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The Synagogue at Tel Rekhesh: An Archaeological Investigation of the Galilean Synagogue of the First Century CE[1]

Takahiko YAMANO
The Central Theological College, Tokyo

1. Introduction

An excavation conducted in 2017 at the upper mound of Tel Rekhesh, an area dated to the Roman period, uncovered a structure that attracted the attention of our excavation team. The results of this excavation have appeared in various publications.[2] The aim of this paper is to provide more detailed information about

1 This paper is part of the findings of the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research Japan (KAKEN) project 'Construction of a General History of Religion in the Eastern Mediterranean World at the Jewish Reformative Period from the Viewpoint of Lived Ancient Religion' (Principal Investigator: Prof. Hiroshi Ichikawa, Tokyo University). Sincere gratitude is expressed for the invaluable support provided for this research. Special thanks are due to Prof. Hiroshi Ichikawa for providing this very significant opportunity as the principal investigator of the KAKEN project, and to Prof. Hisao Kuwabara (Tenri University) and Prof. Shuichi Hasegawa (Rikkyo University) for their extensive advisory support throughout the excavation efforts.

2 S. Hasegawa, H. Kuwabara, and Y. Paz, *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 134 (2022): https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=26123&mag_id=134 (Available for viewing as of 31 March 2025); M. Aviam, H. Kuwabara, S. Hasegawa, and Y. Paz, "1st–2nd Century CE Assembly Room (Synagogue?) in a Jewish Estate at Tel Rekhesh, Lower Galilee," *Tel Aviv* 46 (2019): 128–142 among others. See further T. Yamano, "Tel

the structure and to further develop its archaeological interpretation in light of these studies. It is anticipated that this analysis will contribute to advancing scholarly discussions regarding the significance of the building discovered in the Galilee.

2. Result of the Excavation and Interpretation

2.1. Squares

In order to ascertain whether the structure excavated at Tel Rekhesh is a synagogue, it was necessary to investigate it in its entirety. In the 2016 excavation season, only the northwestern part of the structure was uncovered. Consequently, a total of five survey squares (D4a7, D4b5, D4c5, D4c6, D4c7) were established during the 2017 excavation season to investigate the southeastern part of the structure and the building's surroundings (Fig. 1).[3]

2.2. Dating

The excavation of the five squares yielded no coins, inscriptions, or other definitive dating evidence. However, the pottery recovered from the excavation

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Rekhesh Synagogue," *Seisyogaku-Ronsyu* 49 (Tokyo: Japanese Biblical Institute, 2018), 29–48 (in Japanese); M. Aviam, "The Economic Impact of the First Jewish Revolt on the Galilee," in *Taxation, Economy, and Revolt in Ancient Rome, Galilee, and Egypt*, ed. R. Blanton IV, A. Choi, and J. Liu (London/New York: Routledge 2022), 95–107; M. Aviam, H. Kuwabara, S. Hasegawa, and Y. Paz, "A First–Second Century CE Synagogue on a Jewish Estate on Top of Tel Rekhesh," in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed: 1981–2022*, ed. I. Levine, Z. Weiss, and U. Leibner (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society 2023), 125–127.

3 The continuation rooms of the structures were found in squares D4c6 and D4c7 in 2016. Squares D4b5, D4c5, and D4a7 were established to investigate the outer part of the synagogue; a structure discovered in square D4a7 was assumed to be a Roman miqwe or an Iron Age structure (though its stone rows had a particular orientation that was clearly different from that of other Iron Age remains).

Fig. 1 Tel Rekhesh 2017: the excavated squares
(This figure is the work of the Japanese Tel Rekhesh Archaeological Expedition)

was similar to that from other survey areas on the Roman upper mound excavated up to 2016 (dating to the first to early second century CE). The excavation yielded knife-pared lamps and Galilean lamps, which were produced in the first century CE, in the chamber. In addition, a fragment of a limestone vessel, characteristic of the Galilee, Samaria and Judea of this period, was also found.[4] These artefacts provide a sufficient basis for dating the building to the first century CE. So far, no sherds of post-Roman pottery have been found in the relevant layers.

2.3. Plan

The survey of squares D4c6 and D4c7 revealed that the structure measured

4 See further Aviam, "The Economic Impact," 99.

8.5 m north-south by 9.3 m east-west (6×7 metres interior) (Fig. 2). The structure, although dated to the Roman period, is oriented differently from other contemporaneous structures. It shares the same orientation as Iron Age structures, which are notably misaligned with the cardinal axes (north-south, east-west). In contrast, the other Roman-period structures at the site are aligned with the mound's principal cardinal axes.

