

KURSI

An Ancient Monastic Ruin
and Sacred Reminder of Miracles

TRAVEL JOURNAL *by Jim Pitts*

ON THE EASTERN SHORE OF THE SEA OF GALILEE are the ruins of a Byzantine monastery memorializing two of Jesus' miracles. Commemorated here are the miracle of the swine (Mk 5) and the miracle of the feeding of the 4,000 (Mk 8). This deserted place is literally in the far country on the other side of the lake.

During the time of Jesus, the Sea of Galilee served as a barrier separating Jewish from Gentile territory. The Jewish population lived on the western shore with Gentiles on the east. In crossing the sea, Jesus moved "to the other side." In his ministry of healing and hope among both Jews and Gentiles, Jesus revealed the inclusive love of God. His kingdom transcends racial and religious divisions, connects east to west, Jews to Gentiles, offering all redemption and reconciliation.

Associated with biblical Gergesa, Kursi became an important Christian pilgrimage site early on. During the Byzantine period, pilgrims were reluctant to

KURSI



visit Capernaum or Chorazin. Jesus condemned these towns because they had rejected his ministry. Christian pilgrims to the Sea of Galilee instead would visit Tabgha on the western shore and then Kursi on the eastern shore.

Gergesa is the country of the Gadarenes (Mt) or Gerasenes (Mk and Lk). Here tradition places the demon-possessed young man living among tombs who was healed by Jesus, with the subsequent stampede of swine into the sea. The conversion of this troubled young man led to his commission to be the first Christian Gentile evangelist (Mk 8).

Also, tradition suggests that Jesus fed the 4,000 at or near Kursi (Mk 8). Since the end of the third century, believers have identified this site as the place for these miracles. Topographical and archaeological studies, both because of the area's name and physical features, have confirmed this conclusion.

In 1970, when a new road to the Golan Heights was being constructed, the ancient site came to light. This prompted a series of archaeological excavations on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee at the mouth of the Wadi es-Samak, which revealed an ancient basilica and the remains of a walled monastery. Based on pottery and coin evidence, the construction of the church and monastery began at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century.

During those early years, Kursi functioned as a holy place and popular pilgrimage site. Prosperity supported numerous changes and expansion. Over time there were various renovations and repairs, construction of an olive oil press, additional rooms, walls, and a watchtower. The complex was damaged by Persian invaders and later destroyed by an earthquake in 741. The site was then abandoned.



STORAGE JAR

OLIVE OIL PRESS

BAPTISTERY

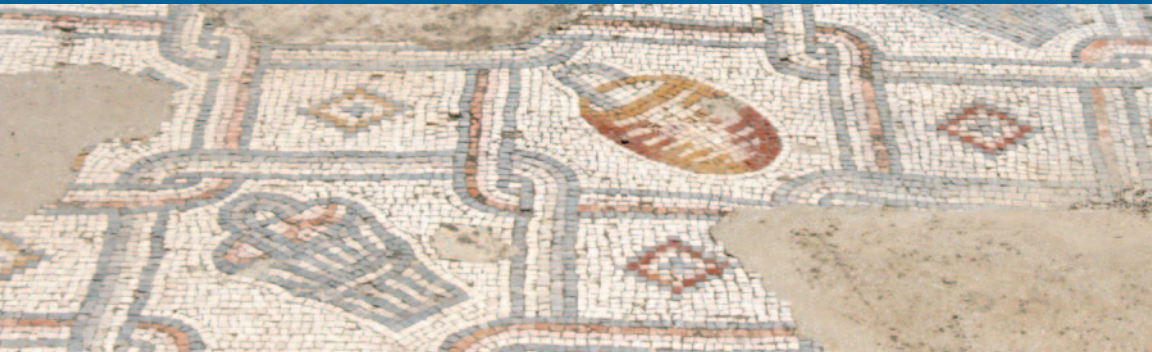
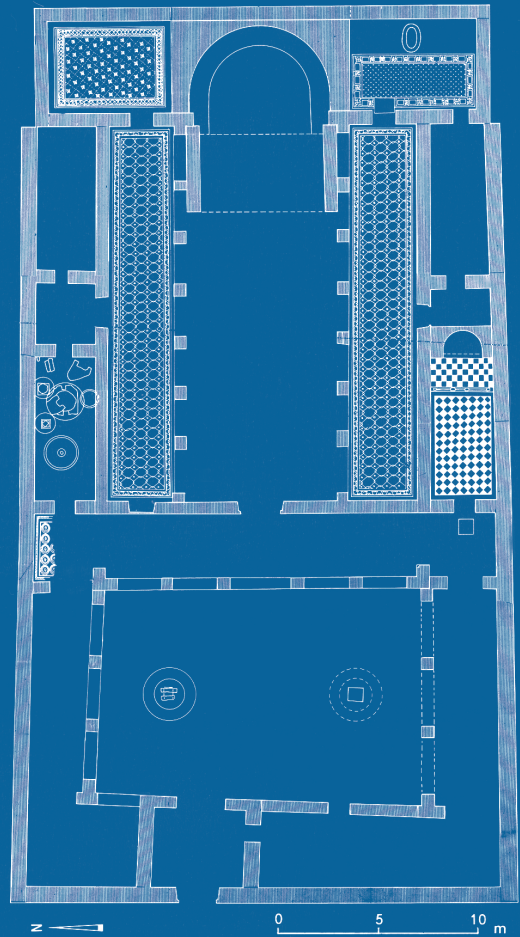


