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## **SYNAGOGUE FROM JESUS' TIME DISCOVERED** **Uncovered at Site of Future Christian Pilgrimage Center in Magdala**

JERUSALEM, SEPT. 11, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- The ruins of a synagogue from Jesus' time were discovered during excavations of a site in Magdala where a pilgrimage center is being built on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The Israel Antiquities Authority, which has been overseeing the excavations, announced this unique archeological find in a press release today.

The Magdala Center excavation began shortly after Benedict XVI's visit to the Holy Land in May, where he blessed the cornerstone of the future building that is being developed under the direction of the priestly congregation, the Legionaries of Christ.

The archeological excavation, directed by Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar of the antiquities authority, began July 27, and approximately one month later the first vestiges of an important find were uncovered. As the excavation continued and significant findings were added, the conclusion was reached that these ruins are of a synagogue from the first century, possibly destroyed in the years of the Jewish revolt against the Romans, between A.D. 66 and A.D. 70.

In the center of the 1292-square-foot building, the team discovered a stone engraved with a seven-branched menorah [candelabrum].

Avshalom-Gorni explained: "We are dealing with an exciting and unique find. This is the first time that a menorah decoration has been discovered from the days when the Second Temple was still standing. [...] "We can assume that the engraving that appears on the stone [...] was done by an artist who saw the seven-branched menorah with his own eyes in the temple in Jerusalem."

Thus far, only six other synagogues have been discovered from the period of Jerusalem's Second Temple. Extraordinary

This finding is of great interest for the Jewish world, affirmed Shuka Dorfmann, director of the antiquities authority, who visited the site twice and spoke of the extraordinary nature of the discovery and the need to study it deeper.

The Israelite authorities have requested the continued excavation of the area, and that the findings be preserved in that site and be included in the Magdala Center project.

Numerous Israelite and Christian archeologists have already made appointments to visit the ruins in the past days.

Magdala is located just over four miles from the ancient town of Capernaum, where Jesus spent much of his time during his public ministry. It is assumed that he came to this site, now being excavated, at least once to preach.

Magdala is also thought to be the place frequented by many eyewitnesses to the life and works of Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, who was native to this town.

In Galilean towns such as Magdala, Christian communities were born, and until the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, these believers many times shared the synagogues with Jews.

Only after the temple was destroyed in the year 70 was there a more clear separation between Jews and Christians, and at that time the latter created their own places of meeting and worship.

A special place

The initiative to build a center here began when the Legionaries of Christ arrived to Jerusalem in 2004 by the invitation of Pope John Paul II, to take care of the Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center. The Magdala Center, also in northern Israel like the Notre Dame Center, aims to complement the services offered to pilgrims who visit Jerusalem.

The land where the building is being erected is on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee.

The Magdala Center, aside from preserving and exhibiting the ruins of this holy place, will offer a hotel for pilgrims to the Holy Land, and a multimedia center that will display the message and life of Jesus and the history of the land.

Another part of the project includes a center that will promote the vocation and dignity of women, inspired by the figure of Mary Magdalene.

Legionary Father Juan María Solana, director of the Notre Dame Center and initiator of the Magdala project, stated, "I knew that Magdala was a holy place and I always had a hunch that it would be a special place for pilgrims of various religions; but the finding that we have made certainly exceeds our expectations."

He continued: "In a moment of prayer at the site, I thought of the last time the faithful gathered here, around the year 70, and how most had been witnesses of the life of Our Lord. I dream of the day that this place will be opened to visiting pilgrims, and I hope it will serve to create bridges and bonds of true love and dialogue between believers of different religions that come together in the Holy Land."

The opening of the Magdala Center is planned for Dec. 12, 2011, though the schedule may have to be adjusted due to the recent discoveries.

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Magdala Center: [www.magdalacenter.com](http://www.magdalacenter.com)

Pontifical Institute Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center: [www.notredamecenter.org](http://www.notredamecenter.org)