

Synagogue at Gamla

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Entry tags: Levantine Religion, Ancient Mediterranean, Judeans and Israelites, Archaeological Site, southern Levant, Hill, Jewish Traditions, Late Second Temple Judaism, Synagogue, Religious Place, Religious Group

Gamla (or Gamala) was a town located in ancient Gaulanitis (modern Golan Heights). The name perhaps derives from shape of the hill the town lies upon, shaped like a camel's hump. The town flourished during the 1st century BCE in part thanks to a thriving olive oil industry. During the First Jewish War against Rome, the town was besieged by Vespasian and ultimately destroyed. The synagogue structure was first identified in the late 1970s. The building consisted over a large main hall, with some additional rooms on the front and rear of the structure. There are two levels in the main hall, separated by stepped benches that circuit the central floor. There are additional rooms adjacent to this main hall. The original structure may have been built during the 1st century BCE, but either some reconfiguration took place around the beginning of the 1st century CE, or the structure was only constructed at this point. Additional rooms were added onto the structure at a later date. The total size of the building, after all additional rooms were added, was around 25 by 17 metres. As such, the Gamla synagogue is the largest known Second Temple period synagogue. The synagogue is not attested to in any ancient text, and there are no inscriptions which provide any more information. The only decorative elements from the structure are a lintel stone, which bears a rosette. The inner columns were likely topped with doric capitals. A single, but poorly carved, ionic style capital was also found inside the hall. The users of the structure are difficult to identify. The structure is well built, but perhaps could seat between 400 and 540 people, only 10% of the town's total population (drawn from Spigel, Ancient Synagogue Seating, 2012). As such it is likely that during its regular use, it was used by local elites. Outside the synagogue is a ritual immersion pool (miqveh). Such pools were used by Jews to cleanse themselves from ritual impurity. The pool was fed by a channel, which ran through the synagogue itself, suggesting that the pool was somehow linked with the synagogue, but it is difficult to determine the exact reason. During the revolt period, it appears that refugees sheltered in the structure, and in this period, we can suggest that the building was given over to non-elites. Once Gamla was besieged and fell to the Romans, the site was not reoccupied. The synagogue structure was first identified in the late 1970s. The building consisted over a large main hall. There are two levels in the main hall, separated by stepped benches that circuit the central floor. There are additional rooms adjacent to this main hall. The users of the structure are difficult to identify. The structure is well built, but perhaps could seat only 10% of the town's total population (drawn from Spigel 2012). As such it is likely that during its regular use, it was used by local elites. During the revolt period, it appears that refugees sheltered in the structure, and in this period we can suggest that the building was given over to non-elites.



Date Range: 20 BCE - 67 CE

Region: Gamla synagogue

Region tags: Levant, Galilee, Israel, southern Levant

The location of the Gamla synagogue, located at the north-east end of the ancient settlement.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

General Variables

Sources and Excavations

Print Sources

Print sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Syon, Danny and Zvi Yavor, eds. Gamla II: The Architecture – The Shmarya Gutmann Excavations, 1976–1988. IAA Reports 44. Jerusalem: IAA, 2010.
- Source 2: Syon, Danny, ed. Gamla III: The Shmarya Gutmann Excavations, 1976–1989 – Finds and Studies Part 1. IAA Reports 56. Jerusalem: IAA, 2014
- Source 3: Spigel, Chad S. Ancient Synagogue Seating Capacities: Methodology, Analysis and Limits. TSAJ 149. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012.

Online Sources

Online sources used for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://synagogues.kinneret.ac.il/synagogues/gamla/>
- Source 1 Description: Database entry

Has this place been the focus of excavation (pre-modern, illicit, or scientific):

Answer 'Yes' for each period or type of excavation.

– Yes



Type of excavation:

– Scientific



Years of excavation:

– Year range: 1976-1989

– Year range: 1997-2000



Name of excavation

– Official or descriptive name: Gamla excavations

Topographical Context

Is the place associated with a feature in the landscape

– Elevation



Type of elevation

– Hill

Does the place involve human-made features besides structure:

Other features might be ground clearing, terracing, other modifications of the local environment.

– Yes



Type of feature

– Terracing

– Water feature

Is the place situated in an urban or significantly urbanized area:

– Yes



Is there a distinct boundary between the place and the urban fabric:

– Yes

Notes: The structure is marked out as different from surrounding buildings, and an exedra leads to the frontage.



Is the place located significantly within the urban fabric:

Is the place centrally located, or at the crossroads of significant pathways?

