist, following in the steps of Democritus. His materialism led him to a general attack on superstition and divine intervention." He believed "that the greatest good was to seek modest pleasures in order to attain a state of tranquility (ataraxia) and freedom from fear, as well as absence of bodily pain (aponia) through knowledge of the workings of the world and the limits of one's desires. The combination of these two states is supposed to constitute happiness in its highest form." This could be "obtained by knowledge, friendship and living a virtuous and temperate life. He lauded the enjoyment of simple pleasures, by which he meant abstaining from bodily desires, such as sex and appetites, verging on asceticism." [Epicurean](#).

Gadara also produced a rhetorician named Theodorus. Like Philodemus before him, he left his home town for Rome, where he taught a young aristocrat named Tiberius, who would be emperor during Jesus' mission. Theodorus perceived the youth's moody disposition, dubbing him "mud kneaded with blood."

Another of Gadara's progeny was a mathematician named Philo, who devoted himself to the study of pi. One way to wander among the ruins of Gadara is to contemplate the fact that here lived a man who had thoughts like the following: "What is the relation between the diameter of a circle and its circumference? If I triple the length of the diameter, I almost get the circumference. The latter is longer, said Archimedes, by a quantity that is less than 1/7 of the diameter but greater than 10/71 parts of it. Surely we can get closer than that!"

Behind such thoughts is the notion that the circle embodies perfection and holiness. In the Decapolis city of Gerasa, 24 miles away, the attempt to "square the circle" was crucial in determining the layout of the city. Was the same principle at work in Gadara? Too little has been unearthed as yet to permit an answer.

In his classic [Jerusalem, Ariel](#), 1974 (30th edition) [Historical Geography of the Holy Land](#), p. 407, [George Adam Smith](#) notes the juxtaposition of cultures around the Lake of Galilee:

We may now touch again a subject we touched before--the influence of this Greek life on Galilee, and the beginnings of Christianity. The Decapolis flourished in the time of Christ's ministry. Gadara, with her temples and amphitheatres, her art, games and literature, overhung the Lake of Galilee, and the voyages of its fishermen... We cannot believe that the

two worlds, which this one landscape embraced, did not break into each other. The roads which crossed Galilee from the Decapolis to the coast, the inscriptions upon them, the constant trade between the fishermen and the Greek exporters of their fish, the very coins--everywhere thrust Greek upon the Jews of Galilee. The Aramaic dialect had begun to fill with Greek words. It is hard to believe that our Lord and His disciples did not know Greek. But, at least, in that characteristic Greek city overhanging the Lake of Galilee, in the scholars it sent to Greece and Rome, we have proof that the Kingdom of God came forth in no obscure corner, but in face of the kingdoms of this world.

{mospagebreak title=Demons into Swine}

## Demons into Swine

When he came to the other side, into the country of the Gergesenes [but the oldest versions of Matthew have "Gadarenes"-SL], two people possessed by demons met him there, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that nobody could pass that way. Behold, they cried out, saying, "What do we have to do with you, Jesus, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?" Now there was a herd of many pigs feeding far away from them. The demons begged him, saying, "If you cast us out, permit us to go away into the herd of pigs."

He said to them, "Go!"

They came out, and went into the herd of pigs: and behold, the whole herd of pigs rushed down the cliff into the sea, and died in the water. (Matthew 8:28-32.)

There is scholarly debate over the location of this miracle. It should definitely be placed on the eastern edge of the Sea of Galilee, where Gentiles predominated (as evidenced by the herd of pigs). The most ancient texts of Matthew have it in the region of Gadara, while Mark and Luke name that of Gerasa. But 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 (Tell Samra, by Ha'on of today). What's more, Matthew does not say "the city," rather "the country of the Gadarenes." The area beside this harbor had no "cliff," however, down which a herd could rush. If the place was indeed the region of the Gadarenes, the swine must have rushed from the plateau on which the city sits, 1800 feet above the lake.

Another possible site is the ancient village of Gergesa, known today as Kursi. The name Gergesa is attested in various ancient sources, designating a village on the lake's eastern shore. 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" (Commentary on John 6:41).

Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge*, Jerusalem, Carta, 2006, p. 360. Notley, to whom we are indebted for this section, 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 or

Gerasa. Under Origen's influence, later versions of Matthew made the correction back to Gergesa. For further discussion, see {tips}Nun Mendel. Gergesa (Kursi): Site of a Miracle. Kibbutz Ein Gev, 1989|Nun, p. 14.{/tips}

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