The largest synagogue of the late first century CE known to date is the synagogue at Gamla, with the entire building measuring 25.5 × 17 metres, and the hall section alone measuring 13.4 × 9.3 metres. The Majdulliya Synagogue, discovered in 2015, measures 23 × 13 metres. The synagogue at Umm el-ʻUmdan, measuring 13.5 × 11 metres,[5] is followed by the synagogue at Herodion, which covers an area of 15.1 × 10.6 metres. The earliest archaeological evidence for a Galilean synagogue from the Second Temple period was unearthed at Magdala in 2009. This synagogue is notable for its elaborate features, including frescoed walls and a mosaic floor, as well as a Torah reading table designed in the form of the Jerusalem Temple, which represents a significant discovery. Measuring approximately 11 × 11 metres, it does not form a perfect square or rectangle due to some protruding sections, but it has been reported that the total area is 120 square metres.[6] The Migdal West synagogue has not yet been officially reported, but

5 This site is located in close proximity to the modern town of Modiʻin. This building was characterised by the presence of pillars and benches along the walls. The excavators have determined that the building was initially constructed at the beginning of the first century BCE, underwent renovations at the end of that century, destroyed during the first revolt, rebuilt between the two revolts, and finally destroyed at the end of the second revolt. See A. Onn et al., "Khirbet Umm el-ʻUmdan," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 114 (2002, 64–68); S. Weksler-Bdolach, "Khirbet Umm el-ʻUmdan," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 126 (2014): https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=14718 (Available for viewing as at 31 March 2025); A. Onn and S. Weksler-Bdolah, "A Synagogue of the Second Temple Period at Khirbat Umm el-ʻUmdan," in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, 220-227.

6 D. Avshalom-Gorni and A. Najar, "Migdal," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 125 (2013): https://

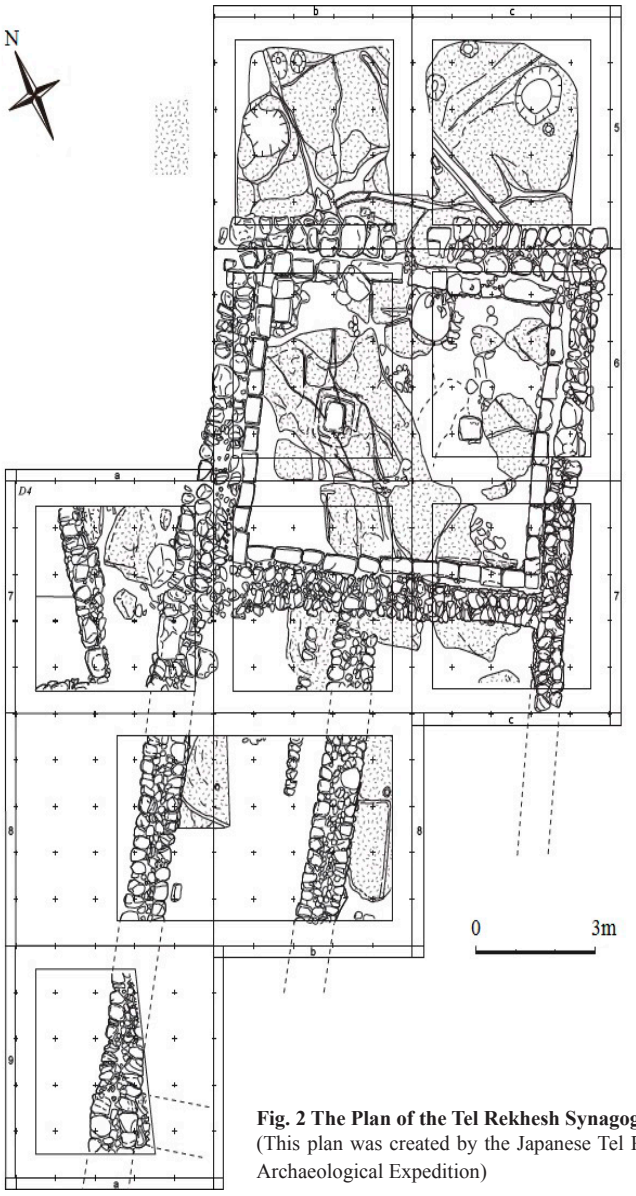

Fig. 2 The Plan of the Tel Rekhesh Synagogue
(This plan was created by the Japanese Tel Rekhesh Archaeological Expedition)

visual observations suggest it is similar in size to the synagogue at Tel Rekhesh.[7] The synagogue at Masada is reported to measure 12.5 × 10 metres, while the synagogue at Kh. Diab is said to have dimensions of 8 × 3 metres. In the late twentieth century, an excavation at Khirbet Badd ʻIsa revealed the remains of a small village. At the centre of the village, a square structure measuring 9.6 × 9.6 metres was uncovered.[8] The synagogue at Tel Rekhesh is slightly smaller than these synagogues, excluding Kh. Diab, but considering the size of the settlement on the upper mound (0.5 ha), it can be regarded as an appropriate gathering place for its residents.

2.4. Entrance

In later synagogues, the rabbis recommended that the entrance should be on the eastern side of the synagogue,[9] following the example of the Jerusalem Temple. This trend can already be seen in synagogues of the first century and may have originated with the rebels who fought for independence against the Roman Empire (Masada and Herodion). The synagogue at Modiʻin (Umm el-ʻUmdan) also has its entrance facing east. Although this site was not a scene of the First

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www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=2304&mag_id=120 (Available for viewing as of 31 March 2025).

7 In December 2021, a second synagogue, known as the Migdal Synagogue West, was identified in close proximity to the Eastern Synagogue, situated just a few hundred metres away. It has been confirmed that this synagogue also exhibits the hallmarks of a typical first-century CE synagogue structure observed in the Southern Levant.