– Yes

Is the place situated in a rural setting:

– No

Is the place situated far removed from non-religious places of habitation:

– No

Structures Present

Are there structures or features present:

Instructions: Answer once for each structure/feature or group that can be differentiated.

– Yes



A single structure

– Yes



The structure has a definite shape

– Rectangular

- ↳ One single feature
 - Other [specify]: None
- ↳ A group of structures:
 - No
- ↳ A group of features:
 - No
- ↳ Is it part of a larger place/sanctuary:
 - No
- ↳ What is the function of the structure/feature or group:
Answer "Yes" once for each distinct function
 - Worship
 - ↳ Worship:
 - Communal
 - Social
 - Political
- ↳ Is the structure/feature finished:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Was the structure/feature intended to last beyond a generation:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Was the structure/feature modified through time:
 - Yes
 - ↳ Was the structure/feature destroyed:
 - Yes
 - ↳ How was the structure/feature destroyed
 - Burned

↳ Was it destroyed deliberately:

– As the result of war

↳ Was it destroyed by accident/natural phenomena:

– Other [specify]: Deliberate destruction

↳ Has the structure/feature been reconstructed:

– Yes

↳ In antiquity

– Periodically

Reasons for Creation/Construction/Consecration

Is the place used for the worship of/communication with non-human supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Dedicated to a supernatural being:

– Yes [specify]: God of Israel

Is the place used for the worship of a semi-divine human being:

– No

Is the place used for the worship of non-divine ancestors:

– No

Was the place commissioned/built by an official political entity:

A political entity is a local power structure that leverages a workforce.

– Yes

↳ Specify

– Council of elders

– King or emperor

Notes: Rick Bonnie has speculated that the construction of this building is somehow connected with the Hasmonean dynasty or supportive elements. The specific commissioners are unknown.

Were the Structures built by specific groups of people:

– Field doesn't know

Was the place thought to have originated as the result of divine intervention:

– No

Was the place created to mark or commemorate the birthplace of a supernatural or human being:

– No

Was the place created as the result of an event:

– Field doesn't know

Was the creation of the place sponsored by an external financial/material donation:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Referring back to the supposed donors, no inscription attests to the financiers of the structure, but perhaps could be royal, or local authorities.

Was the establishment of the place motivated by:

–Other [specify]: Communal gatherings

Was the place built specifically for housing scriptures/sacred texts:

– Yes

↳ What type of scriptures/sacred texts [specify]:

– Type: Torah scrolls

Notes: This is hypothetical. No direct evidence found aside from wall niche which could have been used for scrolls and contemporary evidence for the storage and use of such scrolls in similar structures.

↳ Were the scriptures/sacred texts located in a specific room within the main structure:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Where are the scriptures/sacred texts located in secondary building:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are the scriptures actively used at the place:

– Yes

↳ Are they read aloud:

– Yes

↳ To a human audience

– Yes

↳ Are they studied:

– Yes

↳ Are they recopied:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Inkwells have been found at the site, but it is unclear what documents may or may not have been produced here.

↳ Used for divination:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other:

– Other [specify]: Communal dining

Notes: Community purposes are also likely, although there is not much evidence for other activities.

Design and Material Remains

Overall Structure

Is the place made up of multiple built structures:

– No

Is monumental architecture present:

Monumental architecture is defined here as a built structure that surpasses average human proportions and in general is larger and more complex than is necessary to fulfill the structure's utilitarian function(s). Examples of monumental architecture include Mesopotamian Ziggurats, Egyptian Pyramids, Greek and Roman temples, Mesoamerican Pyramids, North American and Aegean burial mounds, etc.

– No

Is the structure/feature made out of natural materials:

Answer [Yes] for each material type

– No

Is the structure/feature made out of human-made materials

– Yes [specify]: Stone blocks

Decoration

Is decoration present:

– Yes

↳ Is decoration part of the building (permanent):

– Yes

↳ On the outside:

– Yes

Notes: Carved elements on a door lintel.

↳ On the inside:

– Yes

Notes: Doric and a single ionic column capital.

↳ Is decoration attached to the building, i.e. movable reliefs or tapestries

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Carpets have been suggested for the internal floor.

