Jewish Religious Architecture

From Biblical Israel to Modern Judaism

Edited by

Steven Fine

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CHAPTER 6

The Ancient Synagogues of Asia Minor and Greece

Mark Wilson

Literary and epigraphic evidence suggests that there were at least sixty cities in Asia Minor and Greece with synagogues in antiquity.[1] However, archaeological remains for only a few have been discovered. In Asia Minor synagogues have been identified at three sites – Sardis, Priene, and Andriake. Limyra is the latest city where excavators have discovered a possible synagogue.[2] Tentative identifications have also been made at Miletus, Pergamum, and Mopsuestia. In Greece the remains of synagogues were found on the islands of Aegina and Delos, while at Athens a synagogue has possibly been identified. Two architectural fragments of a synagogue have been found in Corinth. One is a lintel with the crude inscription "Synagogue of the Hebrews" ; the other is a Corinthian capital of an engaged pier with three menorahs carved in relief (Fig. 6.1). The reasons for such a paucity of remains are varied. Greece and Turkey are in an active seismic zone, and

FIGURE 6.1 Capital with menorahs, Corinth, 5–6th century CE
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

1 See the map of sites in Asia Minor in Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xvi.

2 Martin Seyer, "Limyra 2012," *Anmed* 11 (2013), 84–85.

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destructive earthquakes are documented throughout antiquity. Sometimes synagogues were confiscated and churches built over them: the one at Pisidian Antioch where Paul preached (Acts 13:14–47) is believed to be such an example. While the Byzantine state continued to afford legal protection to its Jewish citizens (for example, in 346 in the Theodosian Code), opposition surfaced periodically on a local level. Synagogues bore the brunt of such furor as the visible symbol of the Jewish community. Such attacks were often incited by Christian writers such as John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), who wrote eight homilies against the Jews.[3] A column fragment, found in Laodicea, displays a deeply gouged cross superimposed above a finely etched menorah with the cross's globus superimposed upon and obliterating the center of the seven-branched lampstand.

FIGURE 6.2 Column drum with a cross superimposed on a menorah, Laodicea, 5–6th century CE (also on image tombstone)
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

3 See the discussion by Steven Fine in this volume.

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FIGURE 6.3 Synagogue and apse, Sardis, 4–7th century CE
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

(Fig. 6.2). The Laodicean example has been interpreted as the "smoking gun" that provides the "iconographic evidence for the process of Christianizing the physical environment of the empire."[4]

The discovery of the synagogue at Sardis (Figs. 6.3–6.4), according to Kraabel, was one of the "most important discoveries in Diaspora Judaism since 1930" and contributed "much to the understanding of this area as the Dead Sea Scrolls have for Palestine."[5] Situated on the main street of the city, it was entered from the south. Along the synagogue's southern wall stood a series of shops. Menorahs inscribed in two of the shops identify their owners as Jewish, while items found within adjacent shops indicate the tenants were Christians and pagans. These religious groups apparently coexisted side by side in the city.

The Sardis synagogue is the largest ancient synagogue discovered in the Diaspora. The space occupied by the structure was 85 m. (E-W) × 20 m. (N-S). Four successive phases of construction, as well as subsequent changes, have been detected. The first, begun in the late first century CE, initially functioned

4 Steven Fine, "The Menorah and the Cross: Historiographical Reflections on a Recent Discovery from Laodicea on the Lycus," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, eds. E. Carlebach and J. Schacter (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 34.

5 A.T. Kraabel, "The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik," in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, eds. Dan Urman and Paul V.M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 101.

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FIGURE 6.4 Synagogue aediculae, Sardis
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

as dressing or exercise rooms for a nearby bath-gymnasium complex. In the second phase the area was converted to a civic basilica. A new entrance was opened to the east and an apse installed in the western end. During the third phase in the third century, a hall was opened to a length of 80 m. Semicircular benches were constructed in the apse. Whether the Jewish community initiated this work is debated. In the fourth phase dating from the fourth century, the building was definitely used as a synagogue. Previously believed to date from the fourth century, this synagogue may actually date to the fifth or sixth centuries.[6] The sanctuary was preceded by a forecourt, which, in turn, was surrounded by a peristyle courtyard whose floor contained a colorful geometric mosaic that identified four benefactors in Greek inscriptions. A fountain standing in its center apparently served both Jews and non-Jews.

