Hammat Gader (al-Ḥammah colloq. el-Hammeh) was a small village and a spa (today only a spa and visitors’ centre) situated in a small valley on the banks of the Yarmūk River 7km. south-east of the Sea of Galilee on the route connecting Tiberias with Damascus and the northern settlements of the Gilead (al-Balqāʾ), and on the Ottoman railway line which connected Haifa and the Hijāzī railway via Darʿah (ancient Edreʿī) described in the entry on Haifa above. Its mineral hot springs, which already acquired the reputation of having medical qualities in ancient times, have always attracted multitudes of visitors. The place was already inhabited in the early and middle Bronze periods and its name appears in the lists of Thutmose III (about 1468-1436 BCE) together with Damascus, Edreʿī and Abel (אֵל, ἂλ, ʿāl in the Ḥūlah valley, cf. Aharoni, 1988:129-130). In the Roman–Byzantine period the site was part of the city of Gadara (today Umm Qays (colloq. Umm Qēs and Umqēs) in northern Jordan). The Arabic name al-Ḥammah preserved the old name, which referred to the thermal water, since al-Ḥammah is the exact parallel, in both pronunciation and meaning, of the Hebrew Ḥammah—“the hot one.” Primarily, the Arabic al-Ḥammah is not necessarily connected with a particular site; it is a general name for hot mineral water as attested by Yāqūt: “al-ḥammah is the hot spring where the infirm and the ill seek a remedy” (wa-al-ḥammah al-ʿayn al-ḥārrah yastashfi bihā al-aʿilāʾ wa-al-mardā. Yāqūt, Muʿjam, Dār Šādir, 2:306) Although Hammah seemed to be an independent settlement, it was regarded to be the spa of Gadara, the major city up the hill, for which reason it was called the Ḥammah of Gadara, Ḥamtā d’Geder in Aramaic, Hammat Gader in Hebrew as well as Ḥammat and Ḥamtan. (Cf. Hirschfeld, 1997:5ff.) Since a village with similar thermal springs south of Tiberias was called by the same name, one should be careful not to confuse the two when reading the names “Ḥammat,
Ḥamtā and Hamtan" in the sources. When the latter was swallowed by Tiberias that developed southwards, its name was sometimes attached to the name of the city of Tiberias (Ḥamtā d’Tibberyā) in the same way that the name of the site under discussion was attached to Gader (Gadara).

Under the Romans, the site Ḥammat Gader underwent thorough development which started in the second century CE. They built a small theatre in it as well as a few large bath houses. This is probably the source of the legend, recorded by Muqaddasī (middle of the 4th/10th century), that in antiquity there were several bath houses built on the springs each dedicated to one kind of illness (kull bayt li-ʿillah). This put the doctors out of business, and Aristotle asked “the king of that time” to destroy these rooms and enable the physicians go back to work (Muqaddasī, 1407/1987:159). Other Arabic medieval sources repeat, more or less, the same information about the thermal springs and their healing powers. (Cf. Yāqūt, op. cit., 4:18 where he speaks about a village call Ḥusayniyyah in a “valley with buildings from the time of Solomon” and 12 springs of thermal water that heal the sick. Gil, 1992:185 and Cairo Geniza document idem, 1983 2:495, text 278, where it is (rightly) called Merḥaṣ Jedariyyah, the spa of Gadara.)

After the Islamic conquest, the site continued to retain its ancient importance for a while. A Greek inscription dated 662 CE. mentions restorations ordered by Muʿāwiyah during the second year of his caliphate (after having already been the governor of Syria for 20 years). (Hirschfeld, 1997:6; Hasson, 1982:97-101 and see below.)

The Greek inscription
Monday, 5 December 662 CE. (42 AH)


The following reading, translation and interpretation are all the contribution of Leah Di Segni (ibid.)

1) +In the days of ‘Abdallah Muʿāwiyah, the
2) commander of the faithful, the clibanus of the
3) (baths) here was cleared and renewed by
4) ‘ Abdallah son of Abū Hāshim (or Abū ‘Āṣim), the
5) counsellor, in the month of December, on the fifth
6) day, Monday, in the 6th (year) of the indiction,