

MAʿAGAN – WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

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Our conference takes place 208 m below sea level, at the southern tip of the Lake of Galilee, *Kinneret* in Hebrew. Folk etymology derives the name from Hebrew *kinnor* 'lyre', although ancient lyres probably had a different shape. It is more reasonable to assume that the lake has received its name from the Canaanite town Kinneret (or Kinrot) on its NW coast, a regional center during the Early Iron period (see Kinneret map & satellite image, and archeological table below).

The lake is part of the Jordan Valley, which in turn is part of the Syrian-African rift, extending from the Beqa'a Valley in Lebanon to the Great Lakes of East Africa. This rift is the birthplace of Mankind. North of Lake Kinneret, near Benot-Yaʿakov Bridge, evidence was found for hominine use of fire as early as 800,000 years ago [1]. However, the species that proudly calls itself *Homo sapiens sapiens* originated no more than 200,000 years ago. It is claimed that a single tribe of about 1,000 individuals in E. Africa (at the southern perimeters of the Syrian-African rift) some 56,000 years ago, fathered the human population of the entire world [2]. The Levant and the Jordan Valley in particular, formed a major migration route for their colonization of all other continents. The ancestors of most people participating in our conference very likely passed through Maʿagan at some point in prehistory.

During the Late Glacial Maximum (ca. 25,000 years ago in this region), Lake Kinneret was connected with the Dead Sea, forming jointly a huge lake known as Lake Lisan [3]. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors camped on the shores of this lake, just a few kilometers from the conference site. This is known from the extraordinary findings at Ohalo II, a 23,000 years old submerged prehistoric site, discovered during the drought of 1989. Remnants of six burnt huts were found, the oldest ever worldwide [4]. People living in these huts enjoyed a variety of over 200 species of collected plants (organic remains were preserved in the low-oxygen environment under the sea) and fish (as evidenced from perforated stone net weights). They slept on grass beddings [5] and baked bread from wild cereals [6], 12,000 years before wheat domestication took place (!).

Just above Ohalo lies an artificial hill, the archeological Tell of Beit-Yerah, which used to be a peninsula guarding the ancient exit point of the Jordan River from Lake Kinneret. It was a tiny settlement during the Chalcolithic period, and expanded into a massively fortified city [7] in the Early Bronze (ca. 3,000 BCE), when it became the second largest city in the country (after Jericho). The city boasts three walls, large round granaries, which could feed 6,000 people for a whole year, and special pottery (named Beit-Yerah pottery) attributed to trans-Caucasian migrants.

The name of this city, Beit-Yerah, means 'House [of worship] of the Moon'. Taken together with the name of Jericho, the Sinai Desert (apparently named after the moon-god Sin), and moon-worship artifacts discovered in Tell Hazor (UNESCO world heritage site, N. of Lake Kinneret) [8], tempt one to deduce that the entire Valley worshipped the moon at that period. It is amusing to consider whether the "halel" in *haleluyah* (Hebrew for 'praise God') is etymologically related to Arabic *hila* 'moon': Pagan terminology converted to monotheism?

In 1921, the archeologist and Palestine explorers Dalman and Albright identified the Biblical town of Kinneret at Tell-Kinrot (el-^ṣOreme) near et-Tabgha on the NW coast of the lake [9]. The site was excavated by various European teams (among them Volkmar Fritz from the University of Mainz). The Bronze period layers remain little explored, but within layer V from the Early Iron, remnants of a flourishing fortified Canaanite town were unearthed. The town was hastily deserted toward the end of the second millennium BCE, either because of an earthquake or perhaps the result of a military expedition by the House of David (?). Its final demise (734 BCE) came at the hands of Tiglath-Pileser III, the Assyrian king who demolished and exiled the Kingdom of Israel.

Of the three major monotheistic religions, the Lake of Galilee may be rightly considered as the birth-place of Christianity. Numerous sites along its shores are associated with Jesus and his disciples, some of whom were making their livelihood as fishermen before following Jesus. Some of these sites we will visit during our conference tour. (*Cherchez la femme*: Maria Magdalene lived in the town of Migdal, in the Genosar Valley not far from ancient Kinneret).

Tiberias is the largest city in the region. It was founded by Herod-Antipas (son of Herod the Great who rebuilt the 2nd Temple), probably during the year 19 CE, and named after his patron the Roman emperor Tiberius. During the Great Rebellion of the Jews against Rome (66 CE) the rebels destroyed the King's palace in Tiberias because it was decorated with animal figurines. Josephus Flavius (born Joseph Ben Mattityahu, scion of an aristocratic family of temple priests in Jerusalem) was entrusted to defend the Galilee against the Roman legions. Betraying his fellow fighters, he has made his escape from Yodphat, surrendering Tiberias to the Roman general (and soon to become emperor) Vespasian in AD 67, and thus saving it from destruction [10]. In contrast, the inhabitants of Gamla on the Golan-Heights NE of the lake fought to the bitter end. Those who survived the Roman onslaught jumped to their death from the heights of the Gamla cliffs. Flavius (who went with the victors to Rome and became *the* notable historian of this period) reported 9,000 dead from Gamla and its neighboring villages [10].