Three doorways led from the forecourt into the sanctuary. Two large square aediculae on masonry platforms, believed to be Torah shrines, stood on the sanctuary's interior, eastern wall (Fig. 6.4). Beneath the latter shrine were found two Hebrew inscriptions, one reading *shalom* (peace), as well as a menorah

6 See Jodi Magness, who suggests a date in the 5th–6th century CE, see "The Date of the Sardis Synagogue in Light of the Numismatic Evidence," *American Journal of Archaeology* 109.3 (2005), 443–475. Andrew Seager tells us that upon reexamination, the Sardis team maintains its earlier dating, and that this issue will be discussed in the forthcoming report.

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plaque flanked by a *shofar* (ram's horn) and a *lulav* (palm branch). The plaque with its rolled Torah scrolls carved under the curved branches resembles the one found in Priene. A marble-inlay decoration, which speaks of the Torah shrine, states it was "the place where the Law is guarded." A Greek inscription found near the synagogue entrance commanded the Jews to "find, open, read, observe," that is, the commandments of God. The main hall, measuring nearly 60 m. long, was roofed. The 1000 or so attendees faced east and either stood or sat on mats on the mosaic floor. This mosaic contained mainly elaborate geometric designs; Greek inscriptions in four of its panels identified donors to the synagogue.

Located near the apse was a marble table that was probably used as a lectern for reading the Torah. The table supports date between the second century BCE and the first century CE and may originally have decorated a Roman monument. The two pairs of lions that stand beside the table date from the Lydian-Persian period (fifth-fourth century BCE). The lions may have symbolized the Lion of Judah (Gen. 49:9) or the community itself as the *Leontioi*, perhaps the "tribe of Judah," or may simply be heraldic. Inscriptions from the synagogue show the Jews being citizens of the city and using Greek names. More than eighty inscriptions from floor mosaics or wall mountings were found with most being in Greek. Some twelve representations of menorahs were found carved in stone, scratched in pottery, cut from sheet bronze, or appliquéd on glass. One large marble menorah was donated by the sculptor Socrates. The synagogue's remarkable size and central location indicate the wealth and strength of the city's long-standing Jewish community, dating back to c. 205 BCE (Josephus, *Ant.* 12.148–153). Sardis' synagogue was not among the "synagogues of Satan" pejoratively in the New Testament Book of Revelation (3:1–6). In 167 CE Melito, the city's bishop, delivered a sermon *On the Passover* that named the Jews as the murderers of Jesus. Melito is often cited as the first Christian writer to promulgate the idea of Jewish deicide. The subsequent construction of the synagogue near the bath-gymnasium complex suggests that Melito's invectives caused no long-lasting damage for the Jewish community in Sardis.

A building in the western residential area at Priene was initially identified as a house church by Wiegand and Schrader in 1904, an identification changed to a synagogue by Sukenik in 1934 (Figs. 6.5–6.6). Sometime in late antiquity the Jewish community converted a Hellenistic house into a place of worship. A new entrance was installed on the main west street and three steps, which led up into the synagogue's courtyard, protruded prominently into the street. The courtyard, the former *oikos* (domicile), and the Doric *prostas* (vestibule) perhaps served as a communal area for study or eating. The synagogue proper was

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FIGURE 6.5 Synagogue remains, Priene, 5–7th century CE
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

FIGURE 6.6 Synagogue niche, Priene
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