Under the supervision of archaeologists Vassilios Tzaferis and Charles Page, excavations continue annually under the direction and with the funding of the Kursi Excavation Project of the Jerusalem Institute for Biblical Exploration. For further information, see their website, www.jibe-edu.org.

Following recent excavations, efforts are under way to preserve the site. Seasons of careful excavation have revealed a large and magnificent basilica. Built with massive basalt stones, it has two rows of eight columns each, creating a nave with two aisles, a colorful mosaic floor, a water cistern, olive oil press, baptistery, smaller chapels, and a burial crypt.

Of special interest in the church's mosaic floors are depictions of baskets of bread and fish suggesting the miracle of the fish and loaves. The baskets pictured are baskets with handles (Greek *spyris*) as reported in Mark 8.

Plan of the basilica.

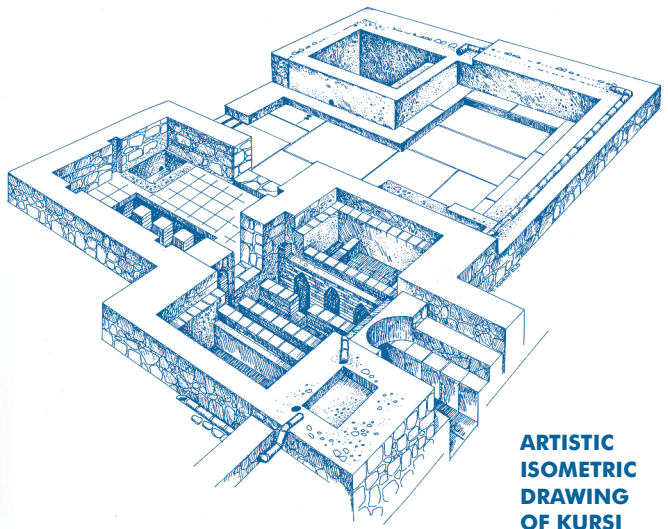




RING



OIL LAMP



**ARTISTIC
ISOMETRIC
DRAWING
OF KURSI**



CALDARIUM
Bath complex



In addition, there were residential quarters, streets, and a yet-to-be-excavated subterranean hall reached by a staircase of twenty-two steps. The presence of a bath complex suggests that the monastery served as an inn for pilgrim guests. One can only imagine the grandeur and glory of this holy place and community devoted to worship and hospitality.

Kursi is the first place where the Gentile world was exposed to the teaching of Jesus. Apparently the demoniac of Gergesa was Jesus' first Gentile convert. He went on to become the first Gentile evangelist. Also, as the site for the feeding of the 4,000, Kursi was a place of Christian hospitality and sacramental nurture.

Upon reading the biblical stories special to this sacred place, pilgrims once again visit the ancient monastic ruins, climb the steep hillside for a panoramic view of the Sea of Galilee, and remember the miracles that happened here.