Around 150 CE the great Jewish tribunal (the Sanhedrin) settled in Tiberias, which for a few hundred years became the capital of the Jewish people in all of its Diasporas. Tiberias developed into a great center of Jewish learning: Between the 2nd and 6th centuries CE, the Mishnah and subsequently the Hebrew ("Jerusalemite") Talmud were mostly written or edited here. The Tiberian system for writing down Hebrew vowels was codified by Ben-Asher in Tiberias during the 10th century, and is still in use today. Thanks to this endeavor we know how the ancient Hebrew words are to be pronounced.

Tiberias was captured from the Muslims by the Franks during the First Crusade (11th century CE), and was incorporated into their kingdom, until their defeat by Saladin (Arabic for `Victory of Religion') in the Battle of Hattin (10 km NW of Tiberias), on the 4th of July 1187. This historical event is a significant landmark in the "clash of civilizations" between Islam and Christianity. (Ironically, both civilizations consider the 4th of July as a highly significant date in their respective histories).

The southern part of the Lake of Galilee was also an important focal point for the Zionist-socialist movement. In 1908 (during the "Second Aliya", the wave of immigration that brought Ben-Gurion to Palestine), an agricultural farm by the name Kinneret was established near ancient Ohalo. Its name was given to it by the author and Nobel laureate Shy ^ṣAgnon, before ancient Kinneret was identified.

A generation of Jewish pioneers trained in the Kinneret farm. In Oct. 28, 1910, a group from Kinneret settled the first *kvutzah* (small communal agricultural group), Degania A, not far from the baptism site at Yardenit. In 1921 (Third Aliya period) pioneers from Kinneret established the first large *kibbutz* (Ein-Harod) in the Valley of Jezre`el. Some settlers preferred individual farms (with mutual commitment), and they have founded the first *moshav*, Nahalal. Among them were members of Degania A, including the parents of Moshe Dayan (born in Degania, 20 May 1915), who later became Chief of Staff (during the Sinai Campaign) and Minister of Defense (during the Six-Day and Yom-Kippur wars). In the old graveyard of Kinneret (on the Lake's shore next to Ohalo) many notable persons are buried, including for example, the poetess Rachel who trained in Kinneret for two years, and eventually died of tuberculosis in Tel-Aviv (1927).

In the hills above Kinneret, in Upper Bitania, the first pioneer group of Hashomer-Hatzair movement worked in manual road construction (1920-1921). This group founded the first Hashomer-Hatzair *kibbutz*, named accordingly Beit-Alpha (1922), at the foot of Mt. Gilboa (where King Saul fell on his sword). My grandfather, Natan Bistrizki, spent some time with this group, and published a documentary book and a novel based on interviews and memories from this period.

During the Israeli War of Independence, Syrian tanks and infantry captured the southern part of Lake Kinneret, and were eventually stopped only on the outposts of *kibbutz* Degania, on the 20th of May 1948. A year later, in July 1949, *kibbutz* Ma`agan (literally `anchorage') was settled by immigrants from Transylvania at a station of the British Mandate border patrol near the Arab village Zemaḥ (the place was thus initially called Ma`agan-Zemaḥ). Part of this group has also spent some years training in Kinneret before settling in Ma`agan. During the 1973 Yom Kippur war, Syrian tanks were again rolling down towards Kinneret; this time they were stopped just a few miles further away, on the slopes of the Golan Heights.

Today Ma`agan is a thriving community (of ca. 300 adults and children) based on agriculture and tourism. Welcome to Ma`agan, where it all began...

References:

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- [10] Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish Wars* (Trans. W. Whiston).

Table. Archeological periods of the Levant, dated in calibrated ¹⁴C years before present (BP=BCE+1950).

Dates (BP)	Period	Culture	Innovations
40,000-22,000	Upper-Paleolithic	Neanderthal & Homo-sapiens hunter-gatherers	Stone tools, flint weapons, fishing nets, weaving (!)
22,000-11,700	Epi-Paleolithic	Kebaran, Natufian	Sedentarism, animal pens (?), round stone houses, sickle, bow (?), ornaments, lime
11,700-8,500	Pre-Pottery Neolithic	Transition to agriculture	Domestication, agricultural villages, square brick houses, wells, graveyards, plastered skulls, flax clothes
8,500-7,000	Pottery Neolithic	Yarmukian, Wadi Rabah	Pottery, olive oil, fertility goddess
7,000-5,500	Chalcolithic	Ghassulian	First metal processing (copper), secondary products revolution (wool, cheese, plough), wine, temples
5,500-3,150	Bronze Age	Canaanite, with periodic Egyptian rule	Urbanization, empires, writing, law, organized warfare, wheel, fortified cities, water projects
3,150-2,600	Iron Age	Israelite	Iron tools, monotheism, literature