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FIGURE 6.7 Plaque with a menorah, Priene
PHOTO: STEVEN FINE

built in the southern courtyard, and access to it was through the Hellenistic *prostas*. A menorah, inscribed inelegantly on its right anta block, welcomed worshipers. The first phase was a large basilica oriented east to west and measuring 6.24 × 13.18 m. It probably had a gabled roof with open truss, producing a spacious interior approximately 7.50 m. in height. An almost square niche (1.30 × 1.40 m.) on the eastern wall was cut into the adjoining *insula*. This niche undoubtedly contained the Torah scrolls. In the second phase a slightly smaller hall was constructed with a narthex to the west and a walled bench along the north wall. Doors closed the *prostas* entrance, and a new entrance oriented west to a side street was installed through the narthex. Two stone plaques carved with menorahs were found at Priene: the first, found at the episcopal church, was flanked by a *lulav*, shofar, and *etrog* (citron, Fig. 6.7); the second, found at the synagogue, had two birds, a *lulav*, and an *etrog* (Fig. 6.8). A menorah graffito found on the threshold of an adjacent house suggests that the synagogue was located in a Jewish residential area. Although the finds date

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FIGURE 6.8 Plaque with menorah and birds, Priene Synagogue
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

the synagogue to the fourth-seventh centuries CE, it is possible that the former house could have been used as a synagogue in late Hellenistic and Roman times.[7]

Excavations in 2009 in Andriake yielded the first synagogue to be found in Lycia. Situated on the Mediterranean, Andriake was the port of nearby Myra. The synagogue was situated northwest of a large granary and plaza called the Plakoma built by Hadrian in 129 CE. The synagogue was visible from the ancient harbor and situated in a central district near the agora. An apsidal structure was visible before excavation. When it was cleaned, three marble panels with menorahs were found on the floor. The complete panel was decorated with a shofar, *lulav*, and *etrog* (Fig. 6.9). Both it and the half panel had scrolled volutes under the lampstand similar to a panel found at Priene. Both panels had dedicatory inscriptions; the half panel pronounces "blessing and peace to all Israel! Amen." Then follows the Hebrew letter *shin*, which is the first letter of the word *shalom* (peace). The discovery of these inscribed panels provided

7 Information on the Priene synagogue is drawn from Nadin Burkhardt and Mark Wilson, "The Late Antique Synagogue in Priene: Its History, Architecture, and Context," *Gephrya* 10 (2013), 166–196.

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FIGURE 6.9 Synagogue menorah plaque, Andriake, 4–6th century CE
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

a positive identification as a synagogue. The structure had a main hall with a two-room annex. The main hall was rectangular, measuring 5.15 × 6.90 m., with an apse at its southeastern side. The apse was semicircular on the interior with a diameter of 3.90 m.; it had five sides on the outside for structural strength.

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FIGURE 6.10 Synagogue, Andriake
PHOTO: MARK WILSON

The niche, terminating in an arch on top, is situated 4.24 m. above the floor. Other architectural elements suggest that this hall had two stories with the niche on a second floor that has since collapsed (Fig. 6.10). Two rooms measuring 9.00 × 5.00 m. lay southeast of the main hall. Their uneven alignment suggests they were added later. Similar baked clay plaques used as flooring in all three rooms suggests that the floor was renewed when the rooms were added. A Greek inscription found in the floor gives the names of the benefactors for the pavement: Theodosios and Iussa, sons of Samuel. The archaeologists have identified three building phases. Coins found in the structure date from the fourth to sixth centuries CE.[8]

Delos was an important commercial and religious center in the southern Aegean Sea. The Jewish community of Delos is mentioned in 1 Maccabees 1:15, 23 and in Josephus (*Ant.* 14.213–216). In 1912–13 the French archaeologist André

8 Information on the Andriake synagogue is drawn from Nevzat Çevik, Özgü Çömezoğlu, Hüseyin Sami Öztürk, and İnci Türkoğlu, "A Unique Discovery in Lycia: The Ancient Synagogue at Andriake, Port of Myra," *Adalya* 13 (2010), 335–366.