8 The structure was supported by four pillars, with a roof and solid benches along the three walls. A small room, covered with white plaster and connected only to the main room, was also identified. Y. Magen posited that the structure was a "public building, a synagogue". See Y. Magen and Y. Zionit, "Khirbet Badd ʻIsa-Qiryat Sefer," in *The Land of Benjamin Staff Officer of Archaeology - Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria,* JSP 3 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority 2004), 179–241; Y. Magen, Y. Tzionit, and O. Sirkis, "The Synagogue at Qiryat Sefer," in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, 214–219.

9 t. Megillah 3:14.

Jewish Revolt, it is associated with the Maccabean Revolt in the Hellenistic period and was the hometown of the Hasmonean family, who led the resistance against the Seleucid Empire. These facts suggest that those who rose up against powerful forces attacking the Jewish people may have sought to express their loyalty to the Jerusalem Temple by designing their synagogues in imitation of the Temple itself. These synagogues all have an entrance facing east, similar to the Jerusalem Temple. That being said, in numerous synagogues of the subsequent period, it was preferred that the entrance face Jerusalem, rather than follow the rabbis' stipulation. This policy is reflected in the first-century synagogue of Gamla, a stronghold of the counter-Roman rebellion in Gauranitis (the entrance faces south-west, i.e. towards Jerusalem).

Conversely, the entrances of the synagogues in the rural settlements, which were presumably less associated with the rebels than the towns mentioned earlier, appear to align with the topographical context of their buildings. The entrance to the synagogue at Khirbet Badd 'Isa was located on the northern side of the building, while the synagogue at Migdal East had its main entrance on the western side and a secondary entrance on the southern side. A notable distinction was observed in the orientation of the entrances to these early synagogues, which did not face Jerusalem, in contrast to later synagogues. The Migdal West synagogue faces east, likely due to the obstruction of the western side by elevated land, rather than having a design intentionally mirroring the Jerusalem Temple. The synagogue at Tel Rekhesh was situated at the southwestern edge of the settlement,[10] whose primary concentration of buildings was located further north. This geographical

10 Between 2008 and 2015, excavations revealed a sequence of buildings dating to the Roman period, located from the centre to the northern part of the upper mound. Among these buildings were two-storey houses featuring painted plaster and window walls: see S. Hasegawa and Y. Paz, "Tel Rekhesh–2013 Preliminary Report," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 127 (2015): https://hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=24892&mag_id=122 (Available for viewing as of 31 March 2025).

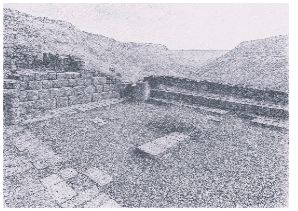
layout is believed to have influenced the placement of the entrance on the northern side of the building.

2.5. Stone benches

Excavations conducted in 2017 uncovered the complete interior of the structure, including the presence of stone benches along the entire perimeter of the synagogue's inner wall (Fig. 3). This feature is consistent with the prevalent practice of using stone benches in the first-century synagogues of the Southern Levant.[11] The presence of stone benches is the most significant indication that the

11 Archaeologically the identification of possible synagogue structures from the first century is considered in comparison with architectural features that emerged during Late Antiquity. The presence of stone benches is a prominent factor in this process. While Late Antique synagogues have been identified as having an apse or a substantial wall niche for the storage of Torah scrolls, along with inscriptions clearly identifying the building as a synagogue, no such inscriptions or features have been identified in synagogues from the first century CE (The synagogue at Gamla has a wall niche, but it is not large enough to accommodate Torah scrolls. The view that it was used by the congregation to place objects – D. D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts. The Place of the Synagogue in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 166; C. Claußen, *Versammlung, Gemeinde, Synagoge: Das hellenistisch-jüdische Umfeld der frühchristlichen Gemeinden* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 170; A. Runesson, D. D. Binder, and B. Olsson, *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 33 – is likely correct). Therefore, the stone benches are the most significant and possibly the only physical evidence of synagogue architecture from this period. The synagogues at Masada, Herodion, Gamla, Khirbet Badd 'Isa (Qiryat Sefer, Ma'ale Modi'in), Umm el-'Umdan (Modi'in), Khirbet Diab, Migdal (East and West), and Majduliyya are recognised as late first-century synagogues by researchers and excavators, and it is acknowledged that all of them feature stone benches. The synagogues at Gamla, Migdal, and Herodion feature further stone benches placed between the stone benches installed on the wall and the central space of the room, with the floor of the central space inside these further benches set at a lower level than the floor along the wall of the synagogue. These benches surround the room on all four sides, with the congregation's gaze focused on the centre of the room. In the structures

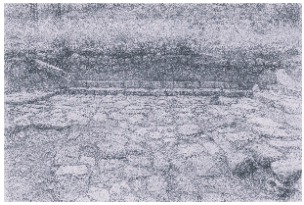
Fig. 3 Synagogues of the first century CE in the Southern Levant
(The photos taken by the author, each turned into illustrations)



Gamla

Majdulliya

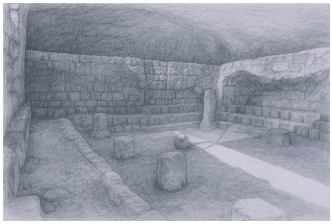
Migdal East



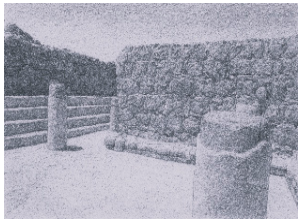
Migdal West

Kh. Badd ʻIsa

Umm el-ʻUmdan



Herodion



Masada

structure at Tel Rekhesh is an ancient synagogue.[12]

The benches positioned on all sides of the room served to direct the attention of the congregation towards the central area of the room, where it is presumed that the reader would have performed the reading of the Torah (Fig. 4). A comparative analysis of the features of the structure excavated at Tel Rekhesh and those commonly found in ancient synagogues led to the conclusion that the former structure was a synagogue.