↳ Is the decoration figural:

A figural representation is defined here as one that contains the depiction of discernible human, anthropomorphic, animal, or zoomorphic forms. In general, it differentiates between animate and inanimate beings, as well as between narrative compositions and still life, landscapes, abstraction, etc. Answer [Yes] for each type of figure depicted

– No

↳ Is the decoration non-figural:

– Yes

↳ Is it geometric/abstract

– Yes

↳ Floral motifs

– Yes

↳ Is it writing/caligraphy

– No

↳ Other [Specify]

–Other [specify]: None

↳ Is the decoration hidden or restricted from view:

– No

↳ Are there statues present:

– No

↳ Are there reliefs present:

A relief as opposed to sculpture carved on the round is a work of sculpture in which the figures project from a background support, generally a flat surface. Reliefs can be carved out of stone, clay, or a similar material.

– No

↳ Are there paintings present:

– No

↳ Are there mosaics present:

– No

↳ Are there inscriptions as part of the decoration:

– No

Iconography

Are there distinct features in the places iconography:

– No

Beliefs and Practices

Funerary Associations

Is this place a tomb/burial:

— No

Is this a place for the worship of the dead:

— No

Is this a place for treatment of the corpse:

— No

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

Co-sacrifices are animal/human sacrifices prompted by the death of the primary occupant of the tomb/burial.

— No

Are grave goods present:

— No

Are formal burials present:

— No

Supernatural Beings

Is a supreme high god is present:

— I don't know

Does the supreme high god communicate with the living at this place:

— I don't know

Are previously human spirits present:

— No

Do human spirits communicate with the living at this place:

— No

Are nonhuman supernatural beings present:

— No

Do nonhuman spirits communicate with the living at this place:

— No

Are mixed human-divine beings present:

— No

Do mixed human-divine beings communicate with the living at this place:

— No

Is the supernatural being/high god present in the form of a cult statue(s):

— No

Supernatural Interactions

Is supernatural monitoring present:

— I don't know

Do visitors communicate with the gods or supernatural beings:

— I don't know

Ritual and Performance

Sacrifices, Offerings, and Maintenance

Are sacrifices performed at this place:

— No

Are there self-sacrifices present:

— No

Are material offerings present:

— Field doesn't know

Is attendance to worship/sacrifice mandatory:

– No

Is maintenance of the place performed:

– Yes

↳ Is it required:

– No

↳ Is there cleansing (for the maintenance):

– Field doesn't know

↳ Are there periodic repairs/reconstructions:

– Yes

↳ Is the maintenance performed by permanent staff:

– Field doesn't know

Pilgrimage and Festivals

Are pilgrimages present:

– Field doesn't know

Is this place a venue for feasting:

– Field doesn't know

Are festivals present:

– Field doesn't know

Do rituals occur at this place:

Rituals are visibly enacted behaviors by one or more people for the purposes of religious observance.

– Yes

↳ Do large-scale rituals take place:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Do small-scale rituals take place:

– Yes



On average how many participants are present in large-scale rituals:

– specify: Up to around 500 people can fit into the structure so theoretically about 500



How often do these rituals take place:

– specify: Unclear, perhaps related to weekly Sabbath observance



Are there orthodoxy checks:

– Field doesn't know



Are there orthopraxy checks:

– Field doesn't know



Are there synchronic practices:

– Field doesn't know



Are there intoxicants used during the ritual:

– Field doesn't know

Institutions and Scriptures

Religious Specialists

Are religious specialists present/in charge of this place:

Religious specialists are individuals whose primary duties within a population group are not concerned with subsistence or craft production but the maintenance of the religious landscape and culture of the group.

– Field doesn't know

Does this place incorporate a living space for religious specialists:

– No

Is this place used for the training of religious specialists:

– Field doesn't know

Are there formal institutions for the maintenance of the place:

Institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders

– Field doesn't know

Bureaucracy

Is there a formal bureaucracy present at this place:

A bureaucracy consists of a hierarchical system of accounting and rule maintenance primarily concerned with material wealth.

– Field doesn't know

Does this place control economic resources (land, goods, tools):

– Field doesn't know

Public Works

Does this place serve as a location for services to the community:

– Yes

↳ Public food distribution and/or storage:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Place for civic functions (census, elections, others):

– Field doesn't know

↳ Place for the practice of justice (trials, executions, etc.):

– Field doesn't know

↳ Function for water management:

– Yes

Notes: Water channel runs through the structure.

↳ Part of the transportation network:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Other

– Other [specify]: Emergency refuge

Writing/Scriptures

Is non-religious writing stored at this place:

Economic documents, records etc.

— Field doesn't know

Are there scriptures associated with this place:

— No

Bibliography

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