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Plassart identified a structure on the northeastern side of the island as a synagogue. Situated far from the city center, the building was located on the shoreline in a residential quarter near the city's gymnasium and stadium. Whether the structure should even be identified as a Jewish or Samaritan synagogue continues to be debated.[9] Plassart based his identification on four Greek *ex voto* (votive offering) inscriptional finds: three refer to the Deity as *theos hypsistos* (God the Most High) and one as *hypsistos*. Although this is a common designation for God in the Septuagint, it is also used for various pagan deities. The presence of *proseuche* (prayer house) in one inscription further suggested its designation as a synagogue. The discovery in 1979–80 of two inscribed stelai approximately ninety meters north of the synagogue reinforced that identification. These inscriptions celebrate two apparently pagan benefactors who contributed to the construction and upkeep of a *proseuche* that belonged to "Israelites" who made offerings to *Argarizein* (Mt. Gerizim, the sacred mountain of the Samaritan Israelites above modern Nablus). Dating from the second century BCE, these inscriptions attest to a Samaritan community, whom perhaps also used the synagogue building.[10]

Scholars who accept the building's function as a synagogue differ on its architectural history.[11] All date its first phase to the second century BCE. It may first have served as a private dwelling. When Mithridates conquered the city in 88 BCE, the house was damaged and with its renovation the structure began to be used as a synagogue. The structure, oriented north to south, consisted of three sections measuring 28.30 m. (N-S) by 30.70 m. (E-W). The western part comprised the synagogue proper on the north and a complex of rooms adjoining to the south. The synagogue consisted of a main hall 16.80 m. (N-S) by 14.40 m. (E-W) with three doorways to the east. From the western wall projected a cathedra of white marble – undoubtedly a seat reused from the theater, which has sometimes been identified with the "seat of Moses" of Matthew 23:2. In a third phase, the hall was cut into two rooms by a wall; and since the eastern doorways were sealed, the inner room could only be accessed through the

9 Lidia Matassa has recently argued against its identification as a synagogue in "Unravelling the Myth of the Synagogue on Delos," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 25 (2007), 81–115.

10 Illustrations of the Delos synagogue and the mosaic floor at Aegina can be found in E.L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (London: Milford, 1934), pls. X, XI. On the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim, see Yitzchak Magen, *Mount Gerizim Excavations 2* (Jerusalem: Staff Officer of Archaeology, Civil Administration for Judea and Samaria; Israel Antiquities Authority, 2008).

11 Monika Trümper, "The Oldest Original Synagogue Building in the Diaspora: The Delos Synagogue Reconsidered," *Hesperia* 73.4 (2004), 518–519.

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outer one. South of the assembly hall was a series of smaller rooms, one of which held an opening to a water reservoir that lay beneath. Its suggested use as a *miqveh* (bath) for ritual purification is doubtful because of its unusual position in the room and lack of steps.[12] Monika Trümper has recently argued that the building was built originally as a synagogue with six phases evident in its history (Fig. 6.12).[13]

Excavations on Aegina, an island south of Piraeus, uncovered a synagogue near the harbor in 1829. The fragmentary architectural remains were found in an important quarter. Its single hall, oriented east to west, measured 13.50 by 7.60 m. The apse in the eastern wall was 5.50 m. in diameter. The structure had no interior colonnade; traces of auxiliary rooms were found on its northern side. A mosaic with colored geometric designs covered the floor of the nave. At the western end of the mosaic near the entrance were two inscriptions in *tabula ansata* (rectangular frame with handles). The larger one stated that an *archisynagogos* (synagogue leader) named Theodoros built the synagogue at a cost of 190 pieces of gold by using revenues from the community and donations from its members. The second inscription, badly damaged, declared that the mosaic pavement was laid during the office of Theodoros the younger. Excavations revealed that an earlier building, possibly a synagogue, of the same orientation and layout stood under the structure restored by the elder Theodoros. This occurred around 300–50 C.E; the synagogue remained in use until the seventh century. Today only the synagogue's mosaic is extant, being displayed in the courtyard of the Aegina Archaeological Museum.

12 Ibid., 575–578.

13 Ibid., 557–569.

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