The width of the benches, all composed of ashlar stone, ranges from approximately 35 centimetres to almost 1 metre, with a height and length of around 30 centimetres each. This is comparable to the dimensions of benches observed in other synagogues of the same historical period.[13] Based on Spigel's reliable method of calculation,[14] it can be estimated that the synagogue in Tel Rekhesh could accommodate about 50 people. This seating capacity can be considered

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at Tel Rekhesh, stone benches analogous to those found in these synagogues are also observed.

12 D. Hamidović, "The New Archaeological Definition of the Earliest Synagogues in Judaea and Galilee Applied to the Site of Khirbet Qumran," in *Religion in the Roman Empire,* Jahrgang 9 (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2023), 96–118, does not endorse the presence of stone benches as a criterion for identifying ancient synagogues. However, his argument conflates elements related to synagogues in both Judaea and the Diaspora, and as such, it can be considered a coarse discussion from an archaeological perspective. Archaeological arguments should be carefully refined with respect to regional specificity and with the scope of findings clearly defined.

13 See C. S. Spigel, *Ancient Synagogue Seating Capacities: Methodology, Analysis and Limits* (Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen 2012), 67.

14 Spigel, *Ancient Synagogue*, 51–74; Chad Spigel's method of calculating seating capacity is supported by "quantitative and reproducible procedures," "archaeological evidence based on actual measurements," "comparative examination with other methods together with a clear statement of limitations," and "application to multiple case studies with consistent results." It is not merely impressionistic or a product of armchair speculation, but rather a method that can be evaluated as academically rigorous and highly convincing, and it continues to be widely referenced in the field of ancient synagogue studies.

Two Pillar Foundations

Looking south

Fig. 4 Synagogue (Photographed by the author)

suitable based on the plan of this building.

2.6. Floor Level

During the 2016 excavation season, the north-western half of the synagogue chamber had already been excavated down to bedrock. This was carried out to ascertain the nature of the substructure beneath the floor. In the 2017 excavation season, the south-eastern portion of the chamber (D4c6/c7) was also excavated

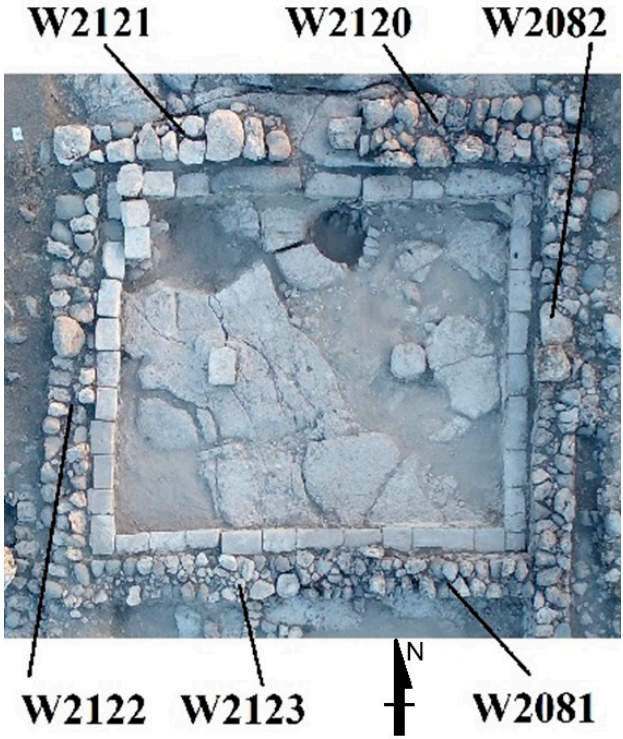

Fig. 5 The synagogue, aerial view (The photo is by the Japanese Tel Rekhesh Archaeological Expedition, and the annotations are by the author)

to a level below the floor, reaching a depth comparable to that of the northern portion of the adjacent chamber. The Galilean oil lamp, mentioned above, was found intact at the subfloor level. A complete, typical first-century knife-pared oil lamp was discovered beneath the floor level.

The floor level of the Roman synagogue is likely consistent with the level of the base of the stone seat set against the wall, and the height was suitable for entry through the doorway and for reaching the seat. Traces of plaster were observed around the pillar foundations on the western side, while the majority of the floor

Site	Location	Space	Entrance Orientation	Pillar	Sub-room	Miqwe
Gamla	Golan	25.5×17m (ca. 433 m^2)	SW	16	2	1
Majdulliya	Golan	23×13m (ca. 300 m^2)	W	12	2	?
Migdal East	Galilee	120m^2 Irregular-shaped	W	4	1	1
Migdal West	Galilee	Non-official announcement	E	6	2	?
Kh. Badd ʻIsa	Judea	9.6×9.6m (92.16 m^2)	N	8	2	1
Umm el-ʻUmdan	Judea	13.5×11m (148.5 m^2)	E	8	1	1
Kh. Diab	Judea	8×3m (24 m^2)	N	0?	1	?
Herodion	Judea	15.1×10.6m (ca. 160 m^2)	E	4-6?	0	1
Masada	Judea	12.5×10m (125 m^2)	E	5	1	1
Tel Rekhesh	Galilee	9.3×8.5m (ca. 80 m^2)	NE	2	0	?

Table of Synagogues of the first century CE in the Southern Levant

consisted of soil with beaten earth. Two cut stones were discovered within the hall, which may have formed the foundations of the pillars that supported the roof (see below).

2.7. Pillar Foundations

During the 2016 survey, a solitary hewn stone was unearthed in the western part of the chamber at a position approximately equidistant from the two walls perpendicular to the stone. At the time, it was unclear whether it was a simplified version of a reading table, as in the synagogue at Migdal, or a pillar foundation. However, the discovery of similar cut stones in the southern part of the room during the 2017 survey made it possible to conclude that the two cut stones were the

foundations of columns supporting the roof of this building (Figs. 4–5).

However, there was one problem with the location of those cut stones. Based on the position of the excavated levels, it is estimated that one of the two quarries (the southern one) would have been buried approximately 10–15 cm below the expected floor level. The stone from the other quarry (the northern one) was also not significantly exposed from the floor level. Consequently, the following four possibilities must be considered in relation to the Roman context: 1) These hewn stones are not from the Roman period but belong to structures from earlier periods of the site. 2) The synagogue was built on a slope, and the floor was formed at an angle to match this incline, 3) Earth pressure has caused the cut stones seen today to sink below their position in Roman times. Consequently, the stones have descended to a lower level than that of the floor. 4) The floor was originally concave, with the surrounding stone seats raised one step higher than the centre of the synagogue chamber, creating a gentle slope toward the centre. 1) is implausible, as the two hewn stones are positioned at an equal distance from the respective walls of the Roman synagogue and are architecturally suitable as pillar foundations. 2) is reasonably plausible, given that the floors of buildings in this region during the Roman period were not always maintained at a constant level. 3) and 4) are unlikely, as the floor of the synagogue was not consistently kept level.

In my opinion, with regard to the construction of this synagogue, the orientation of the walls was likely based on the walls of prominent Iron Age large building complexes, with the south-eastern wall (W2082) being constructed first, followed by the north-eastern and south-western walls (W2120/W2121 and W2081/W2123), and ultimately the north-western wall (W2122) [Fig. 5]. In contrast, the interior seems to have been developed from north-west to south-east. The floor surface, too, was initially prepared to be approximately aligned with the lower, north-western side. As a result, the cut stones on the south-eastern side would have emerged at the surface. However, at this level, they would have been lower than the base of the stone seat on the south-eastern side.

It is likely that the floor surface between the column bases gradually rose between the stone seats and the column bases. Nonetheless, it cannot be disregarded that there was a height difference of approximately 18 cm between the northern and southern column bases. Therefore, it seems most plausible to base the interpretation primarily on point 2, while also considering the impact of earth pressure that occurred over a long period of time.

2.8. Collapse of the building

A survey of the top of the mound revealed that the stone collapses visible on the surface all belong to the Roman period complex. The plan of these remains shows a group of rooms organised in a square frame, and it has been confirmed that many of them are concentrated in the north-west corner of the upper mound. The interior of the complex was subdivided into numerous smaller rooms. In contrast, no Roman remains have been identified to the south of the mound's top.

As mentioned above, the pottery recovered from the synagogue has been dated to the first and early second centuries CE, consistent with the finds from other excavated areas of the upper mound. Fragments of chalk vessels, characteristic of the Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, were found within the synagogue. Additionally, the presence of knife-pared lamps and Galilean lamps, both produced before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, is of interest.

Coins dated to the Roman period are few in number, but they include those from the reigns of Herod Antipas (possibly attributable to Herod Agrippa II), Trajan, and Hadrian.[15] Based on these finds, the construction of the building at Tel Rekhesh can be dated to the first and second centuries CE. To date, no artefacts from the post-Roman period have been discovered. The Jewish settlement on the

15 A. Tsukimoto, H. Kuwabara, Y. Paz, and S. Hasegawa, "Tel Rekhesh–2010 Preliminary Report," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 125 (2013): https://hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=3335&mag_id=120; S. Hasegawa et al., "Tel Rekhesh–2013 Preliminary Report."

upper mound, including the synagogue, was abandoned during the turmoil of the early second century, most likely at the end of the Second Jewish War (the Bar Kokhba Revolt), consistent with the fate of other Roman-period sites in the Southern Levant.[16] The precise date of the synagogue's collapse remains unclear; however, numerous large fissures in the bedrock, along with significant displacement of fractured rock, suggest a specific cause. These cracks are unlikely to have resulted from human activity and may have been associated with a major earthquake. The earthquakes of the fourth and fifth centuries, which caused significant damage in Capernaum and Tiberias, respectively, may have also caused the collapse of the synagogue at Tel Rekhesh.[17] Although there is no direct evidence linking these

16 It can be said that there is general consensus on this view: see Yamano, "Tel Rekhesh," 36; S. Hasegawa, H. Kuwabara, and Y. Paz, "Tel Rekhesh–2019 Preliminary Report," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 135 (2023): https://hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=26379&mag_id=135; Aviam et al., "1st-2nd Century CE Assembly Room," 139.

17 B. Y. Arubas and R. Talgam, "Jews, Christians and 'Minim': Who Really Built and Used the Synagogue at Capernaum – A Stirring Appraisal," in *Knowledge and Wisdom. Archaeological and Historical Essays in Honour of Leah Di Segni*, ed. G. C. Bottini, L. D. Chrupcala, and J. Patrich (Jerusalem: Terra Santa, 2014), 237–274; J. Magness, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine: A Re-evaluation Nearly a Century After Sukenik's Schweich Lectures* (Oxford: The British Academy, 2024), 63–93; M. R. Sbeinati, R. Darawcheh, and M. Mouty, "The historical earthquakes of Syria: an analysis of large and moderate earthquakes from 1365 B.C. to 1900 A.D.," *Annals of Geophysics* 48 (June 2005), 347–435; Y. Hirschfeld, *Excavations at Tiberias 1989–1994*, IAA Reports 22 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority 2004), 3–26; S. Chiat and M. Joyce, "Hammat Tiberias: Galilee," in *Handbook of Synagogue Architecture*, Brown Judaic Studies 29 (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press 1982), 89–120, esp. 103–110; J. Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, Trustees for Harvard University 2005), 1–52; Z. Weiss, "Stratum II Synagogue at Hammath Tiberias: Reconsidering its Access, Internal Space, and Architecture," in *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne*, JSJSup 132, ed. Z. Rodgers with D. Denton and A. F. McKinley, 321–342; K. W. Russel, "The Earthquake of May 19, ad. 363," *BASOR* 238 (1980), 47–64; "The

earthquakes to the synagogue's collapse, considering the date of these seismic events and the geological evidence, the possibility of their connection cannot be entirely dismissed.

3. Significance of the Discovery of the Tel Rekhesh Synagogue

Thus far, we have examined the fundamental architectural features of Tel Rekhesh and noted several observations. The question now arises: how was this structure, which possesses these characteristics, utilized as a synagogue? The identification of synagogue buildings in the Galilee and Judea from the late antique period, approximately the 4th century onwards, is relatively straightforward.[18] Structures are unequivocally identified as synagogues by inscriptions on the columns or on the mosaic floor. Both from those inscriptions or historical writings,

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Earthquake Chronology of Palestine and Northwest Arabia from the 2nd through the Mid-8th Century A.D.," *BASOR* 260 (1985), 37–59.

18 Regarding synagogues after the 3rd century CE, it was once common to date them based on architectural styles, particularly those identified by Sukenik and Avi-Yonah (E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece. The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy* (London: British Academy 1934); M. Avi-Yonah, "Synagogue Architecture in the Classical Period," in *Jewish Art, an Illustrated History,* ed. C. Roth (Jerusalem: New York Graphic Society 1971), 155–190). However, the relationship between architectural style and date has been reconsidered due to the discovery of numerous synagogues thereafter, which demonstrated that such a correspondence cannot always be established. It was critically examined by scholars such as A. R. Seager ("Ancient Synagogue Architecture: an Overview," in *Ancient Synagogues, the State of Research*, BJS 22, ed. J. Guttman and A. Arbor (California: Scholars Press 1981), 40 in the past, and more recently, it has become clear that this classification method is no longer a valid criterion for dating. For more details, see Magness, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 1–25, 27–41.

the term "synagogue" is defined.[19] Similar to other 1st-century synagogues in the Southern Levant, although epigraphic evidence such as the Theodotos Inscription is absent, it is reasonable to conclude that the excavated structure served as a communal gathering place based on the characteristics of the settlement identified as a farmstead from excavations in different areas of the upper mound at Tel Rekhesh.

It is agreed among the scholars participating in the excavation that this building belongs to a part of the farmstead owned by a wealthy family.[20] However, there is debate about whether this building should be called a "private synagogue".[21] In my view, the term "private synagogue" seems inherently contradictory to the communal nature of synagogues, which have historically functioned as public gathering places for the community. Considering this, the image of, so to speak, a "private public institution" seems inherently contradictory and awkward. If it is private, it should more appropriately be referred to as a "family assembly room" or "prayer room". For instance, Jews in the Diaspora used different terms depending on the role of the building. According to such examples, buildings that were not public assembly places/synagogues were not called *συναγωγή*, but referred

19 The most widely known Greek terms for synagogue are "*συναγωγή*" (meaning "assembly place") and "*προσευχή*" (meaning "prayer place"). It can be said that the Hebrew term "בית כנסת" and the Aramaic one "בי כנישתא" are synonymous with the Greek word "*συναγωγή*", and that the Hebrew term "בית תפלה" is synonymous with the Greek word "*προσευχή*". It is evident from the inscriptions of the Diaspora that certain synagogues were designated by different appellations in accordance with their function. In the context of Diaspora synagogues, which were established earlier than those in the Galilee and Judea, inscriptions play a pivotal role in substantiating the existence of these structures, as, in many cases, the buildings themselves seldom remain, leaving only the inscriptions (Runesson et al., *The Ancient Synagogue*, 118–254; Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 227–341).

20 See Yamano, "Tel Rekhesh," 37; Hasegawa et al., "Tel Rekhesh 2016"; Hasegawa et al., "Tel Rekhesh 2017"; Aviam, "Economic Impact," 99; Aviam et al., "1st-2nd Century CE Assembly Room," 141.

21 Aviam et al., "1st-2nd Century CE Assembly Room," 140–141.

to by other terms.[22] Weiss likewise notes that the building at Tel Rekhesh does not conform to the term "private synagogue".[23] Indeed, as he points out, while an exact definition is difficult, in archaeological discourse — even though inscriptions or literary sources like those of a diaspora synagogue are lacking — based on material evidence such as architectural style, and contrary to Hamidović's argument,[24] structures in the Southern Levant with stone benches should simply be classified as "synagogues".

Although there are discrepancies in identification,[25] approximately ten syna-

22 In addition to the primary term for synagogue, *συναγωγή* ("synagogue", "assembly place") and *προσευχή* ("prayer place"), other terms that may also imply a synagogue in this context include *προσευκτήριον* ("prayer institute"), *συναγώγιον* ("synagogal institute"), *ἱερόν* ("sacred place"), *ἱερόν περίβολον* ("a wall enclosing a sacred precinct"), *διδασκαλεῖον* ("teaching institute"), *ἀμφιθέατρον* ("amphitheatre"), *οἶκος* ("house"), *οἴκημα* ("home"), *τόπος* ("place"), *σεμνεῖον* ("revered sanctuary"), and *σαββατεῖον* ("shabbat institute"). See Binder, *Into Temple Courts*, 137–139; Runesson et al., *The Ancient Synagogue*, 20–117, 118–254, 255–273.

23 Z. Weiss, "The Synagogue in an Age of Transition, from the Second Temple Period to Roman Times: Recent Developments in Research," in *Synagogues in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods: Archaeological Finds, New Methods, New Theories*, ed. L. Doering and A. R. Krause (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2020), 25–41, esp. 33.

24 See note 12.

25 The structures that pose difficulties for identification as synagogues are those found at Horvat Etri (Kfar Etri) and Shuafat. In the case of Etri, it is difficult to determine whether a supposed stone seat is by the wall due to later collapses and other factors. While there are some scattered stones on the northeastern side of the wall that are not part of the wall itself, these are not hewn stones like those found in other synagogues, making it challenging to regard them as remnants of seating. These stones are not the appropriate size for seating, nor do they have the nearly flat top surfaces characteristic of seating, as they have been only minimally worked. On the other hand, Shuafat is said to have stone seating along the walls, which, according to archaeological definitions, suggests that it could be identified as a synagogue. However, the issue is that the building at Shuafat measures only 5 x 4 metres, which is too small to accommodate a congregation of the settlement's inhabitants. For this reason, Shuafat has been interpreted not as a public facility but rather as a prayer room for a family or a small group (A. Rabinovich, "Oldest

gogues from the first century CE[26] have been confirmed in the Southern Levant.[27]

Jewish Prayer Room Discovered on Shuafat Ridge," Jerusalem Post, 8 April 1991, 1). While many researchers focus on the presence of stone seating, the report by the excavators (A. Onn /Y. Rafyunu, Jerusalem: Khirbet a-ras., in *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 100 (1993), 61) strangely does not mention the stone seating. The presence of a stone bench is the most significant and often the sole archaeological evidence for identifying synagogues, but considering the size of the settlement's population, the application of this evidence to very small structures should be reconsidered. To establish a common understanding of this issue, further discussion is needed on the criteria for determining synagogue status, such as the composition of participants in the assembly. It should also be noted that some researchers have proposed that synagogues in Capernaum, Jericho, and Khirbet Qana may date back to the first century CE, but in each case, the archaeological evidence remains limited.

26 Some scholars have dated the Theodotos inscription, which is considered epigraphic evidence of a first-century CE synagogue, to the later fourth century CE, and have similarly dismissed other texts and archaeological evidence as not belonging to the first century CE (H. C. Kee, "The Transformation of the Synagogue after 70 C.E.: Its Import for Early Christianity," *NTS* 36 (1990), 7; "Defining the First-Century C.E.: Problems and Progress," *NTS* 41 (1995), 482. However, this hypothesis has been rejected both on the grounds of epigraphic studies and the surrounding archaeological evidence (no artifacts dated later than 70 CE have been found). Due to advancements in archaeological research, the hypothesis that synagogues did not exist in the Southern Levant in the first century CE can now be regarded as obsolete. See V. Kloppenborg, Dating Theodotos (CIJ II 1404), *JJS* 51/2 (2000), 243–280; Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 20–79; Claußen, *Versammlung*; Magness, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 1–25, 27–41.

27 According to a report by J. Ory on Korazin, located about 3 km north of the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, a building with features resembling a first-century CE synagogue was found approximately 200 meters west of an existing basalt synagogue (J. Ory, "An Inscription Newly Found in the Synagogue of Kerazah," *PEFQS* (1927), 51–52. The building is described as a square hall with tiered seating along the walls and seven pillars arranged in a U-shape. However, this building is no longer visible today, and no plans or photographs were made during the original excavation. Efforts to re-excavate the synagogue in the 1970s proved unsuccessful. G. Foerster ("The Synagogues at Masada and Herodion," in L. I. Levine, (ed.), *Ancient Synagogue Revealed*. Jerusalem (1981), 26) and M. Chiat ("*Handbook of Synagogue Architecture*," (Chico: Brown Judaic

The existence of a synagogue in a small rural settlement such as Tel Rekhesh, and not only in the urban centre of Magdala and the large town of Gamla in the Golan, indicates that the Galilean Jews sought a structure for meeting on the Sabbath as early as the first century CE.[28] In the Galilee, in particular, no synagogues from the later first century had been discovered until this century. The synagogue at Tel Rekhesh is a valuable example, following the synagogue excavated at Migdal in 2009 (and 2021). On the basis of archaeological evidence concerning their dates of origin, it can be argued that several synagogues in Judea were established through the renovation of pre-existing structures during the period of the First and Second Jewish Wars, at a time when Jewish communities sought spaces in which to assemble and reaffirm their collective identity. In light of the artefacts and other finds that have been excavated, it is not unlikely that the synagogues at Tel Rekhesh and Migdal were built during an earlier period.

The region of Galilee, historically referred to as the "Galilee of the Gentiles" in Isaiah 8:23 (cf. Mt 4:15 גליל הגוים; Γαλιλαία τῶν ἐθνῶν), continued to be called by a similar expression during the Maccabean War (1 Macc 5:15 Γαλιλαία ἀλλοφύλων: Galilee of foreigners). After the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, the Galilee was likely primarily inhabited by Gentiles, possibly of Phoenician origin, although some remnants of the Jewish population who maintained religious ties to their heritage remained. It was these individuals who were later found by Simon the Maccabee. Following the incorporation of Galilee into the Hasmonean kingdom, many settlements in the region were either rebuilt or repopulated by Jews.[29] The Jews residing in Tel Rekhesh and Magdala sought central locations

Studies 1982), *97–98) also point out that there is no evidence of habitation in Korazin before the Second Jewish War. (Note that Foerster was the researcher involved in the re-excavation of the synagogue in Korazin).

28 This recalls the narrative in the Gospels, which states that Jesus of Nazareth chose the synagogue in the village (κώμη) or village town (κωμόπολις) as the centre of his activities (Mk 1:38).

29 M. Aviam, "The Transformation from Galil Ha-Goyim to Jewish Galilee: The

for their religious activities. The Temple in Jerusalem, a pilgrimage site for Galileans, served as the focal point of their religious practices, including worship and sacrifice. This suggests that the Temple and the synagogue were recognised as separate institutions. The absence of specific orientation towards Jerusalem or the Temple in synagogues from this period may be explained by the fact that the synagogues were not associated with sacrificial rites; they would likely have functioned as places for Torah reading and study on the Sabbath, as well as venues for daily communal gatherings.[30]

The discovery of the synagogue at Tel Rekhesh is of great significance, as it provides material cultural evidence for considering the nature of Jewish communities in first-century Galilee, as well as the activities of Jesus of Nazareth. The distance between Nazareth and Tel Rekhesh is approximately 17 kilometres, which brings to mind the words from the Gospel: "And he preached in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and cast out devils" (Mark 1:39. "καὶ ἦλθεν κηρύσσων εἰς τὰς συναγωγὰς αὐτῶν εἰς ὅλην τὴν Γαλιλαίαν καὶ τὰ δαιμόνια ἐκβάλλων"), leading one to imagine that one of the synagogues mentioned in the Gospel might have been the synagogue at Tel Rekhesh.

Archaeological Testimony of an Ethnic Change," in *Galilee in the Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods – The Archaeological Record from Cities, Towns, and Villages*, ed. D. A. Fiensy and J. R. Strange (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2015), 1–21.

30 Binder, *Into Temple Courts*, 389–450; J. Ryan, "The Socio-Political Context of Public Synagogue Debates in the Second Temple Period," in *The Synagogue in Ancient Palestine: Current Issues and Emerging Trends*, ed. R. Bonnie, R. Hakola, and U. Tervahauta (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 133–152; Magness, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine: A Re-evaluation*, esp. 1–9.

4. Conclusions

The intensive research in the southern excavation areas of Tel Rekhesh has revealed the full extent of the structure. Based on architectural typology in archaeological studies, it can be identified as a synagogue from the ancient Southern Levant. Previous synagogues from the 1st century CE, located in areas such as Gauranitis and Galilee, were primarily built within cities or towns. In contrast, the synagogue at Tel Rekhesh, situated within a rural settlement, provides valuable new insights into the study of Jewish religious culture in the region. This paper builds upon previously published research and offers a more detailed description and interpretation of the structure. For a more thorough analysis of this synagogue, it is essential that the entire upper mound be excavated. It is hoped that such excavations will be undertaken